

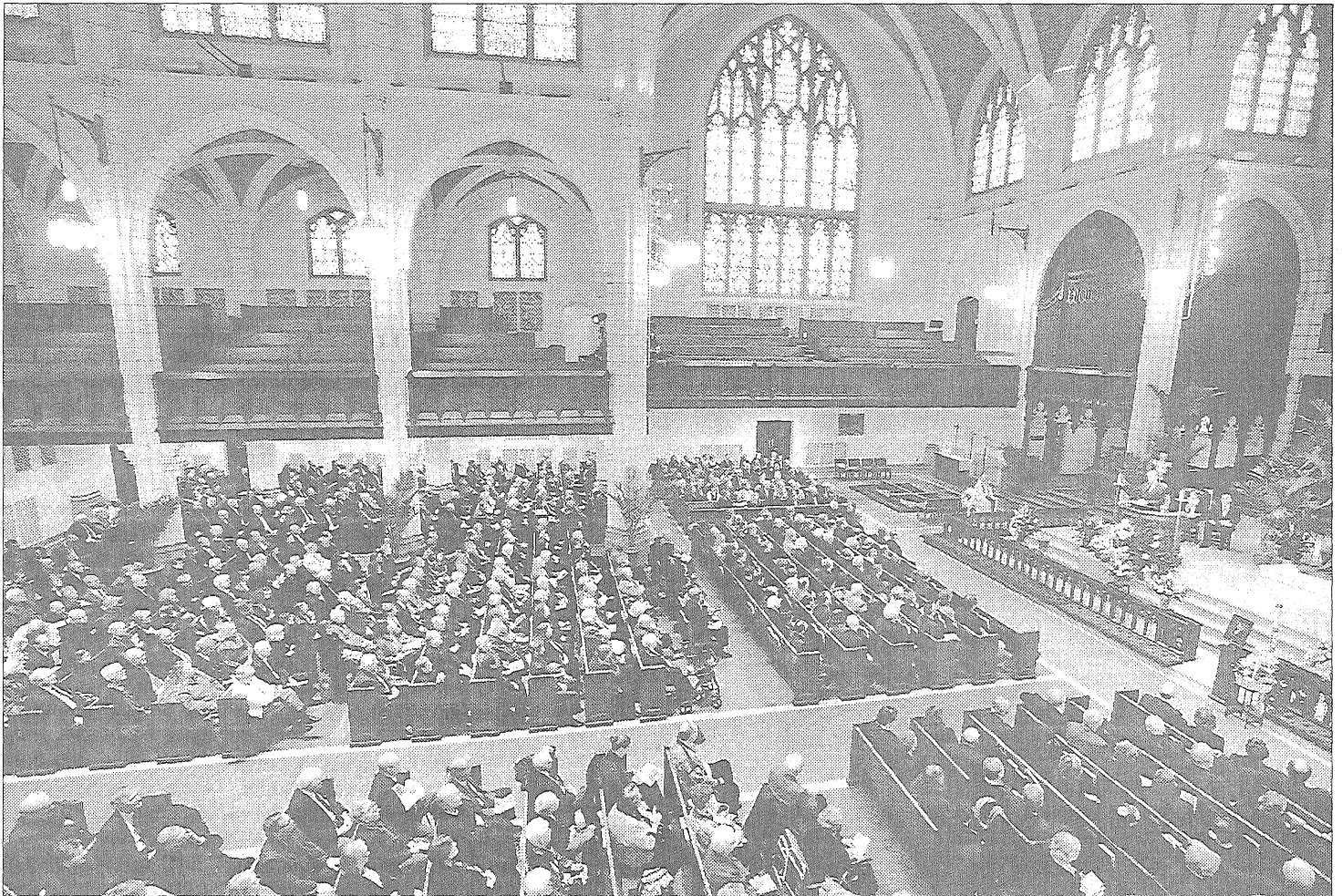
“Public service or parent, you will find we all knew the same man: a listener.”

Julie Sabo



“His fundamental goal was simple: Do it for the people.”

Bill Kelly



Photos by DAVID JOLLES • djolles@startribune.com

Mike Erlandson delivered a remembrance during the memorial service for Minnesota Congressman Martin Olav Sabo on Saturday.

‘Quiet giant’ Sabo remembered

By LIZ SAWYER
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Martin Olav Sabo, the longtime Democratic U.S. congressman from Minneapolis, was honored as the consummate public servant at his memorial service Saturday.

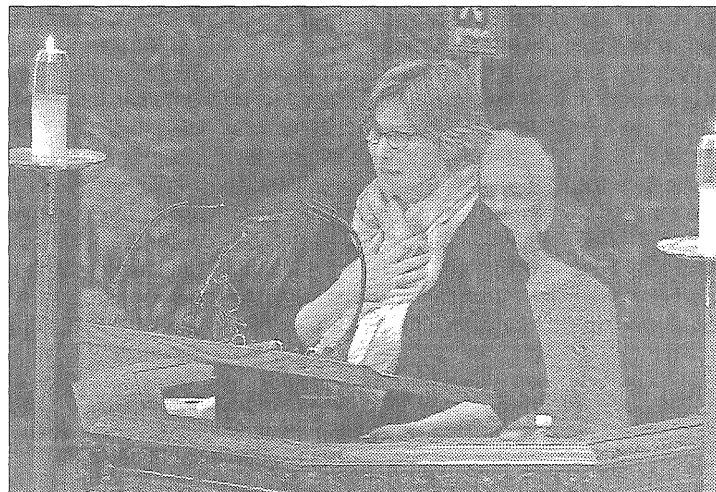
The 14-term congressman, who represented the state’s largest city and nearby suburbs from 1979 until he retired in 2007, died March 13 of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. He was 78.

Hundreds of people attended his funeral at Central Lutheran Church in downtown Minneapolis. Among them were former Vice President Walter Mondale, Sen. Amy Klobuchar, Gov. Mark Dayton and U.S. Rep. Keith Ellison, who succeeded Sabo.

Sabo, the son of Norwegian immigrants who grew up in North Dakota, long won respect for his understated demeanor and civility in the chaotic world of politics.

He was just 22, freshly graduated from Augsburg College in Minneapolis, when he was elected to the Minnesota House in 1960. He would serve there as minority leader from 1969 to ’72 and speaker from 1973 to ’78.

“Public service or parent ...



Julie Sabo, daughter of Martin Sabo, spoke of her father as a great listener. “His integrity, his honesty was always in being himself,” she said.

we all knew the same man — a listener,” his daughter Julie Sabo said in her eulogy. “His integrity, his honesty was in always being himself.”

Sometimes, that meant putting family first. Sabo once turned down an invitation from the president because he’d already made plans to visit his mother, Julie Sabo recalled.

While on the House Appropriations Committee, Sabo helped secure funding for hundreds of

infrastructure projects. Among the most notable was the Twin Cities’ first light-rail line. He also brought home funding to make over the Stone Arch and Hennepin Avenue bridges.

Sabo gained a different kind of notoriety as a fixture at the annual Congressional Baseball Game. Year after year, he presided over the Democrats’ creaky practices as manager, usually in a Twins uniform, sometimes amid a cloud of his own cigarette smoke.

Former legislator Bill Kelly said Sabo worked to make the process more democratic and to hold lawmakers accountable. “His fundamental goal was simple: Do it for the people,” Kelly said.

Sabo wasn’t one for long-winded speeches, so when he did rise to voice his opinions, colleagues listened. “He was indeed a quiet giant,” said Mike Erlandson, his chief of staff in the U.S. House.

Sabo expected his staff to respond to every phone call, e-mail and letter from constituents, Erlandson said. But he was also blunt with supporters who came to ask for something costly.

“He would ... ask, ‘What’s your suggestion for what program we should cut or tax we should raise to pay for this?’” Erlandson said. “He got a lot of blank stares.”

When a reporter asked him to sum up his time in Congress, Sabo replied that he “worked in the nitty-gritty and tried to get some things done,” said longtime legislative aide Eileen Baumgartner. “He was the right man, in the right place at the right time — and we were very lucky to have him.”

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