



MAN, MEANING, MINISTRY: The Quest for the Historical Vanstone

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Introduction and Explanation: In at the Deep End

This article sets out to reflect on the contemporary relevance of three slim but profound volumes¹ from the pen of W.H. Vanstone. Until a year ago I had read only the second and third of these. Nevertheless, these two were sufficient to convince me that here was a powerful theological mind with important insights to offer for our understanding of the life and death of Jesus and assurance for the practice of faith and ministry in our day. It was after reading a short section, “The Deep End”, in an essay by Sarah Coakley², specifically referring to the context out of which Vanstone’s writing came, that I resolved to obtain and read Vanstone’s first, and in the view of many, his most significant and original book.³

The biographical information given by Coakley⁴ was sufficient to convince me that Vanstone has powerful things to suggest for the contemporary practice of ministry, a conviction reinforced by the late Archbishop Robert Runcie’s admiration for his friend as his “hero”⁵, the kind of priest he would like to have been⁶. I responded to Vanstone’s reported comment likening the Church “to a swimming pool in which all the noise comes from the shallow end” and the need to look for our beliefs “from the deep end”.⁷

I had little by way of personal information about Vanstone⁸, assuming him to be a self-effacing man whose writings, suppressing his personality as they do⁹, were to be regarded as sufficient¹⁰. Although a number of writers quote Vanstone’s work, some of them extensively¹¹, I could find few, with the exception of those who speak of him in relation to Robert Runcie¹², who tell us anything of the character and life of the man. With just three books as raw material to work on, my project seemed very straightforward.

However, tentative enquiries with a view to obtaining some background material soon led to a large number of conversations, meetings and correspondence, with a wide circle of friends, both clerical and lay, among whom were former curates and colleagues, members of the various congregations with which Vanstone has been associated, colleagues at Chester Cathedral and in the Diocese of Gloucester, many admirers and also, crucially, a number of detractors, several of whom described their personal experience of Vanstone as being somewhat at variance with his theological writing. One close colleague remarked that “people are either for or against Vanstone”¹³. It soon became clear that Vanstone was a complex man, a colourful character whose personality could be most attractive to many and yet sometimes be deemed unattractive to others because it was misunderstood¹⁴ and who held within him “a tremendous writhing of the soul”¹⁵.

As one who never met Vanstone personally and therefore can have some claim to objectivity, I have tried to weigh up the vast amount of anecdotal and personal information received over a short period of time to arrive at an honest and balanced assessment of the man, but only in order that I might better understand his writing, which is so utterly bound up with his life and ministry.¹⁶

I was therefore glad to find some long-standing friends of Vanstone¹⁷ who proved most positive and helpful in giving neither the uncritical eulogistic or the totally negative appraisals offered by others. These convinced me that in order to understand Vanstone’s books it is important to know the story of his life, and that this life could not be compressed into a few short paragraphs, still less divided up into neat categories. In order to discern the relevance of Vanstone’s writing for contemporary *ministry*, it is essential to understand his intellectual exploration and his practical out-working of ministry as a search for *meaning*, and further, that the three books dealing with this search evolved during significant periods¹⁸ within the life-story of Vanstone the *man*. Having discovered the story, or at least a small part of the story, I now read Vanstone’s books with new eyes.



I. Man and Myth

The claim that Bill Vanstone was “generally regarded as the most intellectually brilliant”¹⁹ of his generation of theological students and “one of the most distinguished spiritual writers of our day”²⁰ was echoed so often in the obituaries at the time of his death²¹ as to become almost a cliché. That does not make it any less true: yet, at the same time, he is an elusive, complex man who has inspired great loyalty and much opposition in the course of a full and controversial life. So many legends have surrounded Bill Vanstone and his ministry in Kirkholt, Rochdale that the tracking down of the historical reality behind the holy smokescreen became an intriguing detective story.

Much of the above paragraph has been freely and yet deliberately adapted from the Preface²² to Ron Ferguson’s brilliant and moving biography of George MacLeod, a man who was as big an influence on my life and many others of my generation in Scotland as I now know Bill Vanstone was on many in England throughout the same period. I have taken this unusual step because my wife and I came quite independently to the same conclusion as we spent some days recently meeting friends and associates of Vanstone at Kirkholt and Chester for the purposes of research. As we listened to their stories and experiences, as we learned of Vanstone’s involvement with the disadvantaged and his legendary camps for boys, we could not help but think of George MacLeod, whose life, together with the legends surrounding it, was in many respects so similar. Ron Ferguson, who in common with many like myself was familiar with Vanstone’s books yet unacquainted with his background, on hearing of my findings in regard to Vanstone, immediately saw the connections and readily agreed that I should make the above adaptation of his Preface to make the point.

Although Vanstone did not enjoy MacLeod’s privileged background, nor did he display the same concern for wider political concerns in his ministry, and certainly not the same cavalier and selective attitude to the latest in-theology, both clearly had huge personal followings and influence; both claimed to be democratic and yet could appear to be dictatorial²³; both suffered much personal criticism at the hands of

detractors; both gave of themselves unsparingly, often to the detriment of their own personal well-being; both were hugely inspirational figures. There is no evidence that MacLeod and Vanstone ever met, but it is intriguing to imagine such a meeting.

When, as many hope it will be, the biography of Vanstone is written, I am sure the similarities and shared concerns will be obvious, as well as the huge differences of physical stature and intellectual discipline. Vanstone was as careful as MacLeod was carefree in his use of language. Both were very human. MacLeod was a brilliant orator, Vanstone a brilliant scholar and writer, although many at the churches where he served or where he was visiting preacher still remember, decades later, the simple common-place illustrations in Vanstone's sermons. Both were generous in friendship and utterly reliable confidants to many; yet both could at times appear arrogant, irascible, confrontational, irritated by change and far from easy to love.

Although Vanstone refers “obliquely” to his early life in the first chapter of his first book, dates, places and names are largely left out. In his unpublished writings, Vanstone reveals a little more of his personal life. Since there is no biography, almost all that appears here has had to be pieced together from various sources – personal recollections, parish magazines, letters, articles, sermons and obituaries, in addition to those valuable insights on Vanstone in relation to Runcie, to which we have already referred.

Vanstone was born in 1923, one of four children in a Lancashire vicarage, all of whom excelled in their respective careers, one sister being a schoolmistress, his other sister and brother going into medicine. From school he went to train as a pilot in the Royal Air Force, spending some of the war years in Canada (Vanstone draws amusingly on his experiences teaching new recruits to swim for a powerful image of grace in his third book).

After the war, Vanstone went to Oxford, then Cambridge (where, at Westcott House, he met lifelong friend and admirer Robert Runcie, the future Archbishop of Canterbury), and then to Union Theological

Seminary, New York, where his seminars with Paul Tillich were to leave a lasting mark, as his later parish and published writings indicate. At all of these academic institutions, Vanstone gained the highest possible distinctions and, not surprisingly, was urged to go into academic work. He refused all offers of academic positions, however, with the same stubborn resilience with which, in later life, he refused offers of ecclesiastical elevation.²⁴ Although it must have irritated many of his aspiring contemporaries, Vanstone lived out, as long as he was physically able, his firm belief that: “There is no promotion from the parochial ministry.”²⁵

Vanstone was ordained in 1950, first as deacon and then curate to the late Harold Kirkman at St Thomas’s Halliwell, Bolton.²⁶ His time there is still remembered. An article he wrote many years later shows how profoundly moved he was by the model of parish ministry he found there.²⁷ “There was even a club, with the extraordinary and self-chosen name of “the Nobodies”, for boys of the streets who did not want to be associated with the church.”²⁸ Five years later, Vanstone was asked to initiate the Church’s work on the new housing estate of Kirkholt, Rochdale. It was the anguish posed by his reluctance to leave Halliwell and the initial difficulties in finding any meaningful response to or purpose for the Church in this new sphere which occupied much of his thinking in the ensuing two decades of ministry, eventually resulting in his first published book.

It is not surprising that Vanstone’s whole-hearted dedication to the concept of celibate parish ministry, which so drew the admiration and envy of his friend Robert Runcie²⁹, took its toll on his health. My recent experience of sitting in his vicarage almost three decades after he left, surrounded by a collection of written and printed materials which, although huge, was but a fraction of what must have been produced, brought home to me the level of commitment which to-day many would regard as foolhardy. He clearly spent many hours each week at his typewriter, many more on foot visiting parishioners, many nights in what today would be regarded as one-to-one counselling, and yet still had time to plan his boys’ camps in far-flung areas. Almost immediately after completion of the hall-church which had been in process of

construction at the time of his arrival, he engaged in the practical work of fund-raising for and planning the striking details of the new church building which he insisted was still required.³⁰ No one could accuse even the young Vanstone of a lack of courage, faith or nerve!

His bishop was shocked to learn that Vanstone was at one time getting up early on Sundays and other days to light the Church boiler, feeling that this was a misuse of his time and gifts. As always, Vanstone had his reasons: his parishioners worked hard at their day jobs, they gave much of their little spare time to the Church, they had families to care for; he, as a single man living next to the Church, could give them a long lie by doing these so-called “menial” tasks for them.

Obituaries refer to the fact that the paucity of Vanstone’s writing is in inverse proportion to its quality: just three slim volumes.³¹ Andrew Brown’s statement that “as a priest, he was too busy to write”³² together with Runcie’s comment that whilst a parish priest Vanstone “never really wrote anything”³³, contribute to a myth, unknowingly perpetuated by Coakley’s essay³⁴. Although Vanstone’s *published* corpus is indeed modest - in addition to the books already noted, just a few book reviews, articles, prefaces and hymns – his *unpublished* corpus, much of it now lost, is quite astonishing.³⁵ What remains includes monthly parish magazines (with carefully thought out letters), weekly Sunday School lessons with hand-drawn illustrations delivered personally on a Saturday afternoon to up to six teachers, scripts for revues and scout gang shows, summer camp reports, lectures, pamphlets, sermons, hymns, letters and poems. Frequently there would be attached to these a verse in Latin (one was even attached to the script of a revue) or a Latin tag, which critics might see as showing off his classical education in an area where this would be by no means the norm, but which, as those who were there testify, led to many a lively discussion amongst the boys in his care. Others explain that, as Latin is a language of exactitude, it was only to be expected that Vanstone, as a classical scholar of his time, would make use of it where English failed to give him the expression he needed. My own suggestion, which cannot be proved but seemed to make sense to his closest friends, is that Vanstone’s frequent resort to Latin (until relatively recently the universal language for much of the Christian

worship liturgy) might have been his way of saying that everything he did, the important and the apparently trivial, in his ministry was to be regarded as his personal offering and prayer to God. As former Archbishop Robert Runcie observed in his funeral sermon,

*His writings and sermons give the impression of being effortless, beautiful in style and concise in content. In fact they were the result of giving himself again and again to writing, refining and polishing*³⁶.

However, as we have already noted, it was not just the words that were being refined and polished, but also *ideas* which were in process of gestation, later to re-appear in his books.

Although the weekly sermons were, like his letters and verse, hand-written and prepared with great care (for the rest of his prodigious output he appears to have used an ancient type-writer), “spoken with eloquence, conviction and passion...their author’s prayer, offered as a response to God”,³⁷ the scripts were generally destroyed afterwards. That this is no myth is clear from the testimony of Church wardens and clerical colleagues who knew Vanstone. That this was no gimmick is, as we should now expect, plain from his carefully considered and clearly stated rationale:

*the sermon has done its work when it has been preached and offered... the occasion of this particular offering will not recur, and if the same sermon should be preached again there would then be no cost involved in it, and therefore no offering.*³⁸

However, not every sacristan or clerical colleague obeyed the instruction to shred the sermon script. A few sermons have survived and are now safely deposited with the Vanstone Archive Project at Oxford or lovingly retained in the possession of admirers. Those I have seen are models of clarity, brevity and precision. Sometimes, in his preaching, as also in his magazine articles, Vanstone could be very blunt. The sermon he preached at York Minister for the Consecration of his friend Ronald Brown as Bishop of Birkenhead certainly pulls no punches:

*The Church is not exempted from the possibility that the structures of its own creation may be the sources of its own corruption. The demonic possibilities of Episcopacy, both for those who are invested with it and for the Church at large, must be taken seriously....*³⁹

It is intriguing to wonder if his congregation that day were even then aware of Vanstone's "conviction that bishops were either stupid or vain, and in some cases both."⁴⁰ We can understand why one of his colleagues describes Vanstone as "sometimes seemingly proud of his humility".

David Wyatt affirms that Vanstone differed markedly from George MacLeod in that he took no part in party politics and yet was "in every deepest sense political." This was demonstrated by many incidents of which I mention three: One day, David Wyatt was travelling on a bus with Vanstone, when a punk-rocker was being mocked by many of the young passengers for his unusual coiffure. Vanstone, in full clerical garb, feeling for the young man, stood up and loudly told the other passengers of his outrage at their treatment of one who was deserving of all the respect due by one human being to another.

On another occasion, Vanstone was queuing in the street outside Strangeways Prison, out of clerical gear because he was visiting "as a friend", when he was jostled by a prison officer with the words "get back to the wall, scum!". Vanstone was so outraged, not for himself, but for what it told him of the unjust treatment meted out to the prisoners' visitors as a matter of course, that he wrote to the then Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, whom he had known since they were student at Oxford. In 1965. Vanstone took the bold and unusual step of inviting Muslim leaders to speak to his people on the Islamic faith.

This deep political and social concern is all the more surprising when one knows that Vanstone differed from MacLeod in another major respect, in that, as both Runcie⁴¹ and Wyatt affirm, Vanstone rarely read a newspaper (although he did subscribe briefly, in the early sixties, to *The New Statesman*), and when he listened to the news on radio, preferred to tune in to Radio Cork, because the Irish humour appealed to him. Yet, despite this handicap, eccentricity even, "he could bring a

well-stocked mind and a clarity of thought to most issues that came up in conversation... Unlike many great thinkers he had plenty of small talk – because he liked ordinary people and small issues and was suspicious of large talk and big opinions”.⁴²

Vanstone’s passion for equity and fairness, could and did earn him criticism for being at times naïve and innocent in his friendships and easily exploited (he was like MacLeod in this respect). Certainly, at Kirkholt and later at Chester, his open-house style of ministry meant that many “enquirers, students, tramps, drug-addicts, drop-outs”⁴³ found their way to his door, bringing their own problems, and often causing problems for their generous host, who would give them, not money, but food and time. Sarah Samuels speaks movingly of how, in Vanstone’s house, the black bin bag or rucksack of a homeless person would be treated with the same loving reverence and respect as the most priceless furniture or expensive clothing. Wyatt explains Vanstone’s attitude theologically: “he put love at the centre of his life and ministry, constantly demonstrating what it means to be human, embodying what he taught.”

Sadly, as even his closest friends and admirers acknowledge, not everyone saw this “saintly” aspect of Vanstone. Christopher Samuels⁴⁴ states that “sometimes he could appear brusque and dismissive, but only when he saw things as being superficial, shallow or false.” Wyatt says that Vanstone was “fierce in his defence of the defenceless.” Brown readily acknowledges that Vanstone could be touchy, that certain things irritated him greatly, that he was a “rock-bottom man” who could flare up when confronted by pretence in any shape or form. Samuels states that Vanstone had difficulty coping with people who were “precious” and full of their own importance; he also confirms that “constant pain and failing health made Vanstone querulous.” Much of the above helps us to understand Webster’s observation:

*At Chester Cathedral, Vanstone could be puzzling to his colleagues. He found teamwork difficult... He was averse to any change in worship or administration... Vanstone felt it his duty to slam on the brakes.*⁴⁵

Vanstone confided in Wyatt that, since he thought his time was limited and death imminent (as he clearly believed it was after leaving Kirkholt), it would be a waste of valuable time to undergo pain-relieving surgery on his hip with the necessary convalescent period. He was also “extremely deaf” in his latter years.⁴⁶ Towards the end of his life his mind “began to break up”.⁴⁷

Vanstone had a simple life-style. Throughout his life and especially at his death, his friends were surprised at how few material possessions he had. He travelled mostly by bus and train, and delighted to tell of the kindness and interest he had met in fellow travellers. Yet, he was a generous host, a good cook, a fastidious table-layer, and kept a well-stocked drinks cupboard, living out, as always, in his own life a well-thought-out theology:

*There is a time to laugh as well as a time to weep...It is a mere affectation of sensitivity when a man claims that, so long as there is tragedy anywhere in the world, he himself can feel no joy.*⁴⁸

I have already expressed my indebtedness to Coakley’s essay for inspiring me to embark on researching Vanstone’s life. However, her biographical information was largely based on an obituary⁴⁹ that, as I have since discovered, contributes further to the legend surrounding Vanstone by erring in at least two key areas. Yet, as is commonly the case with great figures, both these “myths” have some basis in fact.

First, it is not true to allege that he never told anyone in his parish of his canonry. Parish magazines of the period carry his new title inside the printed cover. He was glad to have members of his congregation attend Manchester Cathedral to share the occasion, stating his clear view that the honour was as much theirs as his. As for the way he was addressed, whilst some undoubtedly addressed him as “Mr Vanstone”, most called him “Vicar”. However, as one newly elevated bishop discovered to his cost, when those who considered themselves above him in status expected to be addressed by their title in public whilst addressing him familiarly as “Bill”, Vanstone demanded that they address him as “Canon.” Such public confrontations undoubtedly caused misunderstanding. As his friend Bishop Brown explains,

Vanstone abhorred forced familiarity and spurious friendship. Vanstone's objections arose not from a concern for status but out of a deeply rooted concern for reciprocity in relationships, from the greatest to the least, and the importance of manners. This concern for equality was in total accord with his understanding of ministry and worship, reflected in the design (in which he had considerable influence) of the chancel of the new church, consecrated in March, 1964, with its oval altar, symbolising "brotherhood, equality, communion".⁵⁰

Second, neither is it strictly true to say that "more than two decades of devoted pastoral work ended in 1976, when Vanstone had a severe heart attack"⁵¹. The truth is far more significant. Vanstone's health was in serious decline⁵² prior to a heart attack in June 1974⁵³. After a period of convalescence, he continued to serve faithfully⁵⁴, not missing a Sunday according to the service book, until, quite unable to go on any longer, he was told by his doctors he simply had to leave. His last services were on Sunday, February 1st, 1976, after which he wrote in the service book:

*On this day, being somewhat afflicted with disease of the heart,
I laid down my ministry at Kirkholt with great gratitude to
Almighty God for his unending mercies.*

In the parish magazine at the time⁵⁵ he writes poignantly:

*In more senses than one my heart has a lot to cope with at the
moment: please forgive me if I do not perform very well my last
and most difficult task of leaving St Thomas's.*

In the same magazine he writes of his plans for the immediate future:

*My hope therefore is to begin as soon as possible to regain some
strength in the quietness of my sister's home in Birmingham: to
complete there a piece of writing on which I have been engaged,
on and off, for the last 18 months...*

That "piece of writing" was to emerge the next year as *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God*.⁵⁶ However,

as I have indicated, close attention to magazines over the previous decade shows that this had been a work in process for years⁵⁷, like all his writing, carefully worked out, often at great personal cost, within the work of the parish.

It is clear that Vanstone was physically and emotionally exhausted when he finally left his beloved Kirkholt parish. His friend Victor Whitsey, now Bishop of Chester, provided him with accommodation and some light duties as theological adviser. However, the flame of Vanstone's passion for parish ministry was not to be extinguished so easily. Having difficulty finding an incumbent for St Barnabas's, Hattersley, another huge housing area,⁵⁸ Whitsey finally gave in to Vanstone's insistence that he should be allowed to take up this position. Sadly, barely a year was sufficient to demonstrate that Vanstone no longer had the health and stamina for this demanding work. The acceptance of his inability to fulfil his calling, hard for any priest, but especially so for one as active and devoted as Vanstone, resulted eventually in the completing of his second book, *The Stature of Waiting*, although it too was a work in process over many years.⁵⁹

In 1978, Vanstone accepted an appointment as Canon Residentiary at Chester Cathedral, remaining there until his retirement in 1990. During these years he wrote and lectured, whilst taking a full part in the life of the Cathedral. Vanstone, chose, typically, not to live in the large house which went with his canonry, but in a small medieval cottage where he tried to offer, as far as possible, the kind of pastoral ministry of availability typical of his Kirkholt years:

*his door always open to visitors from all over the world, and to a stream of lonely, questioning, and often wounded men and women, who found there generous hospitality, a ready ear and sensitive understanding, which often kept his light burning until well into the night.*⁶⁰

Samuels quotes a favourite saying: "If there's one closed door, that's one too many", adding that Vanstone's "was as open as it is possible to be".

At the after-service open-house Sunday evening gatherings in his cottage at Chester, he was a great raconteur. The humorous aspect of Vanstone comes across not only in the many stories told by others, his liking for entertaining, with strong cigarettes and a glass of sherry in hand, but also in the stories he tells against himself.⁶¹ Two sentences in *The Daily Telegraph* obituary are reminiscent of Vanstone's own "oblique" writing style:

*Vanstone had a strong attachment to the Book of Common Prayer. In retirement in Gloucestershire he celebrated Holy Communion according to the 1662 rite and preached a well crafted sermon in a tiny country church*⁶².

I now know that it was to Tetbury that Vanstone moved in 1990, near to his sister Christine and close to where their late father had retired, and that this "tiny country church" was St Mary the Virgin at nearby Beverston. Both his mood and his new situation can be gauged from what Vanstone writes in 1997:

*I am very fortunate...in very good health – having the privilege of conducting Holy Communion each Sunday morning in a beautiful ancient church beside a Norman castle, with majestic trees all round and... grateful for the many letters I receive in response to "Fare Well in Christ"*⁶³.

It was in this somewhat idyllic setting that Vanstone had put the final touches to his last book, the writing of which he tells us in the Foreword had taken almost five years. Alan Webster has aptly described *Fare Well in Christ* as:

*his happiest book...The earlier tense struggles in parishes ...were over. He appealed to believers to relax in their faith and to trust in a loving as well as a suffering God.*⁶⁴

Lady Anne McMeekin describes Vanstone in these latter years as:

...always smiling, bent over, crippled, yet he came to social events. We loved him because of his humour and humanity. He preached about his spirit being raised by those who were in extremis.

In *Fare Well in Christ*, Vanstone urges us to remember our calling to be “living reminders” to people.⁶⁵ This made me think, at the time I read it, of Nouwen’s book *The Living Reminder*, a book I was pleased to discover Vanstone had reviewed and that he had also singled out for quotation this sentence:

*When I am away from home, I often express myself in letters in a much more intimate way than when I am with my family.*⁶⁶

How appropriate then to read a moving passage in the sermon Runcie preached at Vanstone’s funeral at Tetbury, referring to Vanstone’s favourite T. S. Eliot quotation, “meeting is for strangers”:

*It meant that true friends carry each other around in their hearts and minds and actual meeting is not essential for friendship to continue; though by correspondence and by the kindness he received here he showed that laughter and the love of friends was still a high priority to the end.*⁶⁷

One relatively new friend during this latter period of Vanstone’s retirement in Gloucestershire, Canon Neil Heavisides, speaks of Vanstone’s ability still to make new friendships, where the relationship was based on mutuality. Heavisides also felt that all his life Vanstone had wrestled with faith and “didn’t want to wrestle any more”.

Alan Webster writes: *Vanstone argued that humanity can achieve its true dignity through a life of prayer. In his own last years he lived out patiently his theme of waiting.*⁶⁸

As I have grown to know, to admire, to begin to understand and even

to love Vanstone the man, I am more than ever convinced that it is only through the telling of the story of his life that one can begin to understand his writing and the contemporary relevance of his ministry. However, there is another more personal explanation for the way my research project developed and expanded. As my Introduction makes clear, my initial research had the limited aim of providing some basic background material. I found, however, that in seeking to discover the story of Vanstone's life, his writing and his ministry and in my reflection on what I had learned, there evolved a modern example of that story which is pivotal for the argument of Vanstone's first book. As in the moving account of the boys' model⁶⁹, I found that, in attempting to describe the experience what will seem like clichés spring most readily to mind: the project "took me over"; there was a growing realisation that here was a story that "had to be told", a style of ministry that "had to be explored", as it were, "for its own sake." It struck me forcibly that, in the discovering and the telling of the story (and telling it with attention to the details, for this is where "meaning" and "importance"⁷⁰ are most likely to be found), my project became itself a "model" - even if only a modest one - of that "responsive creativity" which is so significant for Vanstone's understanding of the meaning of the Church.

Responsive creativity finds what it has to say only through the saying of it, and discovers the greatness of what it celebrates only through the celebration of it. Responsive creativity is the coming-to-be of one's own recognition of the blessing conferred by original creativity⁷¹.



II: Meaning

It is not simply through lack of theological expertise that I feel I must leave it to others⁷² better equipped than I to make a full and proper analysis of Vanstone's theological writing in terms of the categories of our time; rather is it because I was drawn to his writing through *Practicing Theology*⁷³ and have responded to it as a practising minister. However, if I had to give a brief personal overview, I would choose the category of "Meaning", rather than theology, because it seems that all his life Vanstone was wrestling with meaning - the meanings of words (the use of language was of supreme importance to him); the meaning of relationships (illustrated by his concern for appropriate modes of address and good manners); the meaning of worship (expressed in the strikingly unusual adornments of the new church at Kirkholt – the huge metal crown of thorns suspended above an oval-shaped altar and, beside the preaching desk,—"the stark simple life-size wooden cross"⁷⁴ under which the preacher must stand); the meaning of the illness which struck him down and which forcibly ended what he had always regarded as his life's vocation.

Both Wyatt and Samuels confirm that "Meaning" is also an appropriate term for understanding his books - the meaning of the Church and the meaning of God's love (*Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God*); the meaning of Christ's life and death, with its implications (taking "handed over" instead of "betrayed", as a more accurate translation of the Greek) for Vanstone's own new experience as a patient (*The Stature of Waiting*); the meaning of grace and the mystery of death (*Fare Well in Christ*). "Importance" was another word that friends often heard Vanstone use. Certainly it is interesting to note the extent to which the notions of "meaning" and "importance" permeate both his published and unpublished writings.⁷⁵ There are times when the two terms appear so linked as to be indistinguishable, interchangeable even.⁷⁶ Vanstone's detailed reflection on "the meaning of the Church", is prefaced by an explanation that the two central chapters of argument "have been concerned with establishing a context within which the word 'meaning' may itself *have meaning*."⁷⁷ I think this bears out my hunch and Wyatt's contention

that Vanstone's life and ministry must be understood, by admirers and critics alike, in terms of wrestling with meaning and with the importance of things which to others might seem trivial or insignificant.' Vanstone was a *thinking* pastor, for whom living, thinking and ministering were bound together as one.⁷⁸

Vanstone worked out his ministry both practically and intellectually. Thus, I would describe his theological writing, as demonstrated in his first two books in particular, as, above all else, contextual. As my earlier discussion of Vanstone the man was intended to make clear, whilst his formidable intellect was beyond dispute, and for some devotees beyond compare, always it was subordinated to the service of the warm pastoral heart that beat within him.



III: Ministry

It should now be clear why for me this entire research project turned into an extended reflection on contemporary ministry in the light of not only the writings of Vanstone, but also his life and his ministry. The present Vicar at St Thomas's, Kirkholt acknowledges her congregation's debt to its founding Vicar, but feels that the people who revere Vanstone's memory might not always appreciate that his methods would have to be different now. There is evidence to suggest that Vanstone himself "felt the tide was turning against the Church and that each year its work became more difficult on the housing estates to which he had devoted his life".⁷⁹ When Vanstone first went to Kirkholt, the problem of "the importance" of the Church arose because parishioners seemed content and had no apparent material, social or psychological needs. Even if Vanstone felt the Church was not needed, at least his "profession" still earned respect. This can no longer be assumed. Certainly, many contemporary practitioners of ministry could learn from Vanstone that people must come before programmes. We could still follow Vanstone's example, at least to the extent of walking the streets as he did, going to the places where people congregate, becoming known by face, even if it seems impossible to become known in any other meaningful way. We might still see, with Vanstone, that in the face of apparent indifference, the Church is now even more important, as a visible, objective sign

of God's love, a creative response, seeing all things – worship, prayer, preaching, even the so-called “menial” tasks of Church administration and organization - as a costly offering of love to Him.

Those who today mistake “cultural adaptation” and “cultural relevance” for the “process of inculturation”⁸⁰, might ponder with profit a passage which would make for a good practical theology seminar or congregational discussion in any age or culture, even if we might now, three decades further on, question some of the underlying assumptions and the terms in which it is expressed:

the easy symbol, achieved without cost or effort or attention is... an inadequate symbol. Where the activity of the Church scarcely rises above the level of mere spontaneity, it is inadequate as an expression of responsive love...(Man) must see the form of the Church as, in some degree, alien to himself, as that to which he must bring himself to conform. His sense that the Church is alien to him must be overcome not by changing the Church, but by the changing of himself.⁸¹

For me, the supreme lesson of Vanstone's life lies in the impact he made on many individuals, the impact he made on their lives, the stories he told and the stories they now tell about him, as they emphasised again and again to me that I must understand his life in terms of total dedication to his calling. Such dedication in ministry may not always attract people, but it will always be a worthy offering, the true “response of being to the love of God”.



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- ¹ Vanstone, W.H., 1977, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd (henceforth referred to as 'L'); Vanstone, W.H., 1982, *The Stature of Waiting*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd ('W'); Vanstone, W.H., 1997, *Fare Well in Christ*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd ('F')
- ² Coakley, Sarah, 2002, "Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology" in Volf, Miroslav and Bass, Dorothy C. (eds.), 2002, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, Grand Rapids/ Cambridge: Eerdmans, pp. 79–83
- ³ David Wyatt recalls Professor Jürgen Moltmann's remark: "*Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense* is the book I'd most like to have written had I still been a pastor in the Lutheran Church." Wyatt, however, also confirms that Vanstone himself regarded his second book, *The Stature of Waiting*, coming as it did out of a time of great personal struggle, as his most important. In his Introduction to Polkinghorne, John (ed.), 2001, *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans/ London: SPCK, p. x, the Editor writes: "It is the unanimous wish of the contributors gratefully to dedicate this volume to his memory. Each chapter is prefaced by a quotation from his seminal book, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*." Note further the description of *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense* as "one of the most widely admired devotional books of recent years" in Hinton, Michael, 1994, *The Anglican Parochial Clergy: A Celebration*, London: SCM, p. 115.
- ⁴ Coakley, "Deepening Practices", p.81, acknowledging as her prime source of information the obituary in *The Daily Telegraph*, March 15, 1999.
- ⁵ Carpenter, Humphrey, 1996, *Robert Runcie: The Reluctant Archbishop*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, p. 124.
- ⁶ Bishop Hugh Montefiore in Carpenter, p. 144
- ⁷ Coakley, op.cit., p. 81
- ⁸ Manser, Martin H. (compiler), 2001, *The Westminster Collection of Christian Quotations*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 496, offers the unhelpful and inaccurate note: "Vanstone, W.H. American spiritual writer." Since Vanstone was first and foremost

a parish priest, one might wonder whether”*any* of the three words in this description would have been acceptable to him. The simple stone slab over his grave at Beverston states: “Bill Vanstone, 1923 - 1999”, without title or description.

- ⁹ Christopher Samuels suggests “oblique” as the most apt description of Vanstone’s writing.
- ¹⁰ L., p. xii, where, in his Foreword, H.A. Williams draws attention to the fact that “there is not the slightest hint of that self-indulgent exhibitionism which is the trap constantly laid for those who speak from the heart”.
- ¹¹ e.g. Herrick, Vanessa and Mann, Ivan, 1998, *Jesus Wept: Reflections on Vulnerability in Leadership*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd ; Garner, Rod, 1995, *The Big Questions: Believing with Heart and Mind*, London: SPCK (listed in Bibliography under “Vanstone, W.H.” for its “Foreword”.) Webster, Alison, 2002, *Wellbeing*, London: SCM.
- ¹² In addition to Carpenter, op. cit., see further James, Eric, 2002, “Facing Both Ways: Runcie’s Social Vision” in Platten, Stephen (ed.), 2002, *Runcie: On Reflection. An Archbishop Remembered*, Norwich: Canterbury Press, pp. 47-8
- ¹³ Explanatory Note: Much of the information for what follows came from telephone conversations and correspondence with many of those who knew Vanstone, and on visits to Kirkholt and Chester, during July, 2003. In the main, only *written* sources are referenced.
- ¹⁴ So explains former Bishop Ronald Brown
- ¹⁵ This impression comes from a friend from the last period of Vanstone’s life, Canon Neil Heavisides, who encouraged me greatly in this project with his conviction that we should always attempt to learn the life-story of theologians before reading their theology.
- ¹⁶ “His life and writing are intertwined”, the conclusion of Canon Barbara Harrison, present incumbent at Kirkholt, after researching and preparing an exhibition to commemorate Vanstone’s twenty-one years of ground-breaking ministry at Kirkholt.
- ¹⁷ Canon David Ashworth, The Rt. Rev. Ronald Brown, Canon Neil Heavisides, Canon Christopher and Mrs Sarah Samuels, Canon David Wyatt, have been especially helpful in this regard.

- ¹⁸ See note 57.
- ¹⁹ Runcie, in Carpenter, op. cit., p. 124. Although he published under the name “W.H.Vanstone”, I follow Runcie’s use of the familiar “Bill” here because, notwithstanding Chris Samuels’s statement that when they first met he addressed him as “Mr Vanstone”, since “no one in those days dared to call him Bill except a few close friends” (Sermon for Requiem Mass, Chester Cathedral, 26th March, 1999), as the obituaries and my many conversations with acquaintances reveal, in his latter years, and since his death, most referred to him as “Bill Vanstone”, even if “not to his face” (Linda Fearn).
- ²⁰ Hinton, op.cit., p. 58
- ²¹ Brown, Andrew, 1999, “A shabby studio or a decent obscurity”, *Independent*, 6th March, 1999; Webster, Alan, *The Independent*, 11th March, 1999; Wyatt, David and Cleasby, Ingram, *Church Times*, 12th March, 1999; (Unattributed), *The Daily Telegraph*, 15th March, 1999; (Unattributed), *The Times*, 2nd April, 1999.
- ²² Ferguson, Ronald, 1990, *George MacLeod: Founder of the Iona Community*, London: Collins, pp. xi-xii; I find I have unconsciously echoed Ferguson’s Part Two: “Quest for the Historical George” in my own title.
- ²³ Mrs Mary Nuttall states: “he was very determined. He liked to get his own way and knew how to get you to think it was your own idea!”
- ²⁴ One of his closest friends, Ronald Brown, recalls at least two bishoprics offered to Vanstone whilst at Kirkholt, and sees his rejection of these as proof of Vanstone’s clear intention of staying on at Kirkholt until the end of his ministry. Webster, former Dean at St Paul’s, London is on record as saying: “I had always thought he would end up as Archbishop of Canterbury.” (Carpenter, p. 128)
- ²⁵ Runcie, Robert, Funeral Sermon, delivered at Tetbury Church on 16th March, 1999. Bishop Ronald Brown also contributed material for this. As observed by Carpenter, pp. 127-8, and confirmed by Canon Roy Barker, (letter to writer, 2nd July, 2003), Runcie often used friends (Vanstone was regularly called on for this purpose) to provide material for speeches and sermons.

- ²⁶ Canon David Ashworth, who grew up in Kirkholt during the ministry of Vanstone and in due time became curate to Kirkman's successor (and Vanstone's friend) the future Bishop Ronald Brown, speaks (in a letter to the writer, 15th March, 2003) of Halliwell as "one of the very best working class parishes imaginable" where Vanstone "lost, if he ever had, any desire to go back to academic life and resolved to devote himself to parochial ministry."
- ²⁷ Vanstone writes of the dedicated ministry of Kirkman and his predecessors in "A pattern of pastoral ministry" in Greenhalgh, J. and Russell, E. (eds.), 1990, *Building in Love: The Vocation of The Church*, London: St Mary's Bourne Street, pp. 35-45.
- ²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 37; Mrs W. Crook, wife of a Church Warden at St Thomas's, Halliwell during the curacy of Vanstone, in a tribute published in their local Parish News at the time of his death, writes of club activities which involved the curate in boxing and wrestling!
- ²⁹ Carpenter, pp. 124-125
- ³⁰ In the Vicar's letter in the first Church magazine in January, 1956, Vanstone writes of the newly completed hall-church; "Grateful as we are for it, we must regard our present home as only the base from which we go forward to build more nobly. On January 1st we inaugurate our Building Fund."
- ³¹ See note 1. Some obituaries note also the booklet Vanstone, W.H. and Wrigley, Sheila, 2000, 2nd Edition (originally published 1985), *Icons of the Passion: A Way of the Cross*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd.
- ³² *The Independent*, 6th March, 1999.
- ³³ Carpenter, *op.cit.* p. 124
- ³⁴ Coakley, "Deepening Practices" p. 83: "These were Vanstone's contributions to 'theology from the deep end.' He chose not to write them at all until he was ready to express them from that vantage point."
- ³⁵ I acknowledge the considerable help given by Rev Michael Brierley, keeper and compiler of the Vanstone Archive Project, in the provision of copies of relevant documents and other information. Also Canon Barbara Harrison, Vicar at Kirkholt and Miss Linda Fearn, former Sunday School teacher, for enabling me to examine

local parish magazines and other materials, some of them later collected into bound volumes.

³⁶ See note 24

³⁷ Wyatt, Obituary, *Church Times*

³⁸ L., p. 113.

³⁹ on 1st May, 1974.

⁴⁰ Runcie, as quoted by Brown, *The Independent*, 6th March, 1999.

⁴¹ Funeral sermon.

⁴² Runcie, Funeral sermon

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Sermon for Requiem mass (see note 18)

⁴⁵ *The Independent*, 11th March, 1999; a view supported by Ingram Cleasby, former Dean, Chester Cathedral, *Church Times*, 12th March, 1999.

⁴⁶ Brown, *The Independent*, 6th March, 1999

⁴⁷ Runcie, Funeral sermon.

⁴⁸ L., p. 105

⁴⁹ See note 4

⁵⁰ Undated (magazine?) article from the Vanstone exhibition, “As in Coventry.... So in Kirkholt.” We can confidently infer from this that, although Vanstone used terms that today jar for their “political incorrectness”, he was, as his friends confirm, “inclusive” in both his thinking and his practice of ministry.

⁵¹ See note 4

⁵² In the August, 1974 magazine he speaks of “the deep inner weariness which had been with me for many months.” Samuels, Vanstone’s Curate at the time, confirms this observation.

⁵³ In the service book, the curate at the time, Malcolm Drummond, wrote on 23rd June, 1974: “The Vicar suffered a coronary thrombosis on June 17th and was away from duty for some 10 weeks.” In fact, the service book tells us that he was back conducting worship from 11th August, but with the help of Michael Daman (a boy for whom Vanstone “had great plans” [Donald Greenwood, Kirkholt] and to whom the first book is dedicated) to read the lessons to spare his voice (gratefully acknowledged in the magazine, September, 1974).”

- ⁵⁴ In the September, 1974 magazine Vanstone writes: “It is... when we have looked realistically at the possibility of our own death, we think less about those ambitions and purposes which are private to ourselves and more about those causes and goals which transcend our mortality”.
- ⁵⁵ Magazine, January 1976
- ⁵⁶ Amazingly, Vanstone’s first book, designated The Collins Biennial Religious Book Award 1979, had a most inauspicious birth. As Brown and Wyatt confirm, Vanstone, convinced that he did not have long to live, wanted to commit to writing just for the benefit of a few friends (several of whom recall proof-reading the pages as they came out of the duplicator) what seemed to him to be of most “importance” out of all the theology he had learned. Although one of our best-known religious publishers rejected the script, it was later shown to another (Mr Todd, of Darton, Longman and Todd) who declared himself excited and proud to print it, prefixing the original (and in my view better) title, “*The Response of Being to the Love of God*, with words from Vanstone’s best-known hymn, printed at the end of the book.
- ⁵⁷ It is my firm view that Vanstone’s books are by no means as easily placed in the context of his life as the publication dates and, based on these, some obituary writers, suggest. e.g. see magazines for September, 1966; September, 1967; May 1975.
- ⁵⁸ Hattersley featured in a BBC2 “Everyman” documentary: *The God Squad*, broadcast September, 2003.
- ⁵⁹ “Comments of a Convalescent”, Parish Magazine, July 1974, clearly anticipates the thought of the book which appeared some eight years later. Bishop Whitsey, together with his wife, played a large part in caring for Vanstone during his periods of convalescence. The suggestion for the title of this second book came from Whitsey.
- ⁶⁰ Cleasby, Obituary, *Church Times*.
- ⁶¹ See for example the magazine, September, 1974 where he reports that his suggestion to the boys at camp that he might introduce at Kirholt the practice of the minister singing a solo during the Offertory, which they had just witnessed when attending worship on the Island of Coll, “produced ribald comment.”
- ⁶² See note 4

- ⁶³ Letter to Linda Fearn, 6th July, 1997
- ⁶⁴ Obituary, *The Times*
- ⁶⁵ F., p. 123
- ⁶⁶ Nouwen, Henry J.M., 1982 (originally published 1977), *The Living Reminder: Service And Prayer In Memory Of Jesus Christ*, Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, p. 40; for review see Vanstone, W.H., 1983, *Theology*, Vol. 86, pp. 229-230
- ⁶⁷ Runcie, Funeral Sermon; Vanstone uses the T.S.Eliot quotation (but does not assist us with a reference) in his discussion in F., pp. 118-119. He also anticipates this thought in his “resignation” letter in the magazine, February 1976.
- ⁶⁸ *The Independent*, 11th March 1999 (obituary).
- ⁶⁹ See L., pp. 30-34
- ⁷⁰ e.g. see L., pp. 29-30
- ⁷¹ L., p. 96; but for a most imaginative example worked out in a contemporary setting, see also Taylor, Michael, 1983, *Learning to Care: Christian Reflection on Pastoral Practice*, London: SPCK, p. 110; the parallels with my own experience (above) are striking.
- ⁷² Michael Brierley’s unpublished extended essay *Love Almighty and Love Unlimited: The Place of W.H.Vanstone in Twentieth-Century Theology*, 1997, Oxford University, notwithstanding its author’s caveat (letter dated 4th July, 2003) that “much of this he would now write very differently”, is in my view outstanding and augurs well for the more substantial piece of writing planned for the future.
- ⁷³ See espec. Coakley, “Deepening Practices”, pp. 81-83
- ⁷⁴ Samuels, Sermon at Requiem. Sketches (by Vanstone?) of the three symbols together were a regular feature in the Kirkholt magazine.
- ⁷⁵ e.g. in the first (of six) unpublished lectures “Studies in Theological Method”, thought to date from the mid-70’s; see also Vanstone, W.H., 1979, “Love’s Recognition”, in James, Eric (ed.), 1979, *Stewards of the Mysteries of God*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, pp. 33-39.
- ⁷⁶ e.g. see the paragraph beginning “And yet,…” in W., p.4.
- ⁷⁷ L., p. 98
- ⁷⁸ See note 16
- ⁷⁹ Webster, Obituary, *The Independent*

- ⁸⁰ I have found Fr. Vincent Donovan’s writing especially helpful in regard to inculturation. e.g. Donovan, Vincent J., 1991(American edition, 1989), *‘The Church in the Midst of Creation,’* London: SCM, pp. 51-52 “...a process of inculturation – with the message of Christianity growing to the length and breadth and depth of that culture until the two become so intermingled that they are hardly distinguishable”.
- ⁸¹ L., p. 107