

The Methodist Merger of 1939

“Successful” Unification?

Morris L. Davis

The Methodist Church: A Long-sought Reunification¹

The creation of the Methodist Church (1939–1968) was more than a denominational merger. It was the reunification of the two largest Wesleyan/Methodist denominations around the world. It created the largest Protestant denomination in the U. S. and one of the most powerful Christian denominations in the world. When the MEC split in 1844–1845, after several previous splits over matters of race, slavery, and episcopal control, it was just reaching its greatest moment in terms of numbers and national influence. And, as soon as the Civil War ended, leaders in the two denominations began dreaming of a return of that larger body. For the members of the new Methodist Church (which also included the return of the Methodist Protestant Church), it meant a renewal of a sense that they were again the quintessential American church.

Splits in the Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in Baltimore in 1784, began within its first decade and continued steadily, as the Republican Methodist, Reformed Methodist, AME, AME Zion, Primitive Methodists, Methodist Protestants, and the Wesleyan Methodist Connection all emerged before the split that created the MEC, South. After that split, the Congregational Methodist, Free Methodist, Christian Methodist Episcopal, Southern Methodist, Pilgrim Holiness, and Nazarene churches broke away, not to mention the many advocates of holiness who left to join other denominations. In other words, there never was a long period during which the denomination did not experience significant turmoil and schism.

Through all of those splits, however, the MEC and the MECS remained the largest of the Methodist denominational bodies, and the more than nine million combined members longed for a reunion. The process that would result in the eventual plan for that merger was put in place in the early 1910s, and a study commission, called the Joint Commission on Unification, began meeting at Lovely Lane Chapel, Baltimore, birthplace of the MEC, in December of 1916—one hundred years after the death of Francis Asbury. Many thought the fifty-member Commission (twenty-five members from each denomination, all white with the exception of two African Americans) would finish its work at that one initial meeting. But it became quickly apparent that the differences among the Commissioners on what they called the “status of the Negro” were very deep, and were not to be solved in one meeting. Instead, the Commission met six times, the last in 1919, and produced a proposal at that meeting that was essentially the plan of union used for the 1939 merger.

The long and intense negotiations revealed irreconcilable differences between integrationists and segregationists. But, focused as they were on “Christian unity” and the dream of a Methodist reunification, the Joint Commission approved a plan that called for a new Methodist denomination segregated by race. Though the general conferences of both denominations failed initially to accept the plan as a viable way forward, it was revived in the 1930s and became the framework for the church that placed all white congregations in regional annual conferences and

all black congregations together in one sprawling Central Jurisdiction—thus achieving Christian unity through racial segregation and white supremacy.

Christian Racism: “Expediency” and the Triumph of White Supremacy

The Joint Commission included members who hoped for a reunion of white Methodists only, as well as members who hoped for a church that would be fully integrated. While most members were somewhere in the middle of these two positions, the two ends of the spectrum framed the discussion, with the whites-only advocates threatening to leave and the integrationists doing the same. The spread of views in this discussion mirrored the way the debate played out during the years leading up to the split over slavery. As Donald Mathews showed us in *Slavery and Methodism*, the public Methodist debate might have been structured by the pro-slavery and abolitionist advocates, but the eventual decisions were made by the vast majority of white Methodists who were, as Mathews named them, the “anti-abolitionists.”² This powerful majority was far more concerned, Mathews argued, about social, cultural, and economic stability than they were about what might be the best Christian solution. The anti-abolitionist Methodists were more concerned about the threat of “agitating” abolitionists than they were about correcting the evils of slavery. While these Methodists did not advocate for slavery, and even wished it did not exist, their participation in the debate was primarily energized by fears of the instability that might be unleashed by its abolition.

Similarly, the debate about racial inclusion in the proposed Methodist Church was propelled by a desire for minimized social, cultural, and institutional disruption, and the promise of a larger and more powerful Methodist denomination. From the opening speeches in Baltimore, the Joint Commission’s leaders and a few outspoken bishops from both denominations, sought to circumscribe the terms of the negotiations so as to exclude Methodist theology, doctrine, and history. They knew, it seems, that there was a substantial disconnect between a possible theological ideal of Christian unity, and the political reality of starkly different Christian views of race. This disconnect caused the Commission to employ the languages of racial identity (“race consciousness”), nationalism, and “Christian civilization” as their primary means to achieve reunification.

While there were sermon-like speeches and the occasional interpretation of “New Testament ethics” or “the ethics of Jesus,” the Commission steered far away from the kinds of discussions that would force them to judge whether one church or one position on reunification was “more Christian” or “more spiritual” than another. The ensuing debate over the next four years was pitched at a high spiritual register, but in the decidedly non-spiritual language of race. This is not to say that the discussion was not religious, but that the more conventional and traditional religious language was relegated either to the discussion of the unification ideal, or was an unwelcome interjection. There were also several instances in which a Commission delegate presented theological or scriptural reasons why theological or scriptural reasoning did not apply to the problem at hand. The leadership of the Commission, for certain, was not disposed toward fighting a theological battle.

The guidance from the Commission leadership to this end was alternately subtle and explicit. MEC bishop William F. McDowell, who chaired the MEC delegation, made it clear that there was only one goal for the Commission: unification.³ McDowell often took on the task of trying to focus the discussion, usually by shutting down “extraneous” issues. He worried openly about the delegates’ inability to discern their immediate task. The goal of unification, he said, was to be

achieved without attempting to discern “God’s will” or to find a “biblical solution” or to search for a theological imperative.⁴ God’s will was always what was best for “the church,” he argued, so they didn’t need to waste time arguing for anything other than how they would reunite. Concerned that the negotiations would break down because delegates might feel their Christianity impugned or their intentions maligned, he asked that all delegates assume “that [all] of us is equally moved by the spiritual motives of this great thing.”⁵

MECS bishop Collins Denny, like McDowell, refused to sit still for appeals based on claims to a higher Christian ideal.⁶ During his first in speech in Baltimore, he said he would be willing to hear any proposal from any delegate, but he “was not willing to sit and accept somebody’s interpretation of the mind of God as the divine solution of this question.”⁷ Feeling as if they were being put on the defensive, Denny and other MECS leaders repeated this sentiment whenever a delegate attempted to argue against racial segregation on scriptural or theological grounds. Not only did they find it insulting to be told that they were not as righteous as the speaker, they would say, but interpreting the will of God was a foregone conclusion for their task; they would not be able to come to an agreement on God’s will and unification would fail. After the MEC lay commissioner Alexander Simpson accused the MECS delegation of ignoring the gospel and turning a blind eye to their own “common humanity,” MECS bishop Edwin Mouzon defended himself and his fellow commissioners, saying that they “enjoy being preached to. But we do not appreciate being reminded continually that in the opinion of some we do not manifest Christian principle.” According to these delegates, manifesting “Christian principle” was not their task or mission. Rather, they were to focus solely on a unified denominational structure—a result that would, by this logic, overcome any particular disagreements on Christian principle.⁸

But it was MEC bishop Earl Cranston who made the strongest and most sustained arguments against theological and scriptural discussion. For Cranston, the central goal of the Commission was unification, and he was firmly convinced—and almost certainly correct—that the quest for unification would fail if they attempted to address the racial issue theologically. Cranston’s substitute value was “expediency,” and he preached expediency throughout the negotiations. The very existence of the Joint Commission, and the proposals they put forth from the respective General Conferences, relegated the “negro question” to “the ground of expediency.” Individual or institutional views on the “ethical teachings of the New Testament” were so radically different that there was no chance of finding agreement or achieving unification. The Joint Commission was a “treaty,” and an official acknowledgment that whatever expedited unification was acceptable in the discussion.⁹ In terms of his personal view of the relationship of the black MEC membership, Cranston was willing to compromise with the MECS and to consider making the new church an all-white church.

To further buttress this argument, Cranston and others attempted to construct the notion of “equality” as a shifting phenomenon dependent upon the situation being addressed. Cranston distinguished between “spiritual equality” and “ecclesial equality.” “Christian fellowship is spiritual,” he argued, and it “does not inhere in any ecclesiastical scheme, nor can it be given or taken away by any human authority.” All races are “one in Christ,” in other words, but this spiritual unity does not transfer to human society in general, to social interaction among races, or even to ecclesiastical structure. This distinction between the “spiritual” realm and the “merely ecclesial” became the escape hatch for white Methodists when answering critics who attempted to argue that there were gospel principles that applied to the issue of race. So to what were they to turn, then, to find a racial model for the church structure? What was expedient where the gospel, doctrine, theological debate, and Methodist tradition were not? Cranston addressed this

directly, supporting the general trend of the negotiations: they had to look to the communities in which the church found itself and model themselves after those. They had to concede, said Cranston, that “involuntary community existence”—by which he meant the race one was born into—“and community life in community organizations such as our Churches must be governed by the same rules and principles that necessarily obtain in such community organizations and cooperative movements in general.”¹⁰

This approach is exactly what dominated the negotiations: American civilization, American government, the US Constitution, the US legal structure, and the idea of the American nation all received vastly more attention as models for church governance, structure, and “manhood rights” among the membership than any models culled from church history or biblical principle.

At times, though, Cranston eased into making theological arguments himself, claiming at one meeting that “expediency” was itself a New Testament ethic. During the long debates in Savannah in 1918, he pled desperately for the discussion to be turned away from the right or wrong of integrating the new church. The “status of the Negro,” he argued, was not “fundamental in any doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ.” Thus the matter was taking them away from the “fundamental conception of the Church of Jesus Christ,” by which he meant the unification of its strongest elements. By continuing to debate a “New Testament” approach to the question of the black membership, the Joint Commission was subordinating “the spiritual ideal to the conventional.” Rights, status, historical consistency, ethics—all of these things were conventional and not spiritual, because all of them were incidental to the most crucial aspects of the negotiations: (white) unification and “our common obligation for [‘the Negroes’] moral and religious uplift.”

Cranston also employed a tactic that was intended to re-spiritualize what he had vociferously tried to de-spiritualize. He went on in this particular speech to add that blacks in the MEC were inappropriately preoccupied with the trappings of political power.¹¹ Characterizing the positions and rights that the black membership was fighting for as “superficial distinctions and barren recognitions,” Cranston belittled the quest for equality in the new church while he elevated the alternative to a spiritual ideal. “Self-direction” and a racial sphere of influence were more spiritually viable options than the fleeting illusion of political power. The longer and less immediately gratifying road of racial segregation and self-motivated growth would best serve the greater spiritual good of “the race.”¹²

A few delegates went to greater lengths to prove that “heredity [and] race prejudice” could “scarcely yield even to the gospel.”¹³ Frank M. Thomas, a ministerial delegate and one of the eldest delegates from the MECS, frustrated at what he considered the inappropriate moralizing of the MEC commissioners and the MEC press, presented a prepared speech at the Cleveland meeting in which he tried to reason out more carefully why the “status of the Negro” was a problem that could not be solved by recourse to the New Testament.¹⁴ That the New Testament had any bearing on the problem was a fallacy, he said, and would not stand “searching inquiry.” Thomas argued that the New Testament is not a guidebook for the “details of human life.” Rather, it sets out certain broad principles; the “Fatherhood of God . . . Sonship of Jesus Christ . . . His Universal Atonement . . . [the] Gift of the Holy Spirit . . . [the] Brotherhood of Believers.” None of these principles, though, qualifies the “Negroid” for equal standing with whites in a church. Any true Christian would rejoice that all humans are equal on the plane of salvation and their relationship to the spiritual “kingdom.” But this is an entirely different plane of existence from the ecclesial and “fraternal” plane. Christians can be equal “brothers” in the matter of salvation and in relation to God, but that equality does not translate to the non-spiritual realm of

church structure. To claim that the phrase “all are one in Christ” translates to “all are one in Christ’s church” would not hold up “at least in Methodism, the acid test of the facts. A man’s spiritual relations do not determine his ecclesiastical relations.” As an example of how this played out in the church in other areas—and a rare example of a delegate using Methodist polity as a resource—Thomas pointed to the itinerant system of Methodist ministerial assignments. He asserted that Methodist preachers, “free-born, with the blood of patriots in their veins,” do not retain their level of spiritual equality because they are moved around year to year from charge to charge. If it were not for the “high spiritual values involved,” they would simply be at the whim of the “appointive power.” Without any sense of irony, Thomas claimed that it would be difficult to find a more pronounced form of human slavery.”¹⁵

Similarly, MEC bishop Richard Cooke tried to find a way to explain the vast differences between the two churches by outlining the compartmentalized version of social ethics that was espoused by many, he said, in the American South.¹⁶ Cooke used the language of “spheres” to describe the way those opposed to racial integration understood the “ethics of Jesus Christ.” There are limits, he argued, to those ethics, because they pertain only to certain areas of life. The MEC could not adopt such a system of ethics, but he hoped he could assure some MEC delegates that those not willing to hear a “Gospel” argument were not disagreeing about the interpretation of Jesus’ words, but rather understood the nature of “Gospel ethics” in a different way. He tried to convince his colleagues that their differences were not irreconcilable. Rather, he argued, the commissioners needed to find another way of approaching the problem.¹⁷

MEC Bishop Frederick Leete outlined this notion of spheres even more sharply. Rousseau, not Christ, he argued, advocated social equality.¹⁸ Jesus was not a “leader of society” and did not “mingle much with society.” Jesus did teach principles that had some bearing on society, but not any principles that would indicate that all members of society should have equal social footing. Rousseau taught much worth considering about the “rights of man, but very little or almost nothing about the higher duties and privileges of man.” Talk of “social equality,” argued Leete, had its source in French philosophy and not in the gospel. Christians, as this line of thinking went, could think and apply Christ-taught principles in three distinct spheres: politics, society, and the life of the church. In this way, the Commission could advocate equality among church members without advocating the social equality of those same members. With this reasoning, Leete attempted to extricate the Commission from the “social equality” dilemma by diverting it into another “sphere” of Christian thought.

In sum, the Joint Commission, through valuing the possibility of a larger and more powerful denomination more than any other ecclesiology, drove these Methodists to create a racist church built on dreams of power for the purpose of exercising greater power. Both sides of the debate compromised, and both decided that the necessary ecclesial unity was possible only by refusing to attempt unity of Christian teaching.

Questions for The UMC from This “Successful” Reunification

Though many Methodists see a direct comparison between the racist thinking of the Methodist Church and contemporary positions against LGBTQI inclusion, that is not the point that is most useful here. Indeed, I do not think that attempting to make that point would convince anyone on an opposing side. Rather, the comparison I see is a church locked in an intractable set of opposing points of view, and with no reasonable hope of any significant numbers of either side shifting in a way that would change the debate in constructive way. The hope, most especially of

those who were not in favor of racial segregation, was that time would bring the church together over the issue, and that it was worth creating an explicitly racist denomination for a greater spiritual cause—ecclesial unity—bought at the price of ecclesial inequality.

That parallel seems obvious to me, and is why I offer this historical example for our consideration at this current moment. The following questions are not all rhetorical: What was gained by the compromises made over a century ago? What is being gained now by this long and painful struggle in The UMC? More important, what is being lost? What sense of mission for the church is relegated to the edges of the denominational consciousness, and starved of denominational resources, because of the struggle over the divisions on human sexuality? How much sacred time and opportunity has been lost, and will be lost, to an ecclesiology bound to the principle of unity? Is the current denominational struggle an archaic dream of imperial-style denomination, built for power and influence that is dependent on basic theological compromise on all sides? Is it time to take this lesson of a once-glorious reunification that became a shameful history, as the warning that United Methodists, if they are to find more focused purpose and more effective mission, must fully reconsider the idea of denomination and the desires that have kept it afloat?

The Methodist Merger of 1939: “Successful” Unification?—Morris L. Davis

¹ Readers familiar with the history can skip this section.

² Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780–1845* (Princeton University Press, 1965).

³ Bishop William F. McDowell (1858–1937) was the primary spokesperson (and Commission chair) for the MEC delegation for the life of the Joint Commission. McDowell was strongly in favor of union and was, initially, willing to consider a compromise on black membership in order to attain that goal. The discussions of the Joint Commission eventually changed his mind.

⁴ *The Proceedings of the Joint Commission on Unification of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1918–1920; Nashville: Smith and Lamar for the Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1918–1920). (hereafter, *Proceedings*) 1:162.

⁵ *Proceedings*, 2:656.

⁶ Collins Denny (1854–1943) was thoroughly against union, even a racially segregated one. Denny was of the opinion that the MECS was better off retaining its regional distinctiveness. Denny and others like him feared that the MEC would overwhelm their church, and one of the last and best representatives of white southern culture would be lost.

⁷ *Proceedings*, 1:184.

⁸ *Proceedings*, 2:608. This is rather an odd comment coming from a preacher.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 373.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 375.

¹¹ Cranston added that it wasn't their fault because their “first lessons in politics were corrupting and degrading, and it is no great wonder that his conceptions of humanity [*sic*] rights revolve about a ballot box or in the Church around the bishporic. He learned that from white men” (*Ibid.*, 655).

¹² *Ibid.*, 655–56.

¹³ MEC ministerial delegate Claudius B. Spencer (1856–1933), speaking at the Cleveland meeting. *Proceedings*, 3:319. Spencer was a passionate proponent of the separate racial jurisdiction within the new church and felt strongly that the black jurisdiction should not be called a “mission” of any kind.

¹⁴ Frank M. Thomas (1868–1921), MECS ministerial delegate, had just been named the editor of the *Methodist Quarterly Review* at the 1918 General Conference. Thomas held strong views about the necessity of racial segregation and the great promise of a unification of white Methodists.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

¹⁶ Richard Cooke (1853–1958), an MEC lay delegate.

¹⁷ *Proceedings*, 2:193.

¹⁸ Frederick Deland Leete (1866–1958) was an influential bishop who had spent many years in Atlanta overseeing MEC work in the southern states. He was openly willing to compromise with the MECS on a segregated racial membership.