

19 September

Fr NORMAN DENNIS

1 April 1912 – 19 September 1966



This writer was facing his first day of teaching at St Ignatius College, Chishawasha, in 1966 when a student bust into his room at 6.00 in the morning to say, ‘Sir, there is someone in the showers.’ His tone rather than his message alarmed me and I rushed down to find Norman Dennis stretched out on the floor, purple and dead. We struggled through the day and the rector, Jim Hughes, arranged for a supper of nice things to sooth our pain.

Norman had only just arrived in the country in answer to a call to teach biology as the school had wrested permission from the Rhodesian Front government to teach at A level. He was enthusiastic and seemingly happy to be far away from England where his efficient, precise and demanding character had created misunderstandings and even divisions in some of the communities where he served.

Born in Leytonstone, near London, he had entered the Society in 1930 and was ordained in 1942. He studied some biology at Oxford for a year and kept up his interest in the subject as well as botany and was admitted to the Linnean Society – ‘a learned society dedicated to the study and dissemination of information concerning natural history, evolution, and taxonomy’ (Wikipedia) - in London in 1964.

His studies were interrupted and he was appointed to Bournemouth where he became a pastor rather than a teacher. He was a good administrator in the parish and soon made his mark but he did not get on with everyone. The same happened when he moved to Yarmouth where again he was good at putting a new roof on the church but not at winning hearts and minds. He moved to Edinburgh where he was unhappy and then to the Orkneys, the first set of islands off the north coast of Scotland and then he went to Craighead in Glasgow. Finally he spent some time in Manchester before the call came to go to Africa. ‘He was difficult to understand but likeable when you got to know him’, seems to have been the general verdict. One of his contemporaries thought he was made a superior too early and did not have time to absorb and live with the failures of lesser mortals. Norman also worked with the blind, learning braille himself, and corresponding with people about their lives in the spirit. The verdict of the doctor a ‘cerebral occlusion’ and he must have died instantly.