The Rev. James H. Costen Sr. was deft at reconciliation, whether it was for the Presbyterian Church (USA) or for the Interdenominational Theological Center, where he served for nearly three decades.

"Jim served the world of the church. He was one of the leading architects of Presbyterian reunion," said the Rev. Cliff Kirkpatrick of Louisville, Ky., chief ecclesiastical officer of the Presbyterian Church (USA). "He had a global passion as well as a local one."

The Rev. Costen was presiding officer of the northern branch of the Presbyterian Church when it merged with the southern branch in the 1980s to form the present church.

The Rev. Costen was president of Atlanta’s Church of the Master, which he founded, when he became a dean at the seminary in 1969 and was named president in 1983. After retiring in 1997, he became director of development for the Presbyterian Church in East Africa, expanding theological education in the 4 million-member African church.

The Rev. Costen, 71, of Atlanta died Friday of complications after surgery at Piedmont Hospital. The funeral is noon Thursday at Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel at Morehouse College. Sellers Bros. is in charge of arrangements.

The theological center, based in Atlanta, is made up of six collaborating seminaries of six different Christian denominations, seven at the time he became president.

"Jim was a reconciling spirit," said John McCall of Atlanta, former board chairman. The Rev. Costen forged a unit from the seven denominations with seven boards of directors, each with its own vested interests, and doubled the board size with lay members, he said.

During the Rev. Costen’s presidency, the nation’s largest African-American seminary gained new national prominence. Enrollment grew from 310 to 450, the budget increased from $1.7 million to $7 million, and its endowment grew from $3 million to almost $10 million.

Much of that growth was planned on the track at Benjamin E. Mays High School. In a weekend ritual, the Rev. Costen, the Rev. McCall and two seminary administrators met to walk three miles on the school’s track.

"The first mile, we talked about world events and national events," said the Rev. McCall. "The second mile, we would raise the question of what do these world events mean for theological education. When we got to the third mile, we were ready to apply that to ITC."

"His philosophy of life was that God had gifted him with grace and that he had to take that gift beyond himself," said his wife, Melva W. Costen.

Survivors include two sons, James Costen Jr. of Kennesaw and Craig Costen of Detroit; a daughter, Cheryl Costen-Clay of Atlanta; seven grandchildren and one great-grandchild.