

## **The Beginning of the Christian Church in UCC History**

James O'Kelly is a prominent figure in the history of the United Church of Christ, and can be considered one of its many founders through his creation of what would eventually be called The Christian Church. Without his stubborn, principled stand in support of Church Autonomy and Congregationalism many UCC churches in Southern Virginia and the Piedmont of North Carolina might well still be Methodist to this day.

In spite of later conjecture, fueled in part by assertions made by the man himself, James O'Kelly likely either arrived or was born in the then colony of Virginia in the early 18th century. He was a convert to Methodism, and became a circuit rider during the years of the Revolutionary War. Though claims have been made that he served as a volunteer, there are no records which support this claim<sup>1</sup>. Rather, it appears that he was deeply committed to missionary work and serving fledgling Methodist congregations. His work achieved some level of notoriety within the growing denomination, but as his involvement deepened and he became more acquainted with church leaders he began to develop increasingly strident concerns.

Though there is no record of having fought in the Revolution, O'Kelly's opinion on that conflict leaves no doubt that he supported the ideals of liberty and freedom (at least as they were understood at the time). During his time in Colonial Virginia he saw first hand how religious dissent was punished - as 2/3rds of Christians in the Colony had to pay tithes to an Episcopal Church they did not even attend. He was also known to be unapologetically abolitionist in his views on slavery - something that earned him some enmity from Methodist leaders spreading the church in the South<sup>2</sup>.

Ultimately he became one of the primary critics within the Methodist Church of Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, who would become the first two Methodist Bishops. As these two figures consolidated a hierarchical polity for the Methodist Church, O'Kelly worked tirelessly to bring about a General Conference of the Church as a counterweight to this trend. The General Conference of 1792 in Baltimore is widely considered to mark the first true schism in Methodism<sup>3</sup>. Prior to the conference, Asbury and his supporters met to essentially shut out O'Kelly and other dissenters. At the conference, Coke - who had been friendly with the dissenters and who O'Kelly considered a friend - formally sided with Asbury<sup>4</sup>. O'Kelly offered several resolutions to try and get the conference to adopt at least some congregational forms, the most notable of which would have allowed clergy to appeal a Bishop's assignment to a new church to the General Conference. Though this prompted several days of debate, Asbury and Coke had done their work well and it was defeated.

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<sup>1</sup> W.E. MacClenny. The Life of Rev. James O'Kelly. Edwards & Broughton Printing Company. Raleigh, NC. 1910

<sup>2</sup> James E. Kirby, Russel E. Richey, and Kenneth E. Rowe. The Methodists. Greenwood Press: Westpoint, CT. 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> MacClenny. 1910.

For O’Kelly this was the final straw. He and his supporters, along with a number of churches, formally separated from the Methodists. O’Kelly did not see the fight as over, however, as his first name for the breakaway denomination was The Republican Methodist Church. Here again we see the ideal of the young country seeping into the fabric of religious life at the end of the 1700s. But the split was permanent, and it wasn’t long until the denomination started going by the simple moniker of Christian, or slightly more formally part of the Christian Connection.

O’Kelly himself died in 1826 at the age of 92. Though he had known hard fights and bitter disappointments, and though he had stuck to principle even when it cost him deep friendships he remained hopeful until the end. His writings convey this hope, for his movement and the young country whose grand ideals were under constant test. Two years before his death, in “The Prospect Before Us” he wrote that “The little Christian Church moves gradually out of the wilderness. She has rubbed through several hard shocks, with some loss, but her true friends are getting more established; the farther we go, the more we see.”<sup>5</sup> In his final years he still was able to preach for several hours at a time, though he had to sit, and his most common theme was “Liberty of Conscience.”<sup>6</sup>

The Christian Church in Southern Virginia and North Carolina remained distinct for generations after O’Kelly’s death, maintaining its strong congregationalist identity throughout the 19th and into the 20th century when it merged, first with the Congregational Christian Churches. A later merger with the Evangelical Reformed Church created the United Church of Christ we know today.

O’Kelly’s influence is still at work in the United Church of Christ today. When the church stands up for the vulnerable and marginalized, when it takes stances on the most important issues of the day like immigration and the environment, it stands in the tradition of one of its many founding figures: A stubborn Irish immigrant who refused to give up his principles to keep the peace.

—Written by John R. Kernodle, III who grew up at CUCC and is a descendant of O’Kelly through his Grandmother, Esther Cole Kernodle, and her father, Aurell “O’Kelly” Cole.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.