



Alison Gent: radical feminist, Christian traditionalist – and always herself

This [International Women's Day](#), Adelaide diocesan archivist Dr Sarah Black looks back on the life of a pioneer of gender equality who was a driving force in the [Mother's Union](#), the Women's Liberation Movement and the [Movement for the Ordination of Women](#), who lived to see a growing openness and inclusivity of the Mothers' Union and the ordination of women to all three orders of the priesthood.

International Women's Day

"If justice fails, where is love?"

Alison Gent, pictured above in 1990 holding the placard with, from left, Mary Whitehead, Margaret Flint, Bev Walters, Lucy Cheetham, was a lifelong devout Anglican, longtime clergy wife and Mothers' Union member, and a stalwart of the Movement for the Ordination of Women.

Born Alison Hogben in 1920, she grew up in Rose Park, in a family that was poor in money but rich in culture and closeness. She attended Walford School under the inspired headship of Mabel Jewell Baker, a strong Anglican woman. Alison showed high scholastic ability and subsequently studied languages at the University of Adelaide, gaining a Masters degree in 1948.

Her family's poverty was alleviated by her godfather and later stepfather, Guy Makin, who introduced Alison to the world of high Adelaide society. Marriage in 1947 to the brilliant young Anglican clergyman John Gent was in Alison's words "a marriage of true *minds*" and led to the birth of five children.

Alison was expected, as a young clergy wife, to be involved in Mothers' Union at the parish level, and did so. She was deeply loyal, remaining connected to the Mother's Union at St Francis of Assisi,

Northfield, for decades after her departure from the area. She identified strongly, all her long and eventful life, with the Mothers' Union's high ideals of marriage and the spirituality of family life.



Alison Gent, left, with Margaret Holding

Though their marriage formally came to an end after some 33 years, Alison considered that she remained married to John and described herself after his death as a widow.

She was involved with a vast range of committees, groups, organisations and causes. All of them were, in their way, part of Alison's complex take on matters including marriage, sexual politics, spiritual vocation and the gendered life of women. She was a radical feminist in the Mothers' Union, a Christian traditionalist in the secular women's liberation movement, and she was at all times courageously and unrepentantly herself.

Justice and love were always at the heart of her efforts. In 1970 Alison put a motion to Mothers' Union regarding the admittance of divorced and remarried women. She was not initially successful – this change only came about some years later. She also advocated for membership of sole mothers and mothers of illegitimate children.

As Alison became more strongly animated by the cause of gender equality, she spent several years in the Mothers' Union's Social Responsibilities Department, concerned with the effects on women, children and the family of social issues such as prostitution, drug culture, paid work for women, family planning, poverty and domestic violence. This must have been something of a training ground for her

growing activism.

There is a fairly straight line between her work in Mothers' Union and her later work for the Movement for the Ordination of Women. She instituted the silent protests outside of the Cathedral of the late 1980s and early 1990s and defended her convictions fearlessly at all opportunities. For Alison, "soon enough" was *not* soon enough – where change was needed, it was needed now.

She lived to see the results of her and others' advocacy within the church. Not only in the growing openness and inclusivity of the Mothers' Union, and in its untiring work on behalf of women and children everywhere; but for the Australian church, the ordination of women to all three orders of the priesthood.

In the words of her friend Brian Medlin, Alison had an "ability to combine many apparent opposites". She could be an uncomfortable person, a disruptor, and she was uncompromising in her approach. When, in 1977, Bishop Keith Rayner spoke to the diocesan synod about the church's need for different kinds of people, he could easily have had Alison in mind. "Within the providence of God, there is a vocation for all these: the radical to prod us out of our complacency; the conservative to remind us of the values that endure". Alison, remarkably, did both.

Alison's Gent died in 2009. Her life and work embraced some deeper themes of what it is to be a human being, a woman, a Christian, an Anglican and a firebrand.

In her integrative involvements in the secular women's liberation movement, the Church and its many entities including Mothers' Union, she strove always for justice, for love, and for greater equality.

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