

The Reverend Canon Robert Reiss

Churchman and theologian whose open and engaging strain of Anglicanism welcomed all-comers

THE REVEREND DR ROBERT REISS, who has died suddenly aged 80, was in the 1970s a much-loved chaplain of Trinity College Cambridge; later, from 2005, he was Canon Treasurer of Westminster Abbey and from 2011 until his retirement in 2013 he was also Sub-Dean.

His specific responsibility was for oversight of the abbey's finances. Formerly Archdeacon of Surrey, he brought to the role a clear head for managing income and expenditure. While keeping firm control of the latter – reining in over-ambitious plans while building up the abbey's reserves – he nevertheless supported the Chapter's vision for developing its visitor and education facilities, including the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Galleries, and access to them via a new tower outside Poets' Corner.

Sociable, hospitable and jovial, Reiss proved successful in wooing potential donors, often by entertaining them in his home to a lunch he had cooked himself. When one such occasion resulted in a particularly large donation, Reiss declared: "It was my cottage pie that did it!"

He was committed to the abbey's Benedictine heritage of collegiate life and worship, together with a ministry of welcome and inclusivity. He also continued to foster relationships between Christians and Jews, a cause that had been part of the abbey's work for many years.

Moreover, as a Royal Peculiar, beyond the jurisdiction or censure of bishops and synods, Westminster Abbey gave Reiss the freedom to express his evolving liberal theology. This had first stirred with the publication in 1963 of Bishop John Robinson's provocative book, *Honest to God*, and was further stimulated by Reiss's student supervisions at Cambridge with John Hick, Alec Vidler and Maurice Wiles, among other eminent theologians.

One observer said of Reiss that he was a "liberal liberal, not a priggish one". But his theology did not remain stuck in the 1960s and 1970s. In the introduction to his 2016 book, *Sceptical Christianity: Exploring Credible Belief*, Reiss wrote: "In the nearly 50 years since my ordination, I have changed my mind on all aspects of my Christian belief"

He acknowledged that "there is a kind of scepticism that owes more to cynicism than anything else; I do not want to be part of that. But I do feel a moral responsibility to examine the evidence for different aspects of my belief. I have come to think that the Church of England is not currently engaged as deeply as it might be with this contemporary scepticism."

Outside his official ministry, Reiss's talent for friendship – evident in the tumult of friends who attended his 80th birthday celebrations only two weeks before his death – was founded on a combination of persistent cheerfulness (even in the face of considerable family medical problems), a strong sense of humour, a youthful openness to ideas (however different from his own), an unusual degree of emotional tact, and an extraordinary ability to engage. This combination of qualities, allied to a sense of occasion, made him, among his large circle of friends, the celebrant of choice for every major ecclesiastical moment from baptism to burial.

Robert Paul Reiss was born into a non-church-going family on January 20 1943; his parents were Paul Reiss



Bob Reiss during his time as Sub-Dean at Westminster Abbey: among his large circle of friends he was the celebrant of choice for every major ecclesiastical moment from baptism to burial

and the former Beryl Bryant. Aged 12, at the suggestion of a friend he joined a Bible class for boys, part of a national organisation that also offered camping holidays.

These included daily evangelical Bible lessons which had no truck with critical questions; but Reiss credited the sessions with giving him a sense of the relevance of religion to daily life "and an awareness of the reality of the love and forgiveness of God that has never completely left me, even though my understanding of what the word God might mean has changed quite a lot over the years".

When it came to choosing his A-level subjects at Haberdashers' Aske's in West Hampstead, Reiss felt pushed by the school to study maths, physics and chemistry, but he was allowed also to take A-level divinity, on the understanding that he would have to teach himself. He found divinity much more interesting than the sciences. Meanwhile, after trying various churches, he was confirmed in the Church of England and, aged 17, began to feel a call to ordination.

On leaving school, he spent two years in the East End, living at the Mayflower Centre under the auspices of David Sheppard (the England cricketer and later Bishop of Liverpool). Reiss worked as a primary school teacher, then taught religious education in a boys' secondary modern, where all the members of one of his classes were on probation.

He found that the challenge was not just sociological, however, for it was at this time that he picked up John Robinson's *Honest to God*, reading it in one sitting late into the night. It both excited him and shattered his respect for those theological teachers who had heaped scorn on the book. And it confirmed Reiss in his conviction that he wanted to study Theology at university.

Encouraged by a friend to apply to Trinity College, Cambridge, he was offered a place by the Dean of Chapel, Harry Williams. After graduation Reiss

stayed in Cambridge to train for Holy Orders at Westcott House.

With a scholarship from the World Council of Churches, he spent part of his second year at the Orthodox seminary in Bucharest just after the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. The purpose was to learn more about the Orthodox tradition, which he did; but he also discovered something of the sinister reality of living in a police state where trust was a rare commodity.

By contrast, when he was ordained in 1969 to a curacy at St John's Wood parish church, Reiss was moved by the notice-board stating that the church "welcomed all who believed and all who doubted". He found himself in a good place "in which to learn the basic elements of being a public representative of the Church in an open and welcoming community".

In 1973, towards the end of his curacy, Reiss was offered a post as chaplain at his old college at Cambridge, Trinity. His former tutor and supervisor, Harry Williams, had left to become a monk and was replaced as Dean by none other than Bishop John Robinson.

Reiss was offered the chaplaincy so far in advance that he had the opportunity to travel for six months after leaving his curacy. Concerned by world poverty, he spent six weeks in northern India and then three months working as an assistant missionary at Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

He took up his post at Trinity later that year. A popular chaplain, he exercised a highly effective and much appreciated pastoral ministry to students and Fellows alike, with many of whom he remained in touch for years. However, shocked and appalled by the poverty he had seen on his recent travels, he reckoned it "a salutary experience to reflect upon back in Cambridge – living, by contrast, on the high table of one of the most privileged institutions in England".

Ever since as a teenager he had felt

the beginnings of a call to ordination, Reiss remained interested in the nature of vocation and the processes for the selection of ordinands.

In 1978 he left Trinity to become a permanent selection secretary with the Advisory Council for the Church's Ministry, rising to the post of Senior Secretary in 1983. His experiences in this field led him eventually to study for a Lambeth PhD in Ecclesiastical History, which he was awarded in 2013: the resulting book, *The Testing of Vocation: 100 years of ministry selection in the Church of England*, was published the same year.

In 1986 Reiss was appointed Team Rector of Grantham in the diocese of Lincoln. When, soon after, he was invited to speak for his year's intake at Trinity's annual gathering, he startled some of them by saying he was proud to represent a group of non-entities, their predecessors having included Rajiv Gandhi and the subsequent year the Prince of Wales.

His time at Grantham was distinguished by the enterprising attitude with which he approached the task of the rectorship. The hospitality provided in the fine Georgian rectory – skilfully decorated on a shoe-string by his talented wife Dixie – became legendary, both for parishioners and for the legions of friends who came from far and wide. And a need for funds to restore the fabric of the ancient church led to him abseiling down it, in an exhibition of clerical daring – notwithstanding what was, at the time, his rather stout physique.

Reiss ministered at Grantham until his appointment in 1996 as Archdeacon of Surrey in the Diocese of Guildford. He was elected to the General Synod of the Church of England in 1990 and served as a member for 15 years.

As a trustee of the Churches Conservation Trust, in 2003 he surveyed fellow archdeacons in all 42 Anglican dioceses in England, inquiring how many churches might be closed within a decade: the estimate of 200 to 300 prompted the Archdeacon of Gloucester to call for the opening up of more churches for community activities and the return of the mediaeval practice of church naves being used for markets and social gatherings.

A report by the religion correspondent of *The Times* was headlined: "Archdeacon says churches need bingo and markets to survive."

Reiss retired initially to south London, then more recently to Salisbury, where he had permission to officiate. A member of MCC, he continued to enjoy cricket, as well as a round of golf. Although he was diabetic – his hypoglycaemic episodes could cause colleagues (if not himself) consternation – Reiss was determined to remain fit, with regular work-outs at a gymnasium.

His last book, *Death, Where is Your Sting? Dying and Death Examined*, published in 2022, explored the process of dying, the question of what, if anything, happens after death and the issues surrounding assisted dying.

Bob Reiss is survived by his wife Dixie. They first met in Cambridge when he was chaplain of Trinity and she a teacher-training student at Homerton. They married in 1985 and had a daughter, Anya, a playwright of whom he was very proud, who also survives him.

The Reverend Canon Robert Reiss, born January 20 1943; died January 26 2023