

BISHOP WILLIAM McKENDREE AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO METHODISM

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It is a high honor to speak at Old McKendree Chapel, one of the fourteen national historic shrines of The United Methodist Church, and the only one which lies west of the Mississippi River. These annual Services of Commemoration were inaugurated thirty-five years ago when Bishop William F. McMurry spoke to a large gathering here. Since that time each annual service has reminded us of our heritage and prompted our rededication to the faith of our fathers.

One hundred sixty-seven years ago a loyal Methodist layman by the name of William Williams moved from Kentucky to this spot. He soon set aside two acres of land on his farm for a Methodist camp meeting ground. The records say this was then a grove of oak, maple, and poplar trees with a good spring. The first camp meeting was held here possibly as early as 1806, certainly not later than 1810.¹ A Methodist class was soon organized, and a Methodist circuit rider preached to the people here on his monthly rounds, at first in their homes, later in this chapel.

In 1818 the people set about erecting this chapel which now is the oldest Protestant church edifice still standing west of the Mississippi River, a unique distinction indeed. William Williams was probably a leader in the movement to build. He lived until 1838, serving through the years as class leader for the congregation. Incidentally, descendants of Williams down to the fourth generation were the class leaders here as long as the church was active.

When the Methodist Episcopal Church divided over slavery in 1844, the preachers and churches in border states like Missouri were allowed to decide whether they would adhere North or South. The majority of the members of McKendree Chapel voted to adhere South, but the pastor, Nelson Henry, being vehemently in favor of the North, succeeded in keeping McKendree Chapel permanently aligned that way even though Northern Methodism grew steadily weaker in this region. After the division, the congregation at McKendree was small, and mission appropriations were necessary to keep it going. Following the Civil War it was even more difficult to keep the church alive. Then about 1890, there being no other Northern Methodist churches left in the region to which McKendree Chapel could be attached as a point on a circuit, it passed out of

* Address delivered at the Annual Service of Commemoration, Old McKendree Chapel, Jackson, Missouri, Sunday, September 15, 1968, 3:00 P.M.

¹ Frank C. Tucker, *Old McKendree Chapel* (Cape Girardeau, Mo., 1959), 21, 24.

existence as an organized church. In view of the strong southern sentiment in this section from 1844 onward, it is a marvel that McKendree Chapel survived as a Northern Methodist congregation as long as it did.

When McKendree Chapel was built in 1818 it was regarded as a large and imposing church edifice. John Scripps, the secretary of the Missouri Annual Conference at the time, referred to it as a "good hewed log house, with shingle roof, good plank floors, and windows." He said the people built it with the thought that the annual conference would meet here in 1819, and it did.² The conference also held its sessions in McKendree Chapel in 1821, 1826, and 1831, a sure sign that it was generally regarded as an adequate church building and an important congregation during all those years.

Why did the people name the chapel for Bishop William McKendree? We do not know. Bishop McKendree did not preside over the 1819 session of the conference here, nor was he in charge the other three times the conference met in this chapel. He did preside over the Missouri Conference in 1816 and again in 1823, but on those occasions it met in Illinois and St. Louis. Incidentally, the Missouri Conference was organized by the General Conference of 1816, and at that time it included Arkansas, Illinois, and the western part of Indiana, as well as Missouri. It is possible that McKendree visited in this spot while he was presiding elder or bishop, but there is no proof that he did. McKendree may never have set foot in this chapel which bears his name. Why then did they name it for him? Probably because he was well known and greatly revered as the leader of Methodism in the west from 1800 on. He did more to establish Methodism in this region than any other man, not even excepting Bishop Francis Asbury. So the best guess is that when they started to build this chapel, somebody said, "Let's name it for Bishop McKendree," and they did.

Since this chapel was named for William McKendree, and since Methodism in this area was long under his supervision both as presiding elder and as bishop, it may be appropriate for the message today to lift up the career of the man and point out his contributions to American Methodism.

William McKendree was born in Virginia about forty miles northeast of Richmond on July 6, 1757. He was only twelve years younger than Francis Asbury, the man who was his bishop, mentor, and friend from the time he began as a circuit rider in 1788 until long after he himself was elevated to the episcopacy. McKendree's father was a small farmer, belonging not to the aristocracy but to the middle

² Frank C. Tucker, *The Methodist Historical Societies of Missouri Annual Church in Missouri, 1798-1939* (Nashville: Conferences, 1966), 41-42.

class. McKendree's education was limited. His journal shows that he was a poor speller all his life, though in time he learned to speak the English language with precision and force.

McKendree served as a soldier in the Revolution. The date of his enlistment is not certain, but it is believed that he was in military service about two years. He rose to the rank of adjutant. He was present at Yorktown in 1781 when General Charles Cornwallis surrendered. His military career was helpful to him in after years; there was always something of the soldier and the commander in his manner and character. However, to the end of his days he seldom referred to his experience in the army, and he never applied for the government pension he could have had as an old soldier.

McKendree's parents were regular communicants in the Anglican Church. But about 1775 when he was 18, the Methodist movement reached the McKendree family, and from that time forward his father and mother were loyal Methodists. William himself did not become a Methodist at that time. Twelve years later when William was thirty, John Easter, a Methodist evangelist, led a powerful revival in Virginia, and at that time William made a full commitment and joined the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Soon after McKendree's conversion, his father and some of his friends were convinced that he was called to preach, but he himself had doubts. A few months later John Easter invited William to attend the Virginia Conference with him. William went, and to his astonishment when the appointments were announced, Bishop Asbury read him out as the assistant preacher on the Mecklenburg Circuit! Obviously McKendree had been shanghaied into the Methodist ministry! But urged by his presiding elder, McKendree went to the circuit, soon became convinced that the ministry was his calling, and continued in the work.

In his early years as a circuit rider, McKendree was timid and bashful, but he was intensely pious and was devoted to the work. He was ordained deacon in 1790 and elder late in 1791. His progress as a preacher was steady, not flashy. He was opposed to slavery but was not an abolitionist. In 1791 he objected to his appointment on the ground that it would place him in the midst of old acquaintances where he was afraid he could not handle the situation. But he went to the circuit and all turned out well.

A year later, McKendree became involved in a major church quarrel that almost proved fatal to his ministry. For several years his presiding elder, James O'Kelly, had been complaining that Bishop Asbury was exercising dictatorial power over the church. O'Kelly therefore demanded the convening of a General Conference to deal with the matter. Asbury consented, and the first General Conference of the church was held in November, 1792. All preachers

in full connection who attended the General Conference were seated as delegates. McKendree was a member of the conference, and he supported O'Kelly. On the second day of the session, O'Kelly introduced a resolution to the effect that if a preacher felt himself injured in his appointment, he could appeal to the conference, and if the conference sustained him, the bishop must then give him another appointment. The debate lasted two days, with Asbury abstaining. O'Kelly was sure of victory, but when the vote was taken it went overwhelmingly against him.³ Chagrined and smarting under his defeat, O'Kelly immediately withdrew from the conference and the church. William McKendree and several other young preachers walked out with O'Kelly. McKendree felt so strongly about the matter that he resigned his circuit at once and wrote a letter to Bishop Asbury saying he would not take another appointment when the Virginia Conference should meet. It looked as though McKendree was finished as a Methodist preacher.

But Francis Asbury, a very astute and able leader of men, saved McKendree for the Methodist ministry. After the Virginia Conference had adjourned, Asbury rode by where McKendree lived and invited the young man to travel with him a few weeks as he supervised the work of the church. The close association with Bishop Asbury was a revelation to McKendree. He discovered contrary to what O'Kelly had told him that Asbury did not have horns, as we would say today; that indeed far from being an ambitious tyrant, Asbury was a modest gentle Christian man devoted to the welfare of the church and the glory of God. Also, it gradually dawned on McKendree that if O'Kelly's resolution had prevailed in the General Conference it would have hampered if not destroyed the Methodist plan of the general superintendency and the itinerant system. Ever after that period of travel with the preeminent leader of Methodism, McKendree was loyal to Asbury and was willing to follow the man over the rim of the world.

Three years after McKendree's brief defection, Asbury appointed him a presiding elder in Virginia. In the succeeding five years McKendree developed markedly as an administrator, leader, and preacher. He became known as a man of system and order. By spirit and disposition a peacemaker, he had some success in his district in healing the schism brought about by O'Kelly's withdrawal from the church.

In 1800, when McKendree was 43 years old, he was suddenly confronted with the greatest challenge of his life. The General Conference had just adjourned. Bishop Asbury, and Richard Whatcoat who had just been elected a bishop, rode by to see William McKendree in

³ *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1792* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1899), 2-3.

Virginia. Asbury needed a man to lead the itinerants in Kentucky and Tennessee which were fast filling up with settlers. McKendree was a seasoned itinerant, strong of body, alert of mind, and fully committed to the work of preaching the gospel. Asbury asked McKendree to go to Kentucky as presiding elder. McKendree did not hesitate. If he had any doubts about the advisability of going west, he did not express them. On three hours' notice he packed his saddlebags and departed for the west with the two bishops.⁴ At the Western Conference in Bethel, Kentucky, in October, 1800, McKendree was appointed as presiding elder of the Western District which was the whole conference. At that time the Western Conference extended from Ohio to Illinois and down to Tennessee and Mississippi. When the Louisiana Purchase was made in 1803, McKendree's district expanded to take in the territory from Missouri to Louisiana on the west side of the Mississippi River. It has been said that McKendree's assignment as presiding elder in those days was worthy of St. Paul and that it required the zeal of an apostle to meet the challenge.⁵

The man and the occasion had met, and it was a mighty man and a great occasion. Perhaps Asbury could not have made a better choice than William McKendree as his lieutenant in this vast western region. McKendree never flagged as he toured and superintended his large district. Dedicated to the Methodist way, he seemed to know the necessary strategy for winning the west. He organized new circuits and either found or developed preachers to man them. He was presiding elder in this extensive region from 1800 to 1808, and in those eight years he probably did more to spread the cause of Methodism than any other man who has ever served as presiding elder or district superintendent. When McKendree arrived to take over the Western District in 1800 it had 1,741 members in the Methodist societies; when he left in 1808 to become a bishop, there were 16,887, almost a tenfold increase in eight years.⁶ And what was one annual conference when he arrived in 1800 became a dozen and many more as the years passed.

McKendree expected to attend the General Conference of 1804 in Baltimore, and money was provided him for the journey east. But for some reason which is not clear, he gave the funds to another preacher while he himself stayed at his post in the west. Four years later, however, McKendree rode horseback from the west to the General Conference which again convened in Baltimore. His eight years of leadership in the west had brought him an increased depth

⁴ E. E. Hoss, *William McKendree* (Nashville: Publishing House of the M.E. Church, South, 1914), 75.

William McKendree (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1869), II, 217.

⁶ Hoss, *op.cit.*, 105.

⁵ Robert Paine, *Life and Times of*

of religious experience and an understanding of the needs of the church as it sought to minister to the people. Those who knew him were sure that he would be an influential figure in the deliberations of the General Conference. But perhaps few expected him to be elected a bishop at that time.

On the Sunday prior to the opening of the 1808 General Conference, William McKendree was assigned to preach in the Light Street Church, Baltimore. Bishop Asbury and many members of the conference attended the service; they wanted to hear the intrepid presiding elder from across the mountains. Nathan Bangs, the Methodist historian, was present and gave an account of the service.⁷ As the worship service began, Bangs was not at all impressed with McKendree. He thought McKendree looked like an awkward backwoodsman in his coarse home-made jeans which did not fit well. In his pulpit prayer and during the first part of the sermon, McKendree spoke haltingly, seeming to grope for the right words. But when McKendree was well launched into his sermon on the balm in Gilead, his real preaching power became apparent to all. His hesitancy disappeared, his enunciation was distinct, his thought was elevated, and his voice was musical and pleasing. As he proceeded his face lighted up with sincerity, and his peroration electrified the congregation. Some of his listeners began to shout, others were overcome with emotion. When the service was over, Bishop Asbury remarked, "That sermon will make him a bishop." A few days later McKendree was elected bishop, receiving 95 of 128 votes cast, one of the largest majorities ever given by a General Conference. McKendree was the first native-born American to become a Methodist bishop, and incidentally, he was the last bachelor to achieve the office until July, 1968, when William R. Cannon was elected bishop by the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference.

Asbury welcomed McKendree into the episcopacy, though in his journal he referred to McKendree as the "assistant" bishop.⁸ After twenty-four years in the office, during which time he alone was the guiding mind of American Methodism, it was hard for Asbury to think of himself as anything other than *the* bishop.

McKendree revered Asbury, and he did everything within reason to please him. But since McKendree was an able man in his own right, it was inevitable as time passed that he should make some innovations. To Asbury the most disturbing change made by McKendree was his insistence on consulting the presiding elders when stationing the preachers. Asbury sought advice from no one when making the appointments, and he strongly urged McKendree

⁷ Paine, *op.cit.*, I, 196-198.

⁸ *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, edited by Elmer T. Clark, J.

Manning Potts, and Jacob S. Payton (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), II, 569.

to do likewise. McKendree's refusal to do as Asbury said was evidence of good judgment. When the church had fewer ministers and members, it was possible for Asbury by incessant travel to know all of the preachers personally and to be well informed concerning the circuits. Thus he could make wise appointments without consulting anyone. But when McKendree became a bishop in 1808, the church was growing rapidly and it covered more territory. There were more members, more preachers, more circuits, and more annual conferences. Under the circumstances it was no longer possible for any one bishop to know everybody and everything about the church. So McKendree counseled with the presiding elders when making the appointments, and since his day all Methodist bishops have done likewise.

When the General Conference of 1812 convened, McKendree made another radical innovation. Having been a bishop for four years, he decided to read a message to the conference reviewing the state of the church and suggesting needed legislation. Knowing Asbury would object, McKendree did not tell him in advance what he intended to do. As soon as McKendree finished reading his message to the General Conference, Asbury rose and said, "I have something to say to you before the conference." McKendree stood and faced the old bishop. Asbury said, "This is a new thing; I never did business in this way; and why is this new thing introduced?" It was a tense moment in the General Conference. The delegates wondered if the two bishops would stage a quarrel before them. But McKendree's courtesy and tact saved the day. He replied, "You are our father; we are your sons. You never had any need of it. I am only a brother and have need of it."⁹ McKendree's words disarmed and soothed Asbury, and the old man sat down with a smile on his face, and the business of the conference proceeded. What McKendree had done was to inaugurate the feature known as the episcopal address. From that day to this every General Conference has begun with an address from the bishops reviewing the state of the church and suggesting needed legislation.

McKendree perceived that Asbury held much the same relation to American Methodism that John Wesley had in England. Asbury's government of the church was paternalistic, kindly and genial. Everybody accepted his decisions as final. McKendree was wise enough to know that the church would never consent to invest another bishop with Asbury's preeminence. Therefore he did not try to be another Asbury; he sought to make his administration one of law. The constitution of the church was adopted the year McKendree was elected bishop, and he sought always to keep his official

⁹ Paine, *op.cit.*, I, 263-264.

conduct in accord with it. Because of his bent of mind he was a very able chairman when presiding over conferences. It is claimed that few if any bishops have surpassed McKendree in the administration of parliamentary procedure.¹⁰

For twenty years after McKendree was made a bishop there was agitation in the church for the annual conferences to elect the presiding elders instead of allowing the bishops to appoint them. Indeed, from the time of the O'Kelly fight in 1792, there was strong sentiment in every General Conference for the enactment of such a law. In the 1812 General Conference a motion to elect presiding elders failed by only four votes. But after being led astray in 1792 by O'Kelly's vain attempt to put more democracy into the Methodist appointive system, McKendree did not again favor such moves. At the 1820 General Conference, while McKendree was ill and unable to be on the floor, a resolution was adopted requiring the election of presiding elders by the annual conferences. There followed one of the biggest and most prolonged squabbles ever to take place in any General Conference before or since.¹¹

It happened that the 1820 General Conference had elected Joshua Soule a bishop before it adopted the motion about electing presiding elders. Soule immediately announced that he would not accept the office of bishop if that resolution stood, because he believed it was contrary to the third restrictive rule of the constitution of the church which said that the General Conference must not do anything calculated to do away with episcopacy. Soule maintained that if a bishop was not allowed to appoint the presiding elders, the episcopacy would be hindered in its work. The delegates declared that Soule could not resign the office of bishop after having been elected. He insisted that he was resigning anyway. In the long debate that followed, the conference did not take any action on Soule's resignation, but in the end he was not ordained a bishop in 1820. He went back into the pastorate. In 1824, however, Soule was elected a bishop again, and that time he accepted and was ordained.

When McKendree learned about the vote of the 1820 General Conference to elect presiding elders, he rose from his sick bed, went to the conference session, and read a statement to the delegates declaring that what they had done was illegal. After considerable debate and a number of parliamentary maneuvers, the General Conference voted to suspend the resolution requiring the election of presiding elders until 1824. In the next four years McKendree had each annual conference over which he presided to discuss the resolution and vote for or against it. A majority of the annual conferences voted against it. In view of the negative vote in the annual confer-

¹⁰ Hoss, *op.cit.*, 141.

¹¹ *Journal of the General Conference*

of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1820,
211, 212, 221, 231.

ences, the General Conference of 1824 suspended the resolution for another four years. When the 1828 General Conference convened, it declared the resolution null and void. Then many if not most of those in the church who favored the election as over against the appointment of presiding elders withdrew and formed the Methodist Protestant Church which, during its long history, had no presiding elders and no bishops.

In considering McKendree's contribution to Methodism, it should be noted that a number of the orderly methods employed in the General Conference today were initiated by him during his period of episcopal leadership. His part in initiating the bishop's cabinet and the episcopal address has already been mentioned. Under his direction the General Conference began using standing committees to prepare its legislation. McKendree helped to organize the Methodist Missionary Society in New York in 1819 and served as its first president. Today that body is known as the General Board of Missions of the church. McKendree had an able mind and was a capable administrator. Thoroughly acquainted with the Discipline and ecclesiastical law, he was a masterful parliamentarian. It was said that when presiding over a conference, he dispatched business promptly and solved difficulties as though by intuition.¹² Joshua Soule wrote the constitution of the church in 1808, but in after years William McKendree was its chief interpreter.

McKendree's health began to fail in 1818, and though he lived until 1835 he was never again as robust as in earlier years. The 1820 General Conference requested that he do only such work as he felt able to perform. He maintained a nearly normal schedule for several more years. In 1829 he became confused in the chair while presiding over the Georgia Conference, and he did not again undertake the responsibility of presiding. He continued to travel throughout the church and to preach. Like Asbury he might have said, "Live or die, I must ride!" Received with great affection wherever he went, he was a benediction to the church. He attended the 1832 General Conference in Philadelphia and had charge of the ordination of the two newly elected bishops, James O. Andrew and John Emory. All present believed that he would not live to attend another General Conference. When he bade the brethren farewell, everybody in the conference stood until he had departed.

McKendree returned to Tennessee where for many years he had made his headquarters some twenty-five miles from Nashville with relatives who had moved there from Virginia. In the next three years he managed to make one or two preaching tours to the south. On November 23, 1834, he preached his last sermon in McKendree Church, Nashville, another church that had been named for him.

¹² Hoss, *op.cit.*, 151.

Incidentally, for several decades in the nineteenth century that congregation was called the mother church of Southern Methodism, because it was the leading Methodist congregation in Nashville, the capital of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. McKendree Church has carried on to this day as a fairly strong congregation in the heart of the business district of Nashville. On March 5, 1835, McKendree died in the seventy-eighth year of life at the home of his nephew Dudley McKendree. He was buried beside his father in a nearby graveyard. Forty years later his remains were removed, along with those of Joshua Soule, and reinterred on the campus of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, thus hallowing that ground.

William McKendree was a devout soul, an able administrator, and an outstanding episcopal leader who greatly influenced the development of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States. From the year 1800 onward he led the itinerant hosts as they carried the gospel of Christ to the homes of our pioneer forefathers who penetrated the wilderness, put up their cabins, cleared the land, developed their farms, erected churches and schools, and built an empire. Worshiping as we do this day at this Methodist historic shrine, it seems as appropriate to us as it did to the builders of this chapel that it should be named for William McKendree, the man who did more than any other to build up the Methodist Church in this vast Mississippi Valley.

Long ago the writer of the second half of the Book of Isaiah reminded the Hebrew exiles in Babylon that they should not forget their heritage. He said to them, "Look to the rock whence ye are hewn. . . . Look unto Abraham your father!" In this annual service of commemoration we look to the rock whence we were hewn. We honor the leader for whom this chapel, this Methodist historic shrine, was named, and we esteem those sturdy and devout souls who with their own hands erected this "good hewed log house, with shingle roof, good plank floors, windows," and repaired to it regularly for the humble and devout worship of Almighty God. Thus we say:

And here Thy name, O God of love,
Their children's children shall adore,
Till these eternal hills remove,
And spring adorns the earth no more. Amen.