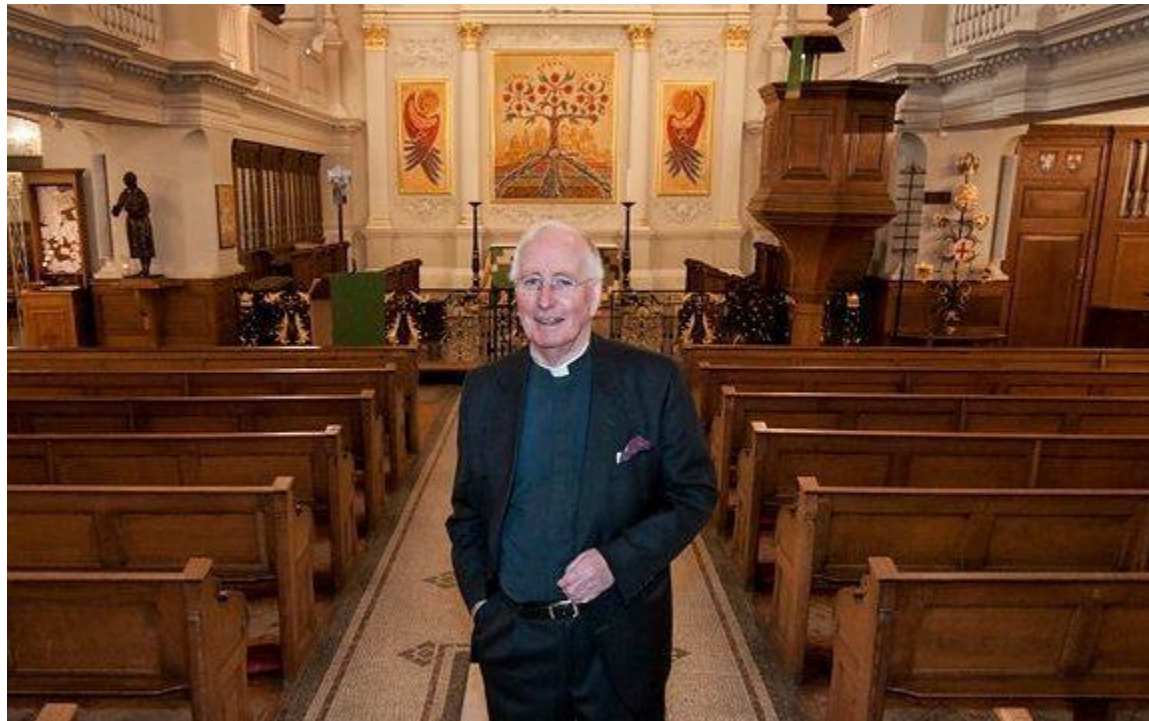


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**The Reverend Malcolm Johnson, moving spirit behind the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement**

As well as carrying out a ministry to gay people Johnson opened St Botolph's crypt to homeless people and set up a youth club for Bengalis



The Reverend Malcolm Johnson, in retirement, pictured at St Botolph's Aldgate in the City of London Credit: DAVID HOFFMAN

The Reverend Malcolm Johnson, who has died aged 89, was Master of the Royal Foundation of St Katharine, Stepney, in the East End of London, from 1993 to 1997, and spent the final years of his ministry as the Bishop of London's Adviser for Pastoral Care and Counselling; but he is chiefly remembered for his remarkable work among the homeless and with the gay community when he was Vicar of St Botolph's Church, Aldgate, from 1974 to 1992.

His appointment to this parish on the border of the City of London and the East End was a direct result of the failure of his marriage when he was chaplain of Queen Mary College, London. This failure, which led to the annulment of the marriage, was due to his homosexuality, which for the previous 20 years he had been struggling to accommodate with his call to Holy Orders.

The pain of the breakdown led him to ask the Bishop of London, Robert Stopford, to provide a quiet parish where he might exercise a discreet ministry to London's gay community. The Bishop obliged with St Botolph's – which was not exactly quiet, since it had a fair-sized Sunday-morning congregation, and in its crypt was a centre for down-and-outs, many with addictions, as well as a youth club for Bengalis living in the neighbourhood.

Johnson decided to expand this work, and before long as many as 300 homeless were attending the centre every day. By the time he left there was a staff of 23, including social workers, doctors, nurses and resettlement officers. Four hostels were created in nearby buildings to provide short-term resettlement housing, and the annual cost of the work was almost £700,000.



A volunteer cutting a homeless man's hair at St Botolph's Crypt 'wet shelter', 1978 Credit: DAVID HOFFMAN

Three hundred parishes sent the centre their harvest offerings, some public money was forthcoming, and the rest was raised by Johnson from contacts in the City, where he also developed a specialist ministry to the business community.

Bridging the gap between the haves and the have-nots led him to initiate an educational programme designed to bring about change in a social order that condemned people to sleep in shop doorways. This led to the engagement of the Rev Kenneth Leech, a well-known social thinker and writer, as a "community theologian".

As director of the centre, as well as vicar of an increasingly busy church, Johnson's hands were more than full, but he never forgot the chief reason for his going to St Botolph's. Many hundreds of people came to talk to him about problems arising from their homosexuality and found a sensitive and skilled listener.

In 1969 he made himself available to the Albany Trust's counselling service and in 1975 he started a support group for gay clergy, the meetings of which attracted attendances of 70-100. A Franciscan friar provided an HIV and Aids counselling service. The church itself became a place to which gay people were drawn and where they felt accepted and at home.

This openness to homosexuals led to unwelcome controversy and national publicity at the end of 1987. For more than a decade the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement had been provided with an office in the church tower, though they used a Post Office box number for their address.



Johnson giving Holy Communion at St Botolph's, 1978 Credit: DAVID HOFFMAN

This created no problems until Johnson made a powerful and much-publicised speech in the General Synod on the Church's lack of understanding of homosexuals. Soon afterwards the evangelical Archdeacon of London informed him that, since no faculty had ever been obtained for the use of the tower room as an office, the presence there of the LGCM was illegal.

Johnson and his Church Council therefore applied for a faculty, but this was strongly opposed by the Archdeacon, who acknowledged the legitimacy of the LGCM's existence but claimed that the presence of its office in St Botolph's tower implied official Church endorsement of its aims.

At the consistory court the application was withdrawn on legal advice, since the LGCM was planning to move anyway, whereupon George Newsom, chancellor of the London diocese, awarded costs against Johnson and the Church Council, forbade them to make any public comment on the case, and declared that "much evil" had flowed from the LGCM's use of the church tower.

All but one of the clergy in the City of London, where Johnson was the Area Dean, signed a letter expressing support for him and admiration of his ministry, while the future Archbishop Rowan Williams, at that time Lady

Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford, suggested that there had been “a deliberate will to humiliate” on the part of London diocese.

Malcolm Arthur Johnson was born on September 8 1936 in Great Yarmouth, where his father owned a factory. It was at his prep school that he first thought he might become a priest, and this remained with him when he was at Framlingham School.

First it was necessary for him to do National Service, most of which was spent in Cyprus as a subaltern in the Royal Norfolk Regiment.

During this time he decided to seek Holy Orders, and on demobilisation he went to University College, Durham, to read theology. His training was completed at Cuddesdon Theological College during the principalship of Robert Runcie, the future Archbishop of Canterbury, and where, according to Johnson, as many as a third of the students were gay, albeit discreetly.

In 1962 he was ordained and went as one of several curates in the large and dynamic parish of St Mark, North End, Portsmouth. He was happy to remain there for five years before becoming chaplain of Queen Mary College, London, where he began his long commitment to ministry in the East End.



St Botolph's Crypt 'wet shelter', 1978 Credit: DAVID HOFFMAN

After the great work at St Botolph's it was said that his abbreviated tenure of the Mastership of St Katharine's Foundation ended in disappointment. This Royal Peculiar, at that time under the patronage of the Queen Mother, was founded as a collegiate church and hospital by Queen Matilda in 1148. Soon after the Second World War it embarked on a combination of spiritual retreats and welfare work under the leadership of the legendary Father John Groser.

This was continued by the monks of the Community of the Resurrection, assisted by some nuns, but when they moved away in 1993 the trustees decided that a new approach was needed. After some hesitation they appointed Johnson as Master and he gathered around him three Franciscan friars and four nuns.

But in spite of good ideas and some progress in new directions, there were problems. Johnson missed his Sunday-morning congregation but, more significantly, he did not live with the community at St Katharine's, choosing instead to live with his partner in a private house. It was also the case that the proximity of the Foundation to St Botolph's (only 1½ miles away) meant that many of his homosexual contacts changed their allegiances, which was not what the trustees had had in mind when they appointed Johnson.

After five years, with the endorsement of the Bishop of London he left to concentrate on counselling, particularly among gay people, from a base at St Martin-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square, remaining there until his retirement in 2002. For the rest of his life he continued to exercise a greatly valued pastoral ministry to individuals, and in 2013 he published a memoir, *Diary of a Gay Priest: the Tightrope Walker*.

Dressed invariably in a dark suit and a clerical collar, there was more of the traditional clergyman in him than most of his opponents recognised.

He is survived by Robert Wilson, a property developer who was his partner of more than 50 years and became his civil partner in 2006.

**The Rev Malcolm Johnson, born September 8 1936, died February 24 2026**