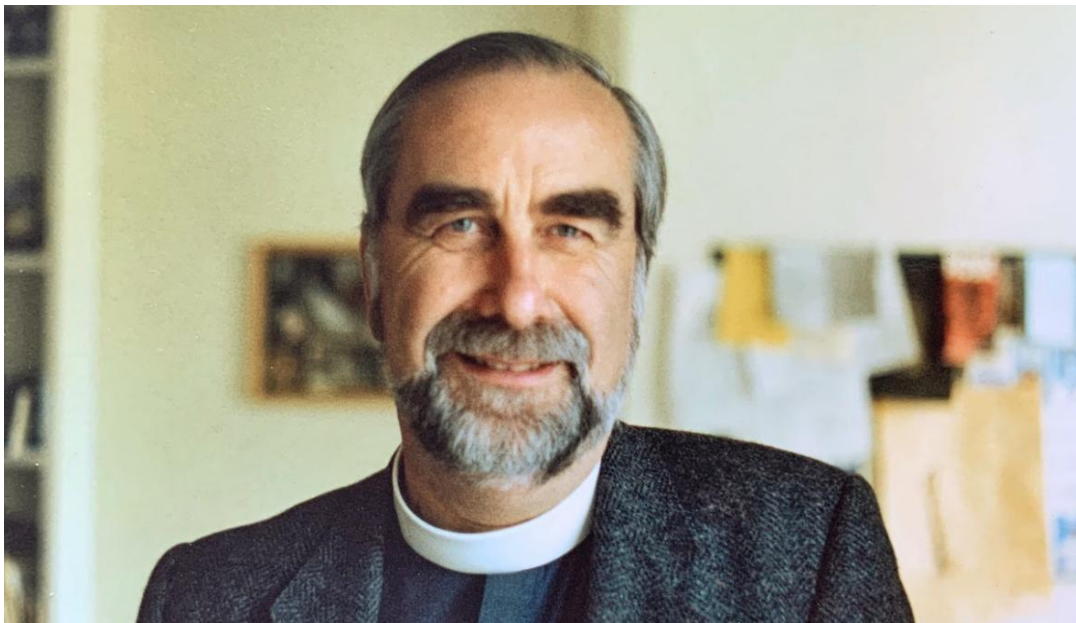


The Rev Alistair Sutherland obituary

Engineer who helped to develop early kidney dialysis machines and pacemakers before giving it up to become a clergyman

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Obituaries



Sutherland said his years as a clergyman serving farming villages were the happiest of his life

When Alistair Sutherland embarked on a second career as a rural vicar at the age of 50 in 1981, he quickly worked out that the average farmer started to feel uncomfortable in his pew just as the average preacher was getting into his stride.

Sutherland, who had a record of finding new ways to tackle problems, changed his approach and came up with the “soundbite sermon”, an address lasting no more than ten minutes. Beyond that, he felt he risked “casting seed on stony ground”.

Needless to say, he became a popular and effective clergyman in the farming communities that he served in Devon and south Nottinghamshire for more than 20 years, which he described as the happiest of his life.

He had probably had a more telling impact on the lives of people, however, during his first career, as an electrical engineer, having led a pioneering team developing pacemakers and kidney dialysis machines in the 1960s and 1970s.



Sutherland with his wife, Mysie

As part of his National Service in 1954, Sutherland had worked for GEC on the Blue Streak ballistic missile project. He later joined Lucas Aerospace, which also made weapons, but was simultaneously involved in the development of medical equipment. Collaborating with surgeons from the United Birmingham Hospitals Research Team, Sutherland and his team developed inductively coupled pacemakers, which were highly efficient, artificial cardiac valves, and dialysis machines that could be used in the home. In 1969 he became managing director of Lucas's medical manufacturing subsidiary, GE Bradley, and his work was later recognised by The Queen's Award for Industry.

According to his daughter, Anne Coutts, Sutherland made complex ideas sound easy and never spoke in jargon, scientific or theological. "He was fascinated about how things worked. I used to like watching him working on our car, lying

underneath it like a mechanic. He had a bright light that hooked on the bonnet so he could see into the engine and would lift me up to show me where things were and what they did.”

Yet he started to yearn for change. A modest and kind man, he felt the call of his Christian faith and decided to study theology at the University of Exeter, driving there in a battered old BMW, but his career almost came to a halt before it had even begun. One member of the Church’s admissions board, Robert Runcie, then Bishop of St Albans and later Archbishop of Canterbury, questioned Sutherland’s suitability for the work. Sutherland pressed on, however. A year later he became a curate at St Michael’s Church in the village of Musbury near Axminster and completed his training at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford.

Alistair Campbell Sutherland was born in Yorkshire in 1931, the second son of Scottish parents who had migrated south. His father, William, was a family doctor and lay preacher, while his mother, Grace, was a teacher. Alistair and his brother, Ian, had a strict childhood in the Scottish tradition: home, church and school. A painfully shy boy, Alistair was sent to Bradford Grammar School, where he gained his school certificate two years early. He studied electrical engineering as an external candidate at Imperial College, London and was offered work experience with GEC in Birmingham.

Concerned that his son knew no one in the Midlands, William Sutherland wrote to a fellow Scot, William Dunn, who was chief engineer at the Alvis car plant in Warwickshire, asking if Alistair could stay with him, his wife and their six children. The family had survived a direct hit on their home in Coventry during the Luftwaffe raid in November 1940. It was a rumbustious and highly competitive household.

The four rugby-playing Dunn boys dubbed the newcomer “Alice”, and gave him a frosty reception when he fell for Mysie, the younger of their two sisters.

Undaunted, he married his “flame-haired beauty” in 1954. She worked as a physiotherapist and survives him, with their three children: Anne became head of Headington Girls’ School in Oxford and later Canberra Girls’ Grammar School in Australia; Alistair, known as “Sandy”, works for the diocese of Exeter in the provision of pastoral care and management; Neil is an agricultural scientist and farmer who also emigrated to Australia.

After working as a vicar in the southwest, Sutherland moved to south Nottinghamshire, where he lived in Barton in Fabis, serving three farming villages, and six more as rural dean. In 1996 he returned to Musbury, where he served the parish until 2003. He was particularly delighted when his son-in-law, Ian Coutts, was enthroned as the Anglican Bishop of Bunbury in Western Australia in 2018.

He liked gardening, and kept an enormous compost heap, which occasionally caught fire. He did *The Times* cryptic crossword at breakfast every day — he called it “brainfood” — and enjoyed mince and tatties, but did not care for salads or vegetables.

At the age of 79 he was fitted with a pacemaker, which weighed one-tenth of the models he had pioneered as an electrical engineer, but was a poignant reminder of his earlier contributions to the welfare of his fellow man.

The Rev Alistair Sutherland, clergyman and electrical engineer, was born on January 19, 1931. He died of a stroke on November 4, 2020, aged 89