

‘Prayer, care and you’re there,’ was Bishop’s creed

In January, shortly before he died, Bishop John Wilson offered TMA this profile of one of his special mentors and ‘Heroes of the Faith’, the missionary strategist Bishop Alfred Stanway (1908-1989). We are proud to publish Bishop John’s final article for TMA in tribute to both him and Bishop Alfred.

I have many heroes in the faith, men and women from the earliest days of the church on, to inspire and instruct. What a wonderful heritage is ours! I am wary of having gurus, one or two persons to whom we always turn. No one is perfect and, as the Scripture says, ‘we all make many mistakes’ (James 3:2). Also times change and each generation requires fresh thinking and new perspectives.

One person whom I regard as a special mentor is Bishop Alfred Stanway. Alf was Deputy Principal of Ridley College when our family arrived there in 1973 after almost five years in the United States. We soon became great friends. He and his wife Marjory lived in an apartment directly under ours. We were on the same wave-length with almost identical ideas about Ridley’s potential future. We both found it easy to make friends among the students and University tutors.



We also enjoyed board games and on many a Friday evening Alf would play scrabble with Marjory and then come up to us to play a game called Acquire. It is something like Monopoly, only in my opinion far superior. We would invite some students and tutors to join us and we had lots of exciting and hilarious evenings together.

Alf was my senior in every way of course. He had started his working life at 15 in accountancy, was converted through the ministry of C H Nash, had a call to go to Africa as a missionary, and was required by CMS to do teacher training as well as theological study. He left for Kenya in 1937. Marjory followed in 1939.

Jill and I had a great respect for Marjory. She was an intelligent woman, highly competent in the Swahili language, an artist, and one who gave an extraordinary level of support to Alf. They had no children and Marjory joked that the Lord knew Alf was more than enough to cope with.

In Kenya he was made an archdeacon where he had much to do with education. Then in 1950 the Archbishop of Canterbury appointed him Bishop of Central Tanganyika, a huge diocese at the time. It was here that his dynamic ideas were given full scope.

Alf elicited remarkable loyalty from many who worked with him. One of his first decisions was to give the missionaries new beds! He argued that people cannot be expected to do a proper day’s work if they can’t sleep at night.

‘Upgrade’ was one of his constant themes. If equipment was being thrown out in Australia as obsolete, why should the expense be undertaken to send it to Africa where it was likely to hinder progress? He would not condone sloppy administration and poor accounting practices. He held to high levels of transparency and honesty. But his organisational principles were people centred, following those of Jesus for whom the needs of people were always the priority.

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He was criticised for his speedy handing over of responsibility to Africans, but he insisted that ‘when history is written, it will be seen we did it too slowly’. It was really the Africanisation of the church which made him decide it was time to return to Melbourne. But under his leadership the church had grown several times over.

He was a great believer in Christian literature as a tool for evangelism and for building up the life of the Church. ‘Whenever the Gospel is preached, literature will be needed.’ He founded Central Tanganyika Press and on his return to Australia he was instrumental in the establishment of ACLS, the Australian Christian Literature Society, now part of SPCK Australia.

In its early years ACLS concentrated on sending Kevin Engel across the world to help strengthen Christian publishing and bookselling in places such as the Southern Sudan, Madagascar, and Argentina. In the case of Argentina ACLS brought staff to Australia for training and experience here. Alf argued that separate and focused organisations were needed because when Christian literature is left to large agencies, it is usually neglected and often fails because of a lack of encouragement and support.

Alf was a long time supporter of women’s ministry, making this clear by his vote at the 1968 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops. As with many issues he was able to cut through a tangle of arguments to what was at the heart of the matter. To him the preaching of the Gospel was primary and God was obviously calling women as well as men to this task and they needed to be supported.

Alf loved succinct statements which summed up his philosophy. One which has never ceased to influence me is “pray first or get nowhere fast”. Prayer was always a top priority. “Prayer, care and you’re there.”

Other sayings that characterise Alf include “The right use of money is the best guarantee of a fresh supply”; “You will need all your intelligence to keep things simple”; “learn to win by losing”; “Nothing is too great for God’s power; nothing is too small for God’s love.”

To their great surprise, Alf was invited on the recommendation of John Stott to be the founding President of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The school as yet did not exist, but it was as though all Alf’s experience to date was a preparation. So he responded positively and in 1975 they moved to America. Over the next few years the College was established and continues to flourish.

In his next retirement he and Marjory moved to Glen Waverley where they made a lot of new friends and had a significant Bible study group in their home. Alf was now afflicted with Parkinson’s disease which in time robbed him of his ability to communicate, except with the help of his former missionary colleague, Margaret McKechnie. It was Margaret who enabled us to put together his book *Prayer – A Personal Testimony*. They gradually divested themselves of their earthly possessions and Alf would say “Next stop heaven!”

When I was appointed bishop, Alf wrote to me (thanks to Margaret) a letter of encouragement and wisdom. Among other things he said:

“What are great moments, confirmation, marriage, ordination should never be allowed to become just another service. Make every service count in the cause of Christ and it will lift the service from routine to worship.”

“Make sure your ministry is marked by encouragement. When you visit a pastor make it a pastoral visit. Learn to be encouraged by the blessing of others...”

“It is always right to be generous.”

I continue to give thanks for Alf and Marjory. Our lives have been wonderfully blessed through their friendship and Christian example. I continue to regard Alf as a special mentor. I am glad that Dr Audrey Grant has all but completed a major biography and study of Alf’s life and ministry. He was undoubtedly one of Australia’s greatest missionary strategists as well as a humble, faithful follower of the Lord Jesus Christ and one who has left us a good and godly heritage.

Bishop John W Wilson was a former
Vicar General and Bishop of the Southern Region in the Diocese of Melbourne. He died on 22
January after a long battle with cancer.

See pages 4 and 5.