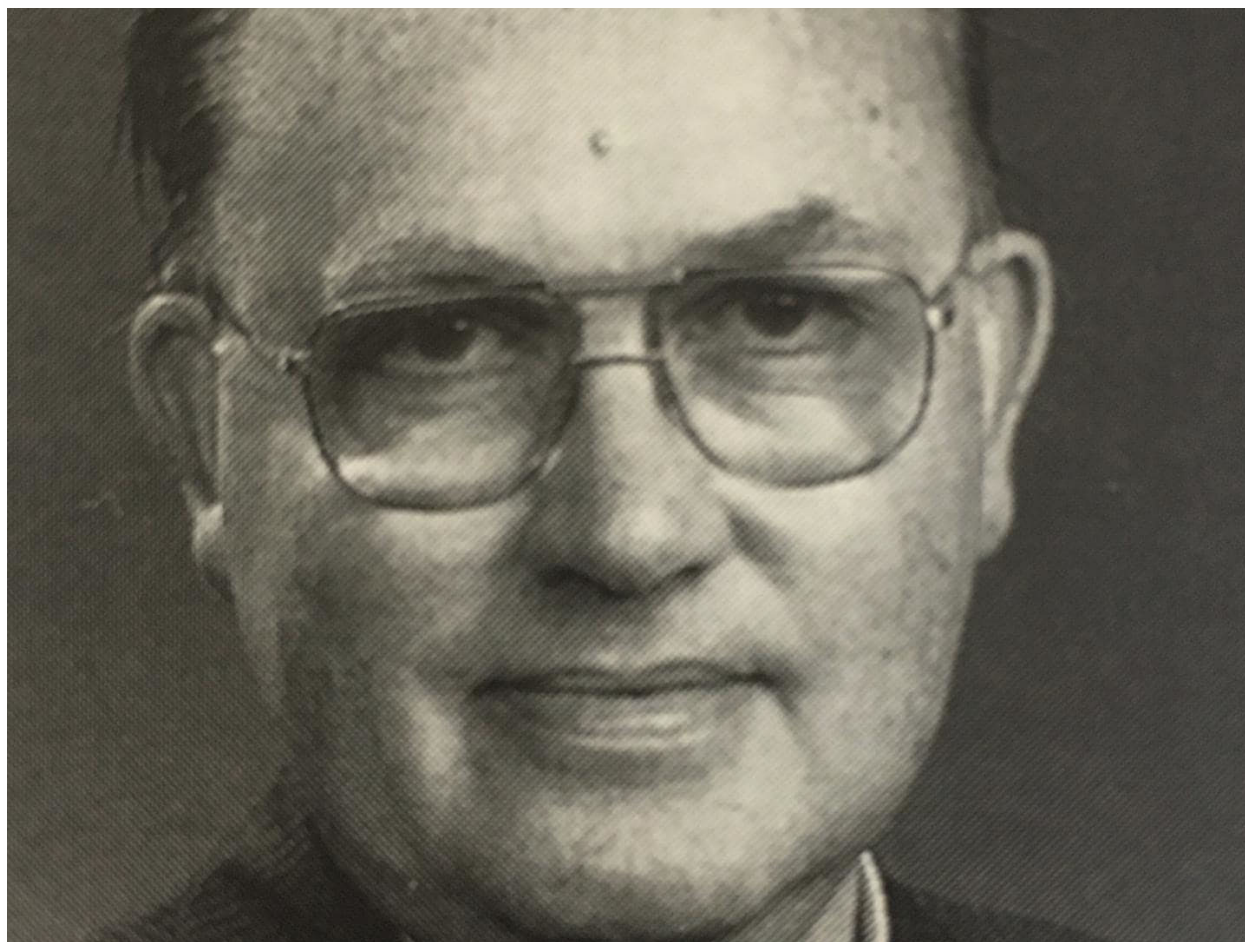


# Priest, mentor, paedophile

Father John Denham blighted the lives of the boys in his care – including a protégé who went on to become a high-flying journalist.

By SUZANNE SMITH



Father John Denham. Picture: supplied

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It was a normal day at the office in 1997 when ABC journalist Steven Alward received a phone call from his old school teacher Father John Sidney Denham. After the usual pleasantries, Denham said he needed a favour. There had been a big misunderstanding: the police had charged him with sexually abusing a former student. Denham said he would get off because the boy was 17 at the time, the relationship had been consensual and they'd been very much in love. According to Denham, this was an attack on a gay man and his 17-year-old lover. He wanted Steven to write him a reference on ABC letterhead.

It sounded plausible to Steven, because at the time NSW law discriminated against same-sex relationships regarding the age of consent: for heterosexual relationships it was 16, whereas for homosexual relationships it was 18. There was a campaign underway by the Council for Civil Liberties and other groups to reform the law. In this context, Denham was presenting himself as a victim of homophobia. The call worried Steven, but in the end he felt obliged to do something, so he came up with a compromise and wrote a personal reference without the ABC letterhead. He believed he was defending gay rights.

At St Pius X High School in Newcastle, Denham – the school’s Master of Discipline – had been a mentor to Steven. The teacher embodied all the traits of a bumptious, slightly camp academic. He talked as though he was a superior intellectual with a penchant for classical music, highbrow literature and fine wines. To the boys he admired, like Steven, he was the most attentive and - encouraging teacher at the school. Even after Steven finished school in 1978, Denham had stayed in touch and they remained close friends.

In 1986, Denham was appointed chaplain at Waverley College, a prestigious Christian Brothers boys’ school in Sydney’s eastern suburbs, where he stayed until 1994. Two years later, in 1996, he was charged with having intercourse with a male aged 10 to 18 years from Waverley College. He was acquitted, but was soon charged again, this time in relation to a student from St Pius X. The boy in fact was 14 years old when the sexual assaults occurred (Denham would be found guilty on these charges in 2000).

Denham had lied to Steven to get the reference he so desperately needed in this case; he’d contacted another former student for a reference and told him the same story. The references before the court spoke glowingly of Denham both as a teacher and as a “person exhibiting strong moral and religious ideals”. The reference from Steven now was filed with Denham’s court records, along with the testimonies from victims detailing his cruelty.



Steven Alward in Year 9. Picture: supplied

I was working as an investigative reporter for the ABC-TV program Lateline and had been - covering the epidemic of clerical sexual abuse in the Maitland-Newcastle diocese – one of a group of journalists, including the trailblazer Joanne McCarthy of the Newcastle Herald, who’d helped trigger the Royal Commission that exposed the egregious cover-up of child sexual abuse

in Newcastle, Ballarat in Victoria and elsewhere. I'd been supported in that effort by my friend and colleague Steven Alward.

In November 2017 Steven asked me to investigate the death of his childhood friend Father Glen Walsh, who took his own life two weeks before the trial of a high-ranking churchman, Archbishop Philip Wilson of Adelaide. Walsh was to have been a key Crown witness at the trial. (Wilson was found guilty of covering up child sexual abuse while working as a priest in the NSW diocese of Maitland-Newcastle but was later acquitted on appeal.) It wasn't the first time Walsh had acted against fellow priests – back in 2004 he had defied the rules of the Catholic Church and reported accusations about a priest to police.

Steven told me he'd grown up with Walsh in Newcastle; they were both altar boys from the tight-knit working-class community in Shortland and they'd kept in touch. He believed there was more to Walsh's death and said I should investigate, naming a cleric who, he inferred, had bullied Walsh. We made tentative plans to catch up.



Father Glen Walsh. Picture: supplied

By then Steven had become aware of the extent of Denham's offending. In 2016, the Royal Commission released Church data that revealed 62 people had made claims of child sexual abuse against him, his crimes making up 39 per cent of all claims received by the Maitland-Newcastle diocese. Denham was ultimately convicted of sexually abusing 59 victims and was sentenced to approximately 20 years in jail. Steven remembered the character statement he had written, and the priest's lies. He felt his precious words, his writing, had been used in a ploy to cover up many heinous crimes. He felt deep shame.

He contacted his friend and former colleague Professor Julianne Schultz, then editor of the - Griffith Review, proposing that he write an article about the paedophile priest. The working title: "The Betrayal". Steven told Schultz that the framework of the article would be a meeting between himself and his former mentor, now in jail. He said that, while Denham hadn't abused him, the priest had lied to him and he was overwhelmed by the thought that his reference for Denham had damaged victims' chances of success. He intended to confront Denham about his behaviour and demand answers.



Denham outside court in Sydney, 2008. Picture: AAP Image/Tracey Nearmy

Steven's brother, Peter, offered to go with him to Goulburn Correctional Centre in NSW. Peter knew his brother had once looked up to Denham; the priest used to constantly praise Steven for doing so well in his career (he'd held senior positions in ABC News and served as head of Radio National), and then emphasise his own role in that success. Steven told his brother he wanted to look the priest in the eye and ask him: "Why have you deceived me?" But Peter was starting to think there might be more to his brother's story.

On January 24, 2017, Steven wrote to John Denham at the Goulburn jail, asking if he could visit him. "I will await your response," he added. "Forgiveness may take a bit longer." A month later, Denham replied. Receiving Steven's letter had been "an agreeable and delightful experience", he wrote. "I really would like to see you again."



Journalist Steven Alward. Picture: supplied

Two months later Steven and Peter made the trip down the Hume Highway from Sydney to Goulburn. In the car, the conversation turned to Denham and Steven dropped a bombshell: the priest had indeed sexually interfered with him when he was in high school. “Not as bad as the other boys,” he added. Peter realised, for the first time, that Steven was planning to confront Denham about his own abuse.

Outside the jail, Steven turned calmly to his brother. “I can do this on my own,” he said. But when they checked in at reception, they were told Denham had withdrawn permission for the visit. Steven was shocked, hurt and angry, and he later contacted Schultz to say he could no longer write the article. He seemed distracted and unhappy. Around the same time, he learnt that Denham had been charged with still more child sex offences. This time, the victim had been under 12.

Denham wrote to Steven, ostensibly to explain his change of mind over the visit. He railed against journalism, citing Steven’s job and his barrister’s advice to be “careful what I said to you in the visit”. “I still believe, however, that the friendship forged so long ago in the fleshpots of Newcastle remains but I fear the risk of exposing myself to, albeit, imagined possibilities... We are allowed to make telephone calls, and should you feel able you could give me a contact number so that I might speak with you on and off. I speak with most of my friends and relatives on a regular basis using this facility. Please don’t give up on me, and please reply to this disjointed epistle, as soon as you are able.” His final line was: “Still thinking of the good times. Love John. P.S. Please keep in contact.”

A week later, on April 2, 2017, Steven penned a response. In part it read: “I met you, as kids often do, thinking what a good teacher, how much I could learn... what an utter betrayal. I went to you when I realised I was gay at 19 to seek some sort of guidance – not knowing you, a priest, would be gay, but just thinking you might be able to guide me in some way. And we stayed in ways connected over more than 30 years... I could not believe that I had missed what you had done, how I had not realised who I had been sitting across from at the bars and the tables. This is what betrayal looks like. And I am what collateral damage looks like.” Steven left this handwritten draft letter on top of a small, neatly stacked parcel of earlier correspondence between him and his former teacher.



Glen Walsh in Year 7. Picture: supplied

Less than a year later, in January 2018, only weeks before he was to marry the love of his life, my friend Steven Alward took his own life, just 10 weeks after his childhood friend, Father Glen Walsh, also suicided. At least 60 men who attended three Catholic schools in the Maitland-Newcastle Diocese have died either from suicide or as a result of risky behaviour. The majority took their own lives, and they are all believed to have been victims of clergy in the diocese. And they're far from alone – there have been similar deaths all over the nation.

For Lifeline, call 13 11 14. The Altar Boys by Suzanne Smith (ABC Books, \$34.99) is out on August 20.