

Russell, Kit Carson (1860–1919)

DOUGLAS MORGAN

Douglas Morgan is a graduate of Union College (B.A., theology, 1978) in Lincoln, Nebraska and the University of Chicago (Ph.D., history of Christianity, 1992). He has served on the faculties of Washington Adventist University in Takoma Park, Maryland and Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee. His publications include *Adventism and the American Republic* (University of Tennessee Press, 2001) and *Lewis C. Sheafe: Apostle to Black America* (Review and Herald, 2010). He is the ESDA assistant editor for North America.

K. C. Russell, evangelist and conference president, was a prominent leader in Adventist work for religious liberty and in its urban evangelistic initiatives during the first two decades of the 20th century.

Early Years

Truman Russell (1824-1906), a brick mason in upstate New York, and his wife Lucinda Jane Russell (1831-1907), named their second child, and eldest son, "Kit Carson" after the legendary American frontiersman, Kit Carson (1809-1868). Kit Carson (K. C.) Russell was born on July 28, 1860, in Clarks Corner, New York, a little over 20 miles north of Albany. During his boyhood the family moved to Randolph in the southwestern part of the state.¹

Though Truman Russell never joined the Seventh-day Adventist church, he kept the seventh-day Sabbath and saw three of his eight children become Adventist ministers: Edgar Torrey (1853-1925), given birth by Truman's first wife, Alvira Parsons Russell (1824-1854), in addition to K. C. and his youngest sister, Lulu Russell Wightman (1872-1940). Two of Truman Russell's sons-in-law also were ministers: J. B. Stow, who married his daughter May Russell Stow (1869-1937), and John S. Wightman (1865-1918), Lulu's husband.²

At age 19, K. C. experienced conversion and joined a small Seventh-day Adventist church just organized at Sinclairville in western New York. He took up canvassing in 1881 and did quite well at it.³



K. C. Russell

From *Review and Herald*, January 29, 1920.

K. C. married a young woman from his hometown of Randolph, Caroline Ellen (“Carrie”) Hovey (1862-1942), on December 13, 1883. The couple would have six children, two of whom—Florence Avenell (b. 1886) and Mabel Elvira (b. 1894)—died before reaching adulthood. The others were Beulah May (1884-1970), who married Walter Artress in 1909, Glenn Carson (1895-1959), Ralph Lee (1898-1952), and Bernice Genevieve (1901-1931).⁴

Early Ministry

For five years after his marriage Russell continued canvassing, but a passion for preaching ministry deepened. His opportunity came in 1888 when the Pennsylvania Conference issued him a ministerial license. For the next nine years he engaged in evangelistic ministry, building up congregations in several small cities and towns, mainly in the central part of the state, that proved strong and enduring. He was ordained in 1891.⁵

Russell was called to the first of several leadership positions when he was elected president of the Vermont Conference in August 1897. He was unable to begin his work there until December and ended up being called back to the mid-Atlantic a year and a half later to serve as president of the new Chesapeake Conference, organized at meetings held in Baltimore, April 27-30, 1899.⁶ Its territory—Maryland (except for three northwestern counties), Delaware, and the District of Columbia—had previously been the southern part of the Atlantic Conference. Russell was one of two ordained ministers in the new conference, made up of nine churches with a total membership of 700.⁷ Once again his tenure as president ended up being brief as he accepted a call to Boston, Massachusetts, late in the summer of 1900.⁸

Russell’s work in Boston would make evident two more features that, in combination with conference administration, would stand out for the remainder of his career. The first was evangelism in the large cities of the United States where, as yet, Adventism had made little impact. In 1902, Russell secured rental of a large public hall in historic Tremont Temple, where many prominent religious, civic, and social reform organizations rented office and meeting space. The church met there on Sabbaths and drew a “goodly number” of visitors by listing evangelistic topics for afternoon preaching services on a large “bulletin” on the front of the building where, according to Russell, 100,000 people passed by daily.⁹

Second, during his ministry in Boston, Russell became heavily involved with advocacy for religious liberty. He reported on developments in the Massachusetts state legislature pertaining to Sunday laws and other measures that could open the way to a dangerous enlistment of state power on behalf of religion, and on occasion spoke before legislative committees in favor of keeping religion free from governmental coercion.¹⁰

Religious Liberty Leader

In 1904 the General Conference tapped Russell to head its Religious Liberty Department.¹¹ The National Religious Liberty Association, formed in 1889, was one of the semi-autonomous agencies that originated in the

19th century but then became conference departments in the denominational reorganization initiated in 1901.¹² That transition was still in flux when Russell arrived. He remained for more than seven years, bringing needed stability as well as energetic leadership in shaping the department that, since 1963, has been named Public Affairs and Religious Liberty (PARL).¹³

A report Russell issued in 1911 illustrates the department's activities under his leadership. On Capitol Hill, Adventist lobbying during the 61st Congress (1909-1910) helped defeat a Sunday law for the District of Columbia that passed in the Senate but failed in the House of Representatives. The “petitions, memorials, letters, and telegrams” generated by Adventists throughout the nation contributed “immeasurably,” Russell wrote, to turning back this “unfavorable legislation.” Russell and his associate Sanford B. Horton lectured widely in public settings and at Adventist camp meetings and conferences to raise awareness about threats to the “rights of conscience” and rally support for their defense. Publishing and disseminating literature was central to the department’s work. Russell described 11 pamphlets and leaflets addressing specific pieces of legislation or issues published in the previous two years. The department also developed a “press bureau” that prepared articles, news releases, and inserts for newspapers throughout the country, with considerable success in getting them published.¹⁴

Several months before Russell took up his duties in Washington in November 1904, the *Sentinel of Christian Liberty* had ceased publication, leaving the denomination without a periodical devoted to religious liberty for the first time since the Pacific Press began publishing the *American Sentinel* in 1886. Perhaps the department’s most consequential achievement under Russell’s leadership was the launching of *Liberty* magazine in 1906, which has continued to be published ever since. The periodical’s circulation in 1911 was 40,000, Russell reported, with the department providing copies to members of Congress, mayors, and other public officials. The denomination’s state conferences, meanwhile, were sending copies to “legislators, State officials, college presidents, professors, teachers, and others.”¹⁵

Russell also took a strong interest in another issue with which Adventists had been involved sporadically since the 1870s—opposition to the liquor traffic through advocacy of prohibition laws. In 1908 he promoted wider use of a plan for conducting temperance rallies at conference camp meetings, usually on the last Sunday afternoon, that had been implemented with success by a number of conferences in the East. He recommended inviting a guest speaker, such as a representative of the WCTU or YMCA, or a Protestant minister known to be an outspoken temperance advocate. This not only made for a united effort with other agencies but also brought many visitors to the camp ground who thereby had opportunity for becoming better acquainted with Adventists and their beliefs.¹⁶

Adventists had at times been resistant to cooperative action with other organizations in the temperance cause because some of the same groups, such as the WCTU, also supported Sunday laws. While acknowledging that Adventists should never compromise principle in working against the liquor traffic, Russell urged that we

“should not be so fearful of being classed with those who are seeking Sunday legislation as never to take a positive stand on the side of that which is just and right.”¹⁷

Russell also emphasized that Adventists should make clear that, as champions of religious liberty, they did not seek legislation against the liquor traffic in order to impose a specifically Christian morality on the public, but on civil grounds instead. While opponents of prohibition characterized it as a repression of individual rights, Russell asserted that it was the liquor traffic that “invades the natural rights of the citizen by being a menace to society.”

¹⁸ In January 1908, a brief newspaper article regarding an upcoming “mass meeting” in Trenton, New Jersey (no doubt based on a press release sent out by the Religious Liberty Department), promoted Russell as a speaker who “deals sledge-hammer blows at the drink evil while at the same time he stands like a rock in opposition to any invasion of the civil power into the realm of conscience.”¹⁹

Despite the large scope of the Religious Liberty Department’s activities under Russell’s leadership, and the fact that the *Review and Herald* announcement of his appointment in 1904 stated that he would be giving “undivided attention to this work,”²⁰ he was entrusted with another challenging responsibility soon after his arrival at the General Conference. When denominational headquarters moved to the Washington, D.C., area in 1903, the churches in Takoma Park and the District of Columbia were placed under direct administration of the General Conference rather than a local conference. A District of Columbia Evangelical Committee was created for this purpose and in 1905 Russell was appointed chair, an arrangement that continued until 1909 (with minor variations in the name of the committee). For most practical purposes, this meant functioning as president of a small conference comprising four (eventually five) churches and some 400-500 members. The role required a considerable amount of time and an exceptional measure of diplomatic skill due to sharp conflicts over racial segregation in the churches and at the institutions developed in Takoma Park. Although one of the churches in Washington, D.C., the predominantly-black People’s Church pastored by Lewis C. Sheafe, separated in protest from denominational governance in 1907, Russell endeavored to keep lines of communication open and bring about reconciliation.²¹

City Evangelist

Russell’s tenure at the head of the Religious Liberty Department ended in 1912 when he was called upon to meet another pressing need—evangelism in large cities. Ellen White had been urging for a number of years that the denomination’s top administrators participate directly in meeting this challenge, and in 1909 and 1910 her admonitions to General Conference president Arthur G. Daniells sharpened.²² Russell, who had demonstrated aptitude for city evangelism, was sent to the Chicago area to engage in it full-time.²³

Russell’s assignment in Chicago coincided with the relatively brief period that Drs. Daniel and Lauretta Kress worked in that area under the auspices of Hinsdale Sanitarium and its medical superintendent, Dr. David Paulson.²⁴ These prominent physicians worked in conjunction with Russell and other evangelists conducting

efforts in the region. They established several small “medical missionary centers” throughout the Chicago area. Nurses based in these centers visited homes in the community to discern needs, gave simple treatments, made presentations on healthful living, and encouraged those interested to attend the evangelistic meetings.²⁵

At Russell’s meetings in downtown Chicago, begun January 5, 1913, at a large Baptist church at the intersection of Ashland Boulevard and Monroe Street, Daniel Kress gave three health talks per week. Russell also linked the theme of religious liberty with evangelism, devoting a portion of the campaign to a four-day “Religious Liberty Convention.” The meetings drew “a number of professional men and women and other influential people,” Russell reported.²⁶ Tent meetings on the West Side of the city followed, beginning in July.²⁷ The Chicago Central Church with a membership of 75 was organized as a result of these efforts.²⁸

In the summer of 1914, Russell returned to his home state and to conference administration as president of the Eastern New York Conference, based in Rome, New York. In 1916 he moved to Rochester, having been elected president of the Western New York Conference. He continued heavy involvement in both public evangelism and religious liberty work during these years.²⁹ Almost immediately after assuming the Eastern New York presidency in 1914, he conducted an evangelistic campaign in the state’s capital city, Albany.³⁰ In 1916, A. G. Daniells once again called upon Russell for a special assignment, this time to coordinate a comprehensive plan to follow-up interest stirred by a major series of meetings that Daniells conducted in Portland, Maine. Russell continued to integrate health education and temperance advocacy into evangelism, and to find ways of broadening the reach of the church’s message. For example, he arranged for a booth at the 1916 Maine State Exposition featuring Adventist literature and presentations demonstrating the principles of health.³¹ And, during both of these conference presidencies, Russell simultaneously served as religious liberty secretary (director) for the Atlantic Union Conference.³²

K. C. Russell was still going full-throttle when he died suddenly on December 29, 1919, from a stroke of apoplexy while walking to a church meeting in Dunkirk, New York.³³ He was 59 years old. His wife for 36 years, Carrie Russell, died at Fostoria, Michigan, on August 25, 1942.³⁴

Contribution

Beyond the passionate, skillful, and innovative leadership with which he helped shape 20th-century Adventist evangelism and religious liberty work, K. C. Russell was among those who cast his influence in favor of gospel-centered presentation of the Adventist message. In 1941, W. H. Branson, then vice president of the General Conference, recounted hearing Russell tell of three men who were regularly attending evangelistic meetings he was conducting and showed strong interest in the doctrines he presented. But then, after they failed to attend several nights in a row, he concluded that they probably would not come back. A week later, though, they did return, and one of them explained that “a Salvation Army meeting was in progress in the city this past week and we went there to get salvation. . . . Now that we have found the way to Christ over there, we have returned here

to learn more about the doctrines.”⁸⁵

The words stung and convicted Russell. According to Branson, he said to himself, “God being my helper, no man will ever again have to leave my meetings and go somewhere else to find salvation.”⁸⁶

SOURCES

Annual Statistical Reports. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Online Archives (GCA).

<http://documents.adventistarchives.org/>.

“‘Booze’ Assailed By Two Speakers.” *Hartford Courant*, March 6, 1916.

“Formation of a New Conference.” *ARH*, May 30, 1899.

Kress, D. H. “Elder K. C. Russell.” *ARH*, January 29, 1920.

“President of Western New York Adventists’ Conference Dies in Dunkirk in Stroke of Apoplexy,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, December 30, 1919.

Russell, K. C. “Boston Field.” *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, September 14, 1904.

Russell, K. C. “Boston Field.” *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, November 2, 1904.

Russell, K. C. “Camp-Meeting Temperance Rallies—A New Departure,” *ARH*, July 16, 1908.

Russell, K. C. “Chicago.” *Lake Union Herald*, February 5, 1913.

Russell, K. C. “Chicago West-Side Gospel Tent,” *Lake Union Herald*, July 23, 1913.

Russell, K. C. “Hearings at the Massachusetts Capitol.” *Sentinel of Christian Liberty*, April 1902.

Russell, K. C. “New York Conference.” *ARH*, July 23, 1914.

Russell, K. C. “Religious Liberty Department Statement.” *ARH*, November 2, 1911.

Russell, K. C. “The Religious Liberty Work.” *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, December 7, 1904.

Russell, K. C. “Sinclairville.” *ARH*, April 5, 1881.

Russell, K. C. “Vermont.” *ARH*, March 1, 1898.

Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia. 2nd rev. edition. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1996. S.v. “Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, Department of (PARL).”

“Talks Liberty and Temperance.” *Trenton Evening Times*, January 30, 1908.

Weeks, Howard B. *Adventist Evangelism in the Twentieth Century*. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1969.

Wightman, John S. “Truman Russell obituary.” *ARH*, November 1, 1906.

NOTES

1. D. H. Kress, "Elder K.C. Russell," *ARH*, January 29, 1920, 23; "Kit Russell" in *1870 United States Federal Census*, Ancestry.com
2. John S. Wightman, "Truman Russell obituary," *ARH*, November 1, 1906, 31; Litten Family Tree1, Ancestry.com, accessed December 19, 2022, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/family-tree/tree/49072341/family?cfpid=20184325324&fpid=20184329010&usePUBJs=true>.
3. Kress, "Elder K.C. Russell"; K.C. Russell, "Sinclairville," *ARH*, April 5, 1881, 218.
4. Kress, "Elder K.C. Russell"; Litten Family Tree1, Ancestry.com.
5. Kress, "Elder K.C. Russell"; "Pennsylvania Conference Proceedings," *ARH*, June 26, 1888, 412; "Pennsylvania Conference Proceedings," *ARH*, July 14, 1891, 412.
6. K.C. Russell, "Vermont," *ARH*, March 1, 1898, 145
7. "Formation of a New Conference," *ARH*, May 30, 1899, 348; *Annual Statistical Report for 1899*, GCA, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR1899.pdf>.
8. H.W. Cottrell, "Chesapeake Camp-meeting," *ARH*, September 4, 1900, 572.
9. "Notice!," *ARH*, October 7, 1902, 23; K.C. Russell, "Boston Field," *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, September 14, 1904, 7-8; K.C. Russell, "Boston Field," *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, November 2, 1904, 4-5.
10. See for example, K. C. Russell, "Hearings at the Massachusetts Capitol," *Sentinel of Christian Liberty*, April 1902, 282-284; "Massachusetts Hearing," *Sentinel of Christian Liberty*, April 2, 1903, 213-214.
11. "The General Conference Committee at College View . . .," *ARH*, October 20, 1904, 24; K. C. Russell, "The Religious Liberty Work," *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, December 7, 1904, 2.
12. Barry Oliver, "The Principles and Process of Denominational Reorganization, 1901–1903," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 29, 2020, accessed December 21, 2022. <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=DC19>.
13. Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, 2nd rev. ed (1996), s.v. "Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, Department of (PARL)."
14. K. C. R[ussell], "Religious Liberty Department Statement," *ARH*, November 2, 1911, 17-18.
15. Ibid, 17.

16. K. C. Russell, "Camp-Meeting Temperance Rallies—A New Departure," *ARH*, July 16, 1908, 5-6.
17. *Ibid*, 5.
18. *Ibid*, 6.
19. "Talks Liberty and Temperance," *Trenton Evening Times*, January 30, 1908, 3.
20. "The General Conference Committee at College View"
21. Douglas Morgan, *Lewis C. Sheafe: Apostle to Black America* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2010), 269-270, 274-275, 297, 301, 307, 321-322, 333-335, 350-351, 354-360.
22. Benjamin McArthur, "Daniells, Arthur Grosvenor (1858–1936)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*. January 29, 2020, accessed December 21, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=8972>.
23. Howard B. Weeks, *Adventist Evangelism in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1969), 64-65.
24. Joan A. Francis, "Kress, Daniel Hartman (1862–1956)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, September 18, 2020, accessed December 23, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=D9MU>; and "Kress, Laretta Eby (1863–1955)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, November 28, 2021, accessed December 23, 2022. <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=BJFV>.
25. Weeks, *Adventist Evangelism in the Twentieth Century*, 65.
26. K. C. Russell, "Chicago," *Lake Union Herald*, February 5, 1913, 1.
27. K. C. Russell, "Chicago West-Side Gospel Tent," *Lake Union Herald*, July 23, 1913, 2.
28. "Northern Illinois Conference Proceedings," *Lake Union Herald*, October 1, 1913, 3.
29. Kress, "Elder K.C. Russell."
30. K. C. Russell, "New York Conference," *ARH*, July 23, 1914, 16.
31. Weeks, *Adventist Evangelism in the Twentieth Century*, 91; "Pastor Wheeler to Continue Evangelistic Endeavor," *Buffalo Evening News*, October 27, 1917, 13; "'Booze' Assailed By Two Speakers," *Hartford Courant*, March 6, 1916, 4.
32. Kress, "Elder K.C. Russell."

33. "President of Western New York Adventists' Conference Dies in Dunkirk in Stroke of Apoplexy," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, December 30, 1919, 6.
34. "Carrie E. Hovey Russell obituary," *ARH*, November 26, 1942, 25.
35. Weeks, *Adventist Evangelism in the Twentieth Century*, 129-130.
36. *Ibid.*, 130.

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000