

Tribute delivered by Professor Paul Walters at an online Memorial Service,

26 August 2021

The Revd Canon Dr John Derek Stubbs

September 3 1952 – August 16 2021

In a famous meditation on death, another Dean John wrote:

All mankind is of one Author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated...

That was Dr John Donne, poet and priest and distinguished Dean of St Paul's London in the 1600's. We who remember John Stubbs can rejoice that he has been "translated" in this way, and is at rest in the house of the One Great Author whose name is Love.

And, at the same time, it is perhaps salutary to ask ourselves how our own chapters are shaping up. What tears and blots and crossings out appear on our earthly pages for the Great Author to have to correct with his grace when we come to be so translated?

John Stubbs was born in Johannesburg, and educated at King Edward VII School (KES) there. Although he began engineering studies, he soon moved to fulltime Christian youth work, in which he was involved for a total of thirteen years – 9 of them in this country. He became the national leader of the Anglican Church's NOMADS youth development team which was a roving multi-racial group that led youth work for dioceses and parishes. In the late 1970s, he fell in love with fellow NOMAD Nommo Ngodongwana.

They were married in Maseru, Lesotho (possibly by Desmond Tutu) and immediately left by air for New York. As their plane entered SA airspace, it was "buzzed" by a plane belonging to the SA Air Force. Once in New York, John continued working with youth, while also continuing his studies. He obtained his Bachelor of Theology through UNISA in 1980 and was ordained priest in 1984 (again possibly by Tutu). He was Assistant Priest at the Church of the Heavenly Rest in Manhattan from 1986 to 1990. When interviewed for *Umbuliso* prior to taking up his position as Dean of Grahamstown, John Stubbs said that their flat in New York was virtually an "exiles" BnB for 11 years.

Unsettling as it might have been, this was how the Stubbses - throughout the darkest decade in South Africa's recent history - kept in touch with events in the land from which they were themselves banned for contravening an inhuman piece of apartheid legislation. A touching tribute from Pumeza Dhlamini on an American Funeral Home website recalls John's ministry at this time: "John was a great pillar of support for the entire South African community... with great gifts as preacher, teacher, and counselor ... a humble, and compassionate person and always ready to extend a hand".

Somehow, John managed to fit in two further degrees while in New York: a Master of Divinity from the General Theological Seminary, and a Master of Systematic Theology from the famous Union Theological Seminary – both in New York. Their two sons, Duncan and

Paul, were also born in New York, while Nommsio built on her BSc from Fort Hare to become a qualified Pharmacist.

From early in his career, John seems to have caught the attention of Desmond Tutu, and it was Desmond Tutu as Archbishop of Cape Town who called the Stubbses from their New York exile as soon as South Africa began to move towards becoming a more normal society. John became Chaplain to the five educational establishments on the Zonnebloem College Campus in Cape Town and Dean of Studies for Cape Town Diocese. He soon became deeply involved with transformation processes in that diocese, and helped to develop a representative range of high quality ordinands in terms of race, gender, age, and type of ordination. Canon Rachel Mash, on the website mentioned before, pays tribute to John's role in the development of her own ministry during his time in Cape Town: "He really understood the importance of theological training on many levels, not just the academic."

This was the background of our new Dean John Stubbs who had just gained his PhD from UNISA in October, when he was instituted by Bishop David Russell on 7 November 1999. It was a strange time: the world was in the grip of the Y2K panic and the fear that all computers would stop working at midnight on 31 December as the new millennium dawned. Our new democracy was a fragile 5 years old. The Cathedral Parish was – as a former Churchwarden remarked – in the grip of several powerful personalities who all wanted a piece of the action.

The Stubbses as a family had to adjust to living in a small provincial town for the first time in their lives: even Cape Town had looked provincial to two teenage sons born and reared in New York. Nommsio, while still in Cape Town, had been upgrading her American Pharmacy training to a full medical degree: she had been accepted by Settlers Hospital for serving her "Zuma year" in 2000 prior to full certification. Later, as Medical Officer at the Army Base, she was to become a fearless AIDS warrior as the denialism of Thabo Mbeki saw a sharp increase in the AIDS death toll countrywide.

The single biggest change that Dean Stubbs introduced to the Cathedral's worship was to introduce the saying of the Prayer of Consecration in Afrikaans and isiXhosa (which he was learning at the time). Thus, at the very heart of the sacrament, the pluralism of our congregation was recognized. It was a very necessary step, but it rattled a few cages. Claire Cordell remembers with what reverent sincerity John Stubbs conducted every service. She particularly recalls one Maundy Thursday as he carried the reserved sacrament to the Altar of Repose; "he looked as if he was tenderly cradling the most precious infant in the world".

As a preacher, the same depth of sincerity combined with his great learning frequently had a deeply moving impact. John Jackson bears testimony to "how much [he] gained from his preaching, and especially what it revealed of his deep appreciation for English literature and his ability to see new possibilities when it came to interpreting familiar biblical texts. He had a fine mind and an appealing sense of humour." (It should be noted that Stubbs had a working knowledge of both Hebrew and New Testament Greek.) Claire Cordell remembers in particular a sermon on Doubting Thomas.

John Stubbs's ability to lend a hand is also fondly remembered by Claire Cordell: after a long morning in the City Hall for one St George's Fair, he was on hand to help with the tedious packing up. She remembers the pains he took to get the best possible sound system for the Cathedral, and how he had the side Communion rails made to facilitate the receiving of the

Host. He was always supportive of members of his congregation: the Editor of *The Spire* in a clash with the Bishop, Colin Lewis in the renewal of the frame and the retuning of the bells (all done in the UK), and at the other end of the scale, Michael Berning and the handbell group. Jeanette Eve remembers with gratitude John Stubbs' support for the work of the AWF.

"He was not an iconoclast," writes Claire Cordell, "but a 'builder-upper'." From his earliest pastoral work, and especially as a member of the NOMADS, John Stubbs saw that the Church's work is the business of **people development**. It is a thought expressed in Ephesians 4:16: "From [Christ] the whole body joined and knitted firmly together by what every joint supplies, when each part is working properly, causes the body to grow and mature, building itself up in unselfish Love." The first response to my appeals for help at short notice with this tribute came from Geoff Antrobus, and underlines this vital part of John Stubbs's ministry amongst us: "John played an important role for me in bringing me into the cycle with you and Michael Whisson of preaching at the Eucharists, followed 6 weeks later at Evensong. Also in bringing me into Lay Ministry at the Cathedral. The preaching contributed significantly to what was my otherwise patchy knowledge of the Scriptures and later to being less resistant to the call to ordination."

"Kind-hearted", "gentle", "deeply caring": these are phrases that ring out through tribute after tribute. His commitment to community development can be seen in his encouragement of the Shelter Children at the 09h30 Eucharist on Sundays, and the provision of special Sunday School lessons for them. Towards the end of his tenure, he was working strenuously to address the poverty and unemployment all round us by creating a sewing group, which unfortunately foundered owing to the lack of sponsorship. Claire Cordell suggests that perhaps he was too kind-hearted to be Dean of the Cathedral at that time, so that when his marriage ran into difficulties and personal problems began to overwhelm him, he was encouraged in 2006 to resign as Dean. A quotation from Olive Schreiner comes to mind: "Perhaps only the angels knew where the lights and shadows fell".

A very suitable new appointment was found for him as Dean of Studies at the Anglican House of Studies in Pietermaritzburg – the institution that is charged with higher degree studies for priests who show academic promise at COTT. After some years there, he returned to the United States – those first 11 years there had obviously made a lasting impression – and resumed a very successful parish ministry near Boston until his retirement.

As a Cathedral, we extend our loving condolences to his family, and commend his soul to the loving heavenly father "from whom every family in heaven and earth takes its name."

Geoff Antrobus, The Rev Professor Emeritus, formerly of the Dept of Economics, Rhodes University

Claire Cordell, Dr., Associate Professor in the School of Languages, Rhodes University, former Church Warden, CMG, Grahamstown

John Jackson, retired Senior Lecturer in Classics, School of Languages, Rhodes University, Lay Minister and Musician, CMG, Grahamstown

Paul Walters, Emeritus Professor of English, Rhodes University, former Church Warden and Lay Minister