

Remembering Frank Aldrich McConnell

October 13, 1913 – January 10, 2005

Hamilton Park United Church of Christ

January 15, 2005

The Rev. Dr. Nathan D. Baxter, homilist
Rector, Saint James Episcopal Church, Lancaster, PA

We are here to celebrate:

The life Frank Aldrich McConnell shared with us; and the faith we shared with him.

We are here, fellow pilgrims from every aspect of his earthly pilgrimage, as witness to the integrity of Frank McConnell. Someone explained integrity as “consistency of character in every aspect of one’s being.” So, we are here to testify, with celebration, to a generous man, an artist, composer and music master of the Church but a humble man (who as St. Paul would write, did not “think of himself more highly than he ought”).

Frank McConnell was an ebullient man – joyous of spirit. I was a student of his and I see him now, teaching Church Music 222. He is trying to help us understand time and measures as having interpretive quality in liturgy. He is moving back and forth across the front of Santee Chapel, humming to a tune none of us knows but is in his head. His hands are held in directing motion (occasionally scratching his mop of hair), as he is grunting out the beat, all the while dancing to that rhythm in his stiff but lithe, marionette-like manner. Yes, I am certain that Family, loved ones, seminary colleagues, students, St. James rectors and choristers would all agree, that there was joy and genius in all that Frank did, extraordinary qualities made human by little signature quirks which endeared him to us all.

Perhaps it was his pervasive joy that made him seem ageless in manner and in presence, for although time had somewhat dwarfed his physique at 91, the sparkle in his blue eyes, the constant playing motion in hands, even when he was not playing (sometimes he put them in his pockets to still them) and his smooth, thick bush of hair which seemed as vibrant now white as it did when black; he seemed ageless. There was something ageless about Frank McConnell. In fact, when I began to think about music to suggest for this service, believe it or not, the first image that came to my mind was Rod Steward singing, “Forever Young.” But then suddenly my romantic imagination was checked by another image of the quality of correction I’d receive by a seasoned Evangelical and Reformed pastor like “Rev. Bea”; and also by a remembrance of my old professor’s firm standards for liturgy and music, when faithful worship trumped romantic fantasy, and that there was nothing the secular could articulate more effectively than that inspired by the sacred.

But even here, the theme of integrity was evident in Frank McConnell; for he could even be joyous in applying his firm standards for music in sensitive liturgical context, such as a persistent bride planning a wedding. Once a young woman, discussing her wedding plans with Frank, explained that there was a show tune which just had to be sung at her wedding. Frank tried to explain the tradition of a church wedding and the inappropriateness of Broadway music in a formal church wedding. She responded forcefully that it was her wedding and the song had to be sung even if she had to sing it! Realizing that she was not getting the picture, he said to her (beginning with his familiar light chuckle), “Madam, you may sing it, but I won’t be playing it.” Yes, Frank had professional integrity, but it lived in a humorously graceful tension with civility. So, we celebrate a man whose life, shared with us, was full of integrity no matter in what context we experienced it.

After serving as assistant organist to some of the most distinguished church musicians of his time, he became Organist and Choirmaster for almost 60 years at St. James Episcopal Church in this city. He was revered and loved by adult choir members and young boy choristers; some, who like John Darrenkamp, went on to great national renown. As a musician, composer of hymns and liturgical settings, and as seminary professor, Frank was a theologian, an interpreter of the Christian faith. Any one who had any doubt about this ascription applied to Frank was never in his class, never experienced the interpretive power of faith in his organ playing or choral directing.

In the Lancaster Seminary catalogues of the 70's and 80's, each faculty member wrote a statement expressing his conviction about his particular discipline. Frank wrote: "Seminarians need to consider, investigate, and experience God's gifts of tone and time as they are employed in endless varieties to stimulate, enrich and express living faith." And whether Evangelical, Reformed, Christian or Congregationalist, U.C.C. or Lutheran, Episcopalian, Baptist, Anabaptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, or Pentecostal; whether American, Armenian, British, Indian, German, African, Latino, Caribbean (Frank taught seminarians from all these backgrounds and more) – one learned to appreciate theologically the musical traditions of the Protestant Church. One understood that music was and always has been an essential ingredient of ministry to "stimulate, enrich and express living faith."

And Frank as husband and father: What character of man who not only faithfully embraced romantic love, but had the strength of character and such secure sense of self to marry a strong woman determined to go where no woman had before – the ordained ministry in the Evangelical

and Reformed Church. Bea was and is a woman of bright mind, and a woman of not a few words; and most of all a woman as full of love as of conviction. For 47 years Bea and Frank have “wowed” us by their romantic love and devotion to each other right to the very end. Yes, Bea, you were part of the music of Frank’s life; and Mark, as their son, you are their greatest and most prized composition.

But in all that he was, Frank McConnell was most alive when at the manual of an organ. I understand that just about a month before his death he played his last church service as supply organist here at Hamilton Park United Church of Christ. He died as he lived, doing what he loved and expressing what he believed.

My first memory of Frank McConnell as organist was at a seminary chapel service shortly after a rebuilding of the organ which he had directed. There I was, first year student, fresh from my black Pentecostal experience, curious if not a bit suspicious of the High German Church culture of Lancaster Theological Seminary. I sat with my class in the front pews of the chapel, and there he was: stark black academic robe draped down his back over the organ bench just inches from the floor; a little pale man laboring over the keys of the great manuals, and grunting to himself in a state of artistic ecstasy. It looked to me like a scene from Phantom of the Opera! But as the years passed, I began to think his grunting was more than a humorous inarticulation. It was a form of prayer. It was an expression St. Paul understood when he wrote to the Christians at Rome [8:26]: “The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness: for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

Yes, Frank was not only glorifying God, but he had found “new dimensions in the divine world of sound.” Yes, we now know why it did not matter to him what puzzlements or humor we might find in his ecstasy, for his grunts were doxologies – praises more articulate to God, through the Spirit, than even the tones of his great organ.

For when in our music God is glorified
And adoration leaves no room for pride,
It is as though the whole creation cried: Alleluia!!

How often, making music we have found
A new dimension in the world of sound,
As worship moved us to a more profound: Alleluia!!

And so this morning we --- you and I – are singing with the gusto, quality and conviction as the best and last of Frank’s choirs. Why? Because in this last tribute **WE CELEBRATE THE CONSUMMATION OF FAITH WE SHARED WITH HIM.** For as Jesus invited us in the gospel of John which we read today (14th Chapter), we believe not just in God – the creator and revealer of life – we believe in God in Jesus Christ, the re-creator and revealer of **LIFE ETERNAL.**

Yes, there is a place prepared for us – a place where we are forever young, or, as the spiritual says, “Where we never grow old.” It is a place you and I know only by faith, but where Frank – baptized in the waters of regeneration, a sinner redeemed by the blood of Christ – now lives in the fuller presence of the God to whose glory he made music. There, in the presence of the

Almighty, we believe Frank has found the perfection of his gift and offers it day and night unto the God of his salvation, even as he awaits our coming.

And so we, who remain in this life, for whatever time, must now tune our gifts of witness to the Faith. Let us, directed by that imperfect but faithful witness of Frank McConnell's life and the faith we shared, inspire our lives singing in doxology and praise. Let us sing, with all the church of Christ even unto the grave: Alleluia!! Alleluia!! Alleluia!!

“[For has not] the church of Christ, in liturgy and song,
In faith and love, through centuries of wrong,
Borne witness to the truth of Christ in every tongue. Alleluia!

[So now],
Let each of us, our instruments be tuned for praise!
Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise!
And may God give us faith to sing always: Alleluia!!
AMEN.