

## *Philip Welsford Richmond Russell (1919 – 2013)*

**P**HILIP Russell died in Adelaide, Australia on 25 July 2013. He was 93 years old. From working as a quantity surveyor to service in a bomb disposal unit during the Second World War to ministry as Anglican priest, bishop and archbishop, he had a varied and distinguished career as a loyal Natalian and South African.

He was born in Durban in 1919, and attended Clifton Preparatory School at Cowie's Hill and Durban High School where he matriculated in 1935. In 1936 he joined the Active Citizen Force and from 1937-1940 served articles as a quantity surveyor in training with the firm Sinclair and Walters in Durban. This training gave him a keen eye later for practical things that needed attention on church facilities. He would not hesitate to scale heights to inspect roofs and gutters and such like, never seeing any need to separate the sacred from the secular. He was a very rounded human being.

The bravest decision in Russell's life was to volunteer for bomb disposal work during the Second World War.



*Philip Russell as Bishop of Natal, taken after he had celebrated the first Eucharist after the amalgamation of the former parishes of St Saviour's and St Peter's to form the new Cathedral of the Holy Nativity, Whitsunday 1976.*

(Photo: Diocesan Archives, Diocese of Natal)

First as sergeant, then as lieutenant, beginning at the tender age of 21, he worked in North Africa with the 95th Bomb Disposal Company of the South African Engineers. He received an MBE for his services, the commendation for which read as follows:

On 6 November 1942 Lieutenant Russell received instructions to clear the railway line of mines from Tel El Eisa to Tobruk, a distance of 350 miles. He commenced work on the 8th November and had successfully completed the task by 15 November during which time his party, under his direct supervision, removed 157 mines and extracted 4 booby traps and about 40 unexploded charges. Due extensively to Lieutenant Russell's organisation and ability, the railway line was used again in time to materially assist operations of the advancing army. Since that date he has worked well forward with the Army as it advanced and has cleared landing fields of bombs and booby traps, enabling the RAF to establish forward landing grounds in record time.

Organisation and ability and true courage remained hallmarks of Russell's career from that day on.

From North Africa he moved with invading Allied forces to Italy in 1943. At this point he was allowed to transfer to the Union Defence Force Institutes (UDFI), a non-militarist merger of the YMCA and Toc H which saw to the welfare of the troops. The pastoral role of later years was beginning to come to the fore. Another landmark event occurred for him while he was in Rome, for there he met fellow-South African Eirene Hogarth, whom he married in 1945 at the Garrison Church, Foggia, Italy.

The desire to seek ordination in the church began in 1939 before Russell's 20th birthday. Later that year he was

accepted as an ordination candidate by Leonard Fisher, the Bishop of Natal, but the outbreak of the war put his plans on hold. The furnace of the war years simply strengthened his conviction, and in 1946 he and Eirene came to Grahamstown where he undertook his formal studies, first towards a Bachelor of Arts degree at Rhodes University College and then for a Licentiate in Theology at the nearby St Paul's Theological College. These were formative years cementing a different marriage between intellectual pursuit and spiritual growth, each of them grounded in a compassionate concern for society with its sorrows, injustices and aspirations.

Russell's ecclesiastical career followed in a steady flow which soon revealed solid and outstanding qualities. Made deacon in 1950 and ordained priest the following year, he worked successively in the parishes of St Peter's in Pietermaritzburg, St James' in Greytown, All Saints' in Ladysmith and, finally, St Agnes' in Kloof, where he was also Archdeacon of the Pinetown archdeaconry, thereby sharing responsibility with the Bishop of Natal for a cluster of several parishes. In 1966 he was elevated to the episcopate, first as the Bishop Suffragan of Cape Town, then as the first Bishop of the newly created Diocese of Port Elizabeth in 1970 before returning to his home Diocese of Natal as its bishop in 1974. With all this experience behind him, his brother bishops elected him in 1978 to be, in addition, Dean of the Province (that is, the bishop next senior to the Archbishop).

While Bishop of Natal, Russell played a key role in the decision to build the new Cathedral of the Holy Nativity on its present site and thereby to unite the two parishes of St Peter's and St Saviour's, bringing to an end

the division among Anglicans in Pietermaritzburg which reached back to the Colenso era in the 19th century.

In 1981, after an abortive election in the Cape Town Elective Assembly, the Synod of Bishops, to whom the decision had been canonically delegated, chose Russell to be Archbishop of Cape Town in succession to his war contemporary, Bill Burnett. He and Eirene went to this work with a good heart. Far from being a caretaker archbishop, Russell left a major impact on the entire Church of the Province of Southern Africa by what the Church's newspaper, *Seek*, described as "his enormous energy". This was accompanied by his fine organising skill and mature pastoral sense, all of it seasoned by a lively and somewhat puckish sense of humour. In addition, he did not shy away from the need to be prophetic as the apartheid state tightened its tyrannical grip on the country in the early 1980s. He served on the executives of both the SA Institute of Race Relations and the SA Council of Churches.

Russell retired as Archbishop on 31 August 1986, Desmond Tutu having been elected to succeed him in April. He and Eirene moved back to Durban, where he had been born and brought up and where he had been the seventh Bishop of Natal. His was an active retirement, though he coined the telling remark "When you're out, you're out".

Most of his retirement ministry was ecumenical. He was treasurer and chair successively of the Diakonia Council of Churches, the prominent social justice agency in Durban. Ever the practical man, he also chaired the Management Committee of the Koinonia Conference Centre at Botha's Hill, having been intimately involved in the establishment of this residential facility in his earlier Natal years. In addition, from 1983 through to 1995 he was a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, a body anathematised by the Nationalist Government.

To his quiet joy, Philip had the title "Archbishop Emeritus" conferred on him by the Synod of Bishops in 1997.

Philip's beloved war-bride, Eirene, died on 31 January 2001. They had been married for almost 56 years. Three of their four children, all married, were by then living in Adelaide, Australia, and Philip was persuaded to emigrate in order to be close to them. Thus the final stage of his life began. He never lost his love for South Africa, keeping in touch so far as he could with its affairs of church and state, remembering it daily in his intercessory prayers. His family has described him as "a warm and loving father, grandfather and great-grandfather (who) has been 'father-in-God' to many more".

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