Journal of Anglican Studies (2024), **22**, 347–351
doi:10.1017/S1740355324000366

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355324000366 Published online by Cambridge University Press

EDITORIAL

JAS Safeguarding Editorial

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(Received 1 August 2024; revised 20 August 2024; accepted 20 August 2024)

Rt Revd Dr Alan Thomas Lawrence Wilson

This edition of the Journal is dedicated to Alan Wilson. A separate article discusses his experience of the extent of abuse within the church and his commitment to reforming the institution's response. This passion was developed in the context of a far broader array of interests and expertise.

Alan's heart was drawn to matters of justice and equality beyond the everyday work of an Area Bishop, which he did with a substantial pastoral heart and exacting attention to detail. He saw it as an imperative of both his faith and shared humanity. His spirituality was adventurous and exploratory, with roots in the Benedictine tradition. This led him to value simplicity and humility. It also meant that belief became real when it was embodied. Sitting on the sidelines was not for him.

A report in the *Church Times* ('Survivors' Protest Aided by Chapter', 7th October 2016, by Tim Wyatt) captured something of Alan's almost insouciant courage. The installation of Bishop Stephen Croft as Bishop of Oxford prompted protests from survivors of sexual abuse, who wanted to draw attention to Croft's extremely poor record in safeguarding, and the generic lack of any accountability for such conduct. Croft was, at the time of his elevation to the See of Oxford, also facing disciplinary proceedings under the Church of England's Clergy Discipline Measure (CDM, 2013).

As the *Church Times* reported, together with the (then) Dean of Christ Church, where the protest was being staged, Bishop Alan, Canon Rosie Harper and the Very Revd. Professor Martyn Percy met with the survivors, spoke with them and gave them lunch. The report concluded that the survivors had been invited back to Oxford to discuss issues surrounding safeguarding and the reporting of abuse. One survivor stated that 'it was not only a very effective protest . . . but was graciously received and managed to create potential for good dialogue'. Alan, together with us, duly delivered on the promise of dialogue.

This modest vignette highlights Alan Wilson's exemplary kindness, care and compassion and his remarkable courage. He was deeply committed to engaging with those that the church habitually marginalized, snubbed or devalued. He stood in the very best tradition of being liberal and open-minded while practising generous theological orthodoxy. His sane, sound and sensible theological views were, more

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often than not, hard for the Church of England hierarchy to receive, yet he fearlessly persisted in his mission.

Alan spoke eloquently and plainly in the present era, where church leaders still promote a culture of 'teachers who say what itching ears want to hear' (2 Timothy 4: 3). He was unafraid of speaking truth to power. The 'too difficult box' held no terror for him, and he couldn't resist pointing out that the emperor had no clothes. He often joked that he had his own permanently reserved and named spot on the Church of England's 'naughty step'. For many, this was a breath of fresh and liberating air. For others, his realism, spirituality, pastoral instinct and fierce intellectual breadth and integrity made him a target.

As religion becomes more critical in world affairs, it is very difficult to strike a balance between religious freedom and other human rights. Alan recognized that a dangerous gap exists between diversity/equality and religion. He brought both experience and expertise to help close this gap.

He had a strong and long-standing commitment to human rights on both theoretical and practical levels. He applied his strong academic background as a historian and theologian within the Church, Education, Interfaith relations, Criminal justice, international development, and especially in the movement for LGTBI equality in the UK and overseas.

His refugee Hungarian mother shaped his worldview, and the roots of this direction in his life continued to develop in the 1980s as a doctoral research student. His supervisor was Professor Peter Hinchliff, a South African exile from Apartheid, who taught the radical difference between a compromise and a rotten compromise. Work as an extramural philosophy and ethics tutor at Reading University in the 1980s consolidated the theoretical grasp of the subject. As Bishop of Buckingham, he enjoyed working with John Bercow, MP for Buckingham and Speaker of the House of Commons, whose clear and consistent commitment to equality was inspirational.

He served forty-five years in Church of England ministry, eleven in an urban parish in Reading and three as a prison chaplain. In all these contexts, pastoral encounters raised urgent justice and equality issues. For example, he was involved in supporting Olu, an asylum-seeker from Nigeria who fled after being tortured and beaten because he was gay.

As Bishop, he chaired the Oxford Diocesan Board of Social Responsibility and the Oxford Diocesan Committee for Racial Justice. This involved bringing together a variety of volunteers and activists in areas, including asylum rights, human trafficking, criminal justice, and environmental awareness. He had lost count of the number of conversations he'd had, which began, 'I'm not racist . . . but . . . '.

Alan served as chair of the Oxford Diocese Safeguarding Committee, where the picture of national institutional dysfunction began to emerge. He was prepared to do the less eye-catching jobs and served on the Church of England Pensions Board, whose assets exceeded £3.2 billion and sat on its Housing Committee. In the community, he was also a great encourager in developing the Living Wage Campaign with Citizens Milton Keynes.

His concern for LGBTI rights led him to become the only serving Church of England bishop advocating equal marriage. In 2014, he published *More Perfect Union? – Understanding Same-Sex Marriage,* in which he argued for a new

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355324000366 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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theological basis on which Christians could affirm gay people's right to marry. A formative experience was being appointed Bishop of Buckingham alongside Dr Jeffery John as Bishop of Reading. He would have been the first openly gay Church of England Bishop. Jeffery's appointment was derailed by an ugly agitation. The injustice of what had occurred, together with the intractability and hostility involved, spurred Alan to get fully involved in campaigning for the Church to reform its attitude towards gay people. His position was valued by his many gay friends. He spoke regularly at *Pink News* awards and, in 2014, headed the Straight Allies section of the Independent Rainbow List.

The particular focus, alongside the pastoral support he offered, was the theological case for change. He convened a team of Theologians in Cambridge in January 2016, which produced a brief book advocating change in lay terms, *Amazing Love*. This contributed to moving attitudes forward and was quoted by the Archbishop of Wales in his 2016 pre-retirement statement on signs of progress. He frequently broadcast as a lone voice amongst bishops, especially in the early days. Many of these annoyed the powers that be. He also briefed broadcasters as an advocate of LGTBI Rights (Radio 4, Channel 4 News, BBC Newsnight, local radio, etc).

Another formative experience came in 2015 when he was approached by lawyers to provide academic expert testimony supporting Canon Jeremy Pemberton, an NHS chaplain whose promotion had been blocked by a bishop because he was gay and married. In his PhD, he focused on the relationship of law to doctrine in England. At the same time, he was developing his understanding of Queer Theology and presented a keynote for an academic conference in the Cayman Islands. This brought contact with the Raznovich Case – an immigration status issue for a same-sex married couple which has parallels with the UK Pemberton case.

In parallel, Alan was an outstanding Chair of the Oxford Diocesan Board of Education, the largest DBE in England with 284 state schools. The Board enables schools to maintain their religious distinctiveness positively while being open to all and implementing a culture of equality. He also collaborated closely on equality and diversity with Revd Steve Chalke, an entrepreneurial Baptist Minister and the founder and leader of Oasis UK, who has pioneered work in this field. Alan's knowledge of the education sector, laws on schools and governance, history of the legislature and its meanings was second to none. He was the leading expert on education within the Church of England regarding its roles and responsibilities in schooling.

Alan founded the Oxford Nandyal Educational Foundation with two colleagues, a charity that undertook teacher training and school development in Andhra Pradesh, India. This grass-roots education work brought him into contact with the struggle for Dalit and religious rights in South India. Alan's work always had a strong interfaith dimension. He chaired Art Beyond Belief, a Slough-based arts and interfaith education charity, and Christians Aware, a national charity to promote interfaith understanding. With the Muslim Community, he was a regular keynote speaker at Community Iftars and Muslim Art events.

Twenty years ago, he changed the focus of his chaplain's post to face outwards. He appointed Canon Rosie Harper, a colleague who has written a thesis providing a theological basis for human rights. They wrote books and articles together and

undertook various study tours abroad. These included a fact-finding visit to Israel/Palestine with the Council of Christians and Jews and research in the US and Canada with pro-LGBTI lobbyists and lawyers in San Francisco, Washington and Vancouver. At the time of the original Falconer Bill in the House of Lords, they visited Portland, Oregon, to study the experience of the state's Assisted Dying law and other US States as the law gradually changed.

Bishop Alan was a prescient intellectual among the bishops, few of whom knew how to read him or what theological silo to assign him to. In the very best traditions of liberal Anglican theology, Alan was committed to God, truth and justice first and foremost. Brand loyalty to the Church of England or promoting one of the many tribes within its polity did not interest him. He could be countercultural, illiberal, subversive, prophetic, and honestly and powerfully hilarious. Standing in the tradition of David Jenkins and other liberal episcopal luminaries, Alan had a sharp wit, devasting put-downs, a brilliant sense of humour, and great comic timing and was a hugely entertaining raconteur.

Pope Francis claims the church is a field hospital that deals with the casualties of daily life and its ordinary combat. If so, Alan was the Church of England's Hawkeye (Alan Alda, from M.A.S.H) – bone-dry humour, quick-witted, dedicated, brilliant, doubtful about the point of the conflict, loyal, yet sceptical of those in authority. But if you ever found you were another of the casualties caused by the actions of the church, there were no better hands to be in.

Above all, Alan was truthful. In the Church of England today, that is rare and should mean the leadership issuing apologies using speed dial. Alan knew that there was a lot about the church that could never be defended and, in any case, should not be. What the church needed to offer was its remorse, repentance and redress. It has not, and will not.

Over the last few years, Alan began to find support for his position and felt less isolated amongst the bishops than previously. He died very suddenly of natural causes, without warning, in February 2024. His loss was devasting for many of us – depriving the church of someone who embodied humour, wisdom, compassion, integrity, humanity, courage, and justice for the church and the wider world. Like (Lord) Frank Field, who passed away a few months later, Alan had integrity, intelligence and deep commitment to the causes he believed in. He was an independent thinker, never constrained by conventional wisdom but constantly pushing at the frontier of new ideas.

There is a story about Frank Field that could just as easily apply to Alan. A former cabinet member under Tony Blair's government was once asked why there had never been a senior cabinet post for Field in the Labour administration. The response was uneasy: 'Well, you know, Frank could be a bit . . . well, a bit . . . awkward?'. That prompted the reply, 'Look, "awkward" is the whole point of Frank – he lives and breathes to ask awkward, obvious questions and not ignore the elephant in the room. Of course he's awkward. That is Frank'. Alan was cut from the same cloth.

Alan had much in common with left-field, left-leaning thinkers such as Frank Field or Tony Benn. Alan embodied the courage and intellectual prescience to pose obvious questions often obfuscated in a church culture that was evasive about its language and logic. He was unafraid to ask what powers the church had, where they

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355324000366 Published online by Cambridge University Press

came from, to whom people were accountable, and how such power could be challenged or withdrawn. He was often known to quote Tony Benn's dictum: 'It's the same each time with progress: First they ignore you, then they say you're mad, then dangerous, then there's a pause. Then you can't find anyone who disagrees with you'.

Returning from institutional bishopy events such as the College of Bishops gatherings, Alan would tell of the times when, and the end of the day at the bar, one bishop or another would sidle up to him and tell him how much they admired his courage and agreed with him. They went on to say: 'but of course I couldn't possibly say something like that'.

He was astonished how someone's need to be part of the tribe could cause them to subsume their moral independence to the institution. He held himself accountable to God, to himself, to his friends and colleagues and to those for whom he was their bishop. Mostly amazing people, sometimes hurt and needy people and sometimes frankly obnoxious. His accountability never wavered, and thus he left this earth with his integrity intact. He is sorely missed.

Rosie Harper and Martyn Percy, 2024.

Cite this article: Percy, M. (2024). JAS Safeguarding Editorial. *Journal of Anglican Studies* **22**, 347–351. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355324000366

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