



DISCOVERY

Edited by
ROBERT DREW SIMPSON

A Truly Great Bishop—Francis John McConnell (1871–1953)

When I received my first appointment in what was then the Newark, New Jersey Annual Conference, I was not really familiar with the bishop presiding. He appeared elderly, and he was. He seemed half-asleep, but he was not. Only recently have I learned what Bishop Francis J. McConnell was doing when he appeared to be dozing. He was doing calculus problems to keep his mind alert amid the less than exciting agenda of the session in old St. Luke M. E. Church in downtown Newark. He once said that he could work any mathematical problem, although he sometimes had trouble with addition and subtraction. But McConnell had an exceptionally alert mind even without calculus.

What a special experience it has been for me during recent months to assist in sorting and cataloging McConnell's papers and correspondence at the United Methodist Archives readying them for the use of scholars who will be using them for various academic purposes. Throughout this task I became acquainted with the bishop who appointed me to my first church many years ago. I have become appreciative for the first time of his breadth of scholarship and pioneering social leadership in the church. So I thought it worthwhile to share some of my discoveries about a truly great bishop.

McConnell was born in Ohio on August 18, 1871, the son of a Methodist preacher. He was educated at Ohio Wesleyan University and at Boston University School of Theology. In 1897 Eva Thomas consented to marry him. It is refreshing to read their correspondence over a lifetime of marriage and discover how warm and deep their relationship was. They had two sons and a daughter.

In 1894 McConnell joined the New England Conference and served in Massachusetts. He then transferred to the New York Conference. In 1909 his administrative and academic skills were affirmed when he was elected President of De Pauw University where he served until 1912. In that year he was elected a bishop of the church serving in three areas: Denver, Pittsburgh, and New York. While in Denver his Area included Mexico which at that time was torn by revolution. The correspondence at the Archives regarding that period is deserving of graduate study. While in the Pittsburgh Area the Bishop was knee-deep in a steel strike with McConnell on the side of the workers and their rights. In the New York Area until the end of his episcopacy he was a strong voice speaking for social and political action on numerous fronts. He was a pioneer in the work of the Federal Council of Churches. From 1912 he set a challenging model for the church through his leadership in the Methodist Federation of Social Action. He gained respect from all quarters because of his integrity. While he traveled as much as 42,000 miles a year, no one should think him just another traveling bishop with gad-fly tendencies. In the midst of all his tasks he was a scholar of the highest order. He wrote 24 books and lectured across the world. His books were definitive works, e.g., *Is God Limited?*; *The Christlike God*; *Borden Parker Bowne*, (his mentor and protégé at Boston); *The Prophetic Minister*; and *John Wesley* (this work remains a standard Wesleyan biography). The Bishop also wrote his autobiography in 1952. The collection at the Methodist Archives holds the manuscript copy of several of these books.

When "St. Francis," as his friend Halford Luccock called him in his charming correspondence, celebrated his 25 years in the episcopacy, praise for him abounded. The November 3, 1937 issue of *Zions Herald* marked the occasion with some words I find very much on target, "Says John Ruskin in *Sesame and Lillies*, 'A bishop means a person who sees. Nearly all the evils of the church have arisen from bishops desiring power more than light. They want authority not outlook.'" The article continues, "On Tuesday of last week 3000 people gathered in Carnegie Hall to do honor to a truly great bishop, Francis John McConnell, who 'sees, and has demonstrated that he desires light more than power.'" *The New York Times* said of him, "He is widely loved by people of other denominations as well as his own. No one looks up to him that is not fed with food of the spirit. 'Liberal' and 'Courageous' are two adjectives that belong to him." As I read the Bishop's papers I think he would have especially appreciated to be remembered by those two adjectives in particular.

In McConnell's papers I found a copy of Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam's remarks which he made at the McConnell memorial service. They are choice. One in particular catches McConnell's insightful mind and sense of humor. Oxnam said, "His amazing ability to put profound thought simply was seen in his statement, 'The meek shall inherit the earth,' that's true. But the trouble is to keep them meek when they begin to inherit."

Bishop McConnell died on his beloved family farm in Lucasville, Ohio on August 18, 1953, but his words and works are much alive at our United Methodist Archives in Madison, New Jersey. Come and discover this truly great bishop—a bishop for all seasons.