

Archbishop, agent of change

David Somerville rose high in the Anglican hierarchy while fighting for the ordination of women and the blessing of same-sex unions

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We are sitting in a century-old cathedral, with wooden arches high above us and colourful stained-glass windows ringing the walls around us. We are in a place of intimidating history, but we are about to witness a step into the modern age. We are among many who have come to watch. Ordinarily, this church seats about 800, but today, for this once-in-a-lifetime ceremony, extra pews have been installed to squeeze in more than 1,000 attendees.

This is Christ Church cathedral in Vancouver, on Nov. 30, 1976. All eyes are on the four people - including two women - standing at the front, in flowing robes, participating in an ancient ceremony that before this day has only ever included men. Archbishop David Somerville leads the procedure that will give the Anglican Church in Canada its first-ever female priests. It is the triumph of many, including the archbishop, who have worked so hard to change the church's patriarchal tradition so this moment would come to pass. But it does not pass without incident.

As in a wedding ceremony, there is a point when the official turns to the audience and asks if anyone has any reason to object. When Archbishop Somerville does so, the tension in the room spikes. Many objected to the idea of female priests - who knows what an embittered opponent may say or do to ruin the moment? Hearts slow. Breathing stops. All is silent. A few seconds pass, when, as feared, a man stands and begins walking to the front, clutching a rolled-up document in one hand. Perhaps he has a lot of courage to do this, but when he reaches the front and turns around to look at the crowd, his nerve falters. He stands, frozen, unspeaking, his hands shaking - but until he's finished, the ceremony cannot continue.

Archbishop Somerville - the man's philosophical opponent - reaches out, takes the document and unrolls it. He hands it back to the man, indicating for him to speak. When the man does, he explains his objection to the ordination of women as a "sponge to women's lib." When the man finishes, Archbishop Somerville thanks him, but explains the ceremony will continue.

("Having come so far and worked so hard," he recalled years later, "I was determined to proceed.")

Within a few minutes, the ordinations are complete and a new chapter in religious history has begun.

We have witnessed a day that reveals everything about the archbishop's character. His effort, his vision, his thirst for equality, his compassion for an overwhelmed opponent - they're all there, shining as brightly as any of the stained-glass windows. They are traits visible in all of his struggles to, as he saw it, revive the church, from the ordination of women to the fight for same-sex rights. They are traits shaped and polished over the archbishop's decades of service.

David Somerville was born on Nov. 11, 1915, in Ashcroft, B.C., a village just west of Kamloops. When he was 2, his father, Thomas, a police officer, died in the flu epidemic, so his mother, Martha,

moved with David to England to live with his grandmother. His three years in England were to hold a tough lesson. Although he enjoyed going to church, the other boys at Sunday school often refused to allow him to play with them. The humiliation of being forced to watch from the sidelines served at least one valuable purpose: Here, young David learned the pain of being the outsider.

In 1922, his grandmother died, prompting David and his mother to return to B.C., ultimately settling in Vancouver as the boy entered his teenage years. It was here religion really took hold. When he witnessed how a local priest was dedicated to helping the poor and the sick, and the cleric's devotion to God, David was inspired. This was his path, too, he realized, and he dropped thoughts of a career in medicine to pursue a calling to the priesthood. He enrolled at the Anglican Theological College, his ordination coming in 1940.

Somerville, then in his late 20s, spent the next decade at various remote outposts in the B.C. interior, serving isolated pockets of parishioners, including one location that required him to climb aboard an ore car and ascend 6,000 feet up a mountainside to visit a group of miners. From experiences like this he came to believe in the importance of a priest's willingness to venture into the community.

In 1949, Somerville transferred home to Vancouver, to the St. James parish in the then-troubled, now-notorious Downtown Eastside. This put him in direct contact with the poorest and most troubled people, and while he did his best to help them, he also started to doubt the church's position in society. He always made a point of speaking to average churchgoers, and knew very well how deeply their opinions on modern issues differed from those of high-ranking church officials. As the 1960s dawned, he sensed the coming era of change, and feared the church he so dearly loved had fallen badly behind the times and risked being swept away.

Somerville left St. James in 1960 and took up a teaching post at his alma mater, the ATC. Discussions with his students, more than two decades his junior, gave him an insight into the hearts of the next generation. The five years he spent there "altered [my] perspective and reaffirmed my hunches," he told Julie H. Ferguson for her book, *Sing a New Song: Portraits of Canada's Crusading Bishops*. It was the 1960s, and there was no sanctuary from the decade's spirit of change, even in a church - and especially for a church. Somerville, who deeply loved his religion and realized it could play a larger and more profound role than it had been, was to be among those leading the charge.

In 1968, Somerville won election as "bishop in waiting" in the diocese of New Westminster, the automatic successor whenever the bishop chose to retire. Locals got an immediate taste of his different outlook when he chose to have his consecration in the Agrodome, instead of the cathedral, because it allowed more people to attend. When criticized for holding such an august ceremony in what amounted to a large barn, Somerville wryly parried the blow by pointing out that Jesus had been born in a stable.

In 1971, the previous bishop retired, and Somerville ascended to the role. This gave him the power to really push for change. These changes would both guard the integrity of the church but also make it more relevant to people's lives - there was no value in the church being simply a building they went to once a week so as not to disappoint their parents.

Bishop Somerville acted swiftly. Within a few years, he had helped update the centuries-old liturgy, creating a new order of service that called for the congregation to participate in the service, rather than watch the priest. As well, his diocese became the first in the world to allow children to take communion.

His biggest fight, by far, was over the ordination of women. The issue had drifted around since the Second World War, but Bishop Somerville and others felt the time had come to act, and that the male-only priesthood was nothing more than an unjust tradition. Lined up against them were opponents who sincerely believed that ordaining women was a violation of God's will. This was always going to be a tough fight.

In 1972, Bishop Somerville made a friend, Elspeth Alley, a deacon and promised to make her a full priest as soon as he could. He helped her enter the ATC, but the verbal abuse she suffered there dismayed him. Of course, neither of them was going to give up. The rudeness of her classmates made them both resolve to win the fight.

Still, Bishop Somerville was no bully. If the fight was to be won, it must be won properly. Opponents must be persuaded, not abused. Differences must be settled, not steamrolled. Bishop Somerville's masterstroke came at the 1973 General Synod, the biennial meeting of Anglican officials.

At this gathering, he was the lead writer of the motion to open up the priesthood to women, but the actual act of moving it revealed his tactician side. The meeting was made up of three groups: the laity (who overwhelmingly supported female priests), the bishops (who also leaned that way), and the clergy (whose support was uncertain at best). The groups would vote one at a time, the result of the one vote revealed before the next. All three had to approve, and their voting order would be determined by who actually made the motion: Bishop Somerville arranged for it to be a well-respected member of the laity, so that that group would vote first. As expected, the motion passed with ease. Bishop Somerville had seconded the motion, so his group, the bishops, voted next. They also approved. This meant that when the clergy voted, they already knew the other two groups had approved. The extra pressure, the archbishop hoped, would push the wavering few to his side as well. Sure enough, the clergy voted yes, albeit by a smaller margin, and the motion was carried.

Unfortunately, the church was no different than other large organizations. Even with the motion carried, officials insisted that a committee must be struck to determine how best to implement the ground-breaking policy. And after that, another committee. And so on, for two years.

In 1975, Bishop Somerville became an archbishop when he was elected metropolitan of the Ecclesiastical Province of British Columbia and Yukon, just in time for the that year's synod to finally sign off on the ordination of women. The bishops agreed that the ordinations would begin on the same day across Canada, so that no single diocese would grab the spotlight. Which brings us to that scene, on Nov. 30, 1976, with Archbishop Somerville and the other three - including Elspeth Alley - gathered at the front of Christ Church cathedral.

When Archbishop Somerville had become bishop in 1971, the church was little different than it had been at his birth in 1915. Yet he acted so swiftly and surely that within just nine years as bishop, he had changed the Anglican Church forever.

But there was still one cause left. Just before his retirement in 1980, Archbishop Somerville felt the first winds of a storm that would end up making the ordination of women look like a summer breeze. That year, he allowed a group of openly gay men and women to hold regular meetings in the cathedral, outraging many, and the battle over same-sex rights was on.

Upon his retirement as archbishop, he returned to teaching. He left that job in 1984, and then, in 1985, at the age of 69, he showed he was still able to surprise, by getting married for the first time in his life. His new wife, Frances, and her late husband had been long-time friends.

In retirement, his legend grew. He was one of four bishops profiled in Ms. Ferguson's book, which was released in 2006, when Archbishop Somerville was 91.

Yet even at that advanced age, his mind was still thinking about the church and its modern role. In 2007, he signed a letter along with five other retired archbishops urging the church to bless same-sex unions, saying it would show "justice, compassion and hope for all God's people."

In 2003, he had written a letter for the New Westminster diocese newspaper strongly supporting the blessing of same-sex unions.

"In the Gospels, Jesus does not mention homosexuality, pro or con," he wrote. "What he does both teach and demonstrate is inclusiveness and love."

Archbishop David Somerville died on July 25. His wife, Frances, died in 2007. He leaves a niece.