The Guardian profile
He is bright and prepared to take a stand for something he believes in, even if it's not going with the mainstream

Riazat Butt, religious affairs correspondent
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Until last Sunday few people had heard of the Reverend Dr Martin Dudley BD MSc MTh PhD FSA FRHistS AKC. He had written some handbooks, such as the Parish Survival Guide, but his reputation did not extend far beyond the boundaries of St Bartholomew the Great, the pretty 12th-century church in the City of London. Indeed, the building was more famous than him, starring in blockbusters including Four Weddings and a Funeral and Shakespeare in Love.

But a lot can change in a week and when, on May 31, he presided at a service for two gay clergy the rector could never have predicted that, a fortnight later, he would be swept into the eye of a storm. Since news broke of the ceremony - which had a wedding march, rings, vows, two best men, a fanfare and confetti - Dudley has been publicly admonished by his own bishop, the Right Rev Richard Chartres, and the two archbishops, Rowan Williams and John Sentamu, for a possible breach of guidelines on blessing civil partnerships.

Dudley's actions could not have happened at a worse time, fuelling an already bitter and protracted power struggle that threatens the unity of the Anglican Communion, with conservative dioceses from Africa and America opposing the more accommodating nature of the Church of England towards the ordination and consecration of gay clergy.

The furore has saddened those who know him. Parishioner and longtime friend Nicholas Newington-Irving says Dudley should be judged on how he tends to his flock. "He puts bums on pews. He has a lot more people coming into St Bartholomew, whatever else people think he's doing. He is a very good preacher and he's very caring."

Newington-Irving describes Dudley as a "prominent figure" in the City of London, sitting on 14 committees. "Unfortunately," he says, "people who are in the public eye will attract attention. But Dudley is a survivor and he is picked on for almost everything."
Dudley, a Baptist's son, is famed in church circles for his intelligence and knowledge of liturgy. Born in Birmingham and educated at King Edward's school, he studied theology at King's College London, and has a doctorate in theology. He also has an MSc from City University's Cass Business School. His chaplain at King's was Colin Slee, now canon of Southwark Cathedral.

"He is very bright. He is a very consistent person in that he knows his own mind and doesn't mind if everyone else disagrees with him. He is very intelligent and prepared to take a stand for something he believes in, even if it's not going with the mainstream."

Dudley's insistence that he had done nothing wrong upset conservatives - and more liberal senior churchmen - and even when the opprobrium was at its loudest he infuriated his detractors by saying he would do it again. This defiance is, says Slee, part of his personality. "He would be perfectly content to be seen as a maverick. However, he also believes in the church and would be regarded by some as an old-fashioned Anglo-Catholic."

His contemporary at King's, Nicholas Holtam, vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields, hails his intellect, but says Dudley is working in a vacuum. The fevered debates about gay clergy would have made it impossible for him not to realise the wider ramifications of the service. "He is a very surprising person to be caught up in a dispute, which he wasn't prepared for. He doesn't have a reputation for picking up social causes."

What happens to Dudley depends on the outcome of an investigation ordered by the Bishop of London. A judgment is thought to be imminent and could see him disciplined, although not, as some would wish, defrocked. Parson's freehold prevents him being fired except in extreme cases of wrongdoing. A churchwarden of St Bartholomew's, Ian Kelly, says Dudley is well-versed in ecclesiastical law and this knowledge will stand him in good stead. One churchman has said it would have been "remarkably short-sighted of Dudley to do what he did if he did not have freehold".

Kelly believes it is the support of his congregation that drives the priest onwards. "Although I struggle with the idea of civil partnerships, I really don't want him to leave. We are not a dying or dormant church, we are on the front foot and that is because of Martin."

The CV

Born May 31 1953

Education King Edward's school, Birmingham; RMA Sandhurst 1978, St Michael's college, Llandaff; PhD London 1994; Cass Business School, City University (MSc 2006)
Family  Married Paula Jones in 1976; two sons


Publications  The Collect in Anglican Liturgy, 1994; Like a Two-edged Sword, 1995; Serving the Parish, 2006

Recreations  Visiting French cathedrals, reading modern fiction

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