



**John Milton Kelly
1905–1984**

David sang, Luther sang Germany into the Reformation, a school which trains Christian leaders must sing and sing well. Dr. Kelly is demonstrating the possibilities of such a program. He is no longer a pioneer; he is a fact to be reckoned in the realm of Theological Education.

—Pres. Jesse H. Baird, written ca. 1951

Dr. Kelly, who from 1937 to 1962 was founder and head of the Seminary's department of Sacred Music, died October 10th at the age of 79, in Greenbrae, California.

Throughout his life, John Milton Kelly strove for academic achievement. In 1926 he obtained his B.A. from Evansville College, Evansville, IN and received a Bachelor of Music degree from the Westminster Choir School of Princeton, NJ, in 1930. In the years that followed, he did graduate work in Education and Psychology at Rutgers; received an honorary Doctor of Music degree from Beaver College in 1948; studied Advanced Voice training with Dr. John Finley Williamson at Westminster; and took courses at the Union Theological Seminary School of Sacred Music in New York City.

Dr. Kelly's professional career was equally distinguished. From 1929 to 1937 he taught at the Westminster Choir College and directed Sacred Music at the First Methodist Church of Ithaca, NY and the First Presbyterian Church of Princeton,

NJ. Then in 1937, as President Baird relates in *The San Anselmo Story* (p. 71), Dr. Kelly was called to SFTS:

Our conviction that since music occupies such a prominent place in the life and worship of the churches, it should be adequately taught in a theological seminary, led to plans for a music department. Dr. Ezra Allen Van Nuys and his Calvary Presbyterian Church of San Francisco joined in a plan for the calling and supporting of a top musician capable of accomplishing what was needed in Calvary and the Seminary. I visited Princeton and with the hearty cooperation of Dr. John Findley Williamson, called the First Assistant of the Princeton Choir College, Professor John Milton Kelly, and his talented wife Edna. With the courage of pioneers they came and began their work.

Dr. Kelly served the Seminary so well that from 1944 to 48 he was honored by being called to the Presbyterian Board of Christian Education to set up a music program for the entire denomination. In the academic year, 1954–55, he was again granted leave, this time a sabbatic which he spent teaching conducting at the Westminster Choir College.

In addition to his fruitful work of raising the quality of music at the Seminary and throughout the denomination, he directed the influential SFTS Summer Choir

School and was founder and director of the Seminary A Cappella Choir, which performed throughout the western U.S. and won friends for the Seminary and sacred music alike. He was also very active in the promotion of music at the community level through his role as founder and director of the Marin Chorale and his participation in the San Anselmo Rotary Quartet.

In the early 1960s, Dr. Kelly served as Minister of Music at the First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael, where he also served as Minister of Visitation for the last eight years of his life. At the end of spring term, 1962, he took a sabbatical leave to visit churches in Japan, Korea, Formosa, and the Philippines. In October of 1962 he officially resigned from the Seminary to work through the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations directly with the Church of Christ in Thailand at Chien Mei, as well as with churches in India, Nepal, and Indonesia. His task was similar to the one undertaken in 1944–48. At that time his aim was to raise the standards of music throughout the Presbyterian Church; now his goal was to do the same for the churches of southeast Asia. It was during this period and to further these aims that Dr. Kelly served as the musical editor under the general editorship of Dr. D. T. Niles for the *Eastern Asia Christian Conference Hymnal* (Tokyo: AVACO, 1964)—a work that was popular enough to be reprinted in 1972.

In 1967, John Milton Kelly returned to teach for one year at the Seminary as Visiting Instructor in Sacred Music and to serve as Minister of Music at the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley. He continued to reside in San Anselmo until his death.

Dr. Kelly leaves his wife, Edna, of San Anselmo; three daughters, Marianne McConnell of Greenbrae, Eileen Hansel of San Anselmo, Janet Wells of Berkeley; and three grandchildren. The family prefers that memorial gifts be sent to the following institutions: San Francisco Theological Seminary—for a special memorial fund to benefit the music program—the First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael, or the Hospice of Marin.

To conclude with the words of Jesse Hays Baird about John Milton Kelly: "His influence has spread to the choir lofts of many churches, great and small, throughout the nation and abroad."

—Michael D. Peterson
Branch Librarian

Of Special Note: On Sunday, January 6, 1985 at 4:00 p.m. in the Seminary's Stewart Chapel, Dr. Wilbur F. Russell will give an organ recital entitled, "A Celebration of the Life of John Milton Kelly." The recital is part of the Seminary Hill Concert Series.

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