TOWARD PRESERVING THE HISTORY OF THE CENTRAL JURISDICTION

By L. Scott Allen

Since little of the history of the Central Jurisdiction of The Methodist Church has been written, perhaps most Methodists who are not directly involved in the work of the Jurisdiction know little or nothing of its history. For many Methodists, what Negroes have thought, said, and done in The Methodist Church is not regarded as a part of the history of American Methodism.

Admittedly there is a scarcity of documentary materials on the Central Jurisdiction. But there are reasons for this scarcity. For one thing, it is part and parcel of the disregard of Negro history as a whole in the United States. For another, Negro historians have been reluctant to do the necessary research for compiling authoritative books on the history of their race. Again, publishers have been reluctant to bring out books on the subject because of the limited prospective market for them. Publishers and Negro historians disagree as to which is more to blame for the failure to produce good books on Negro history in this country.

Now the subject assigned me for this paper suggests that there is a history of the Central Jurisdiction to be compiled and preserved as an important part of the history of American Methodism. Let it be said at the outset that the history of the Central Jurisdiction began before 1939, the year the Jurisdiction was organized as an integral part of The Methodist Church.

The history of the Central Jurisdiction is a collective story of the Negro's participation in the Methodist movement from the period of its inception on American soil until the termination of the dissolution processes of the Central Jurisdiction which will be accomplished in 1968.

William Warren Sweet, in Methodism in American History, relates the dramatic story of the campaign to raise money to build the first Methodist chapel in New York City. This effort, promoted through the use of a "subscription paper," seemingly as the result of Barbara Heck's larger vision, is described by Sweet as calling forth response from approximately 250 contributors who represented a broad cross-section of the population.

That list of names, according to Sweet, was representative of all classes, from Negro servants to the Livingstons, Delanceys, and Stuyvesants. With the funds received the Methodist society leased and later purchased a lot on John Street in New York City. On that lot they built Wesley Chapel, now John Street Church, and Philip
Embury preached the dedicatory sermon on the new chapel on October 30, 1768.

And so it was by that sacrificial act of Christian stewardship that the imprint of the Negro race was indelibly inscribed upon the earliest physical foundation stones of American Methodism.

The line of succession begun by Negroes in the pioneer days of the Methodist movement in America has continued unbroken throughout the entire history of the church.

Significant references to the devotion exemplified by Negroes in their loyalty to the early religious movements in America were made by John Wesley himself. For example, excerpts from a letter written by Samuel Davies of Virginia are included in Wesley's Journal for July 27, 1755.

I was much affected about this time by a letter sent me from a gentleman in Virginia. Part of it runs thus:

The poor Negro slaves here never heard of Jesus or His religion till they arrived at the land of their slavery in America. . . . These poor Africans are the principal objects of my compassion, and, I think, the most proper subjects of your charity.

The inhabitants of Virginia are computed to be about three hundred thousand, and one-half of them are supposed to be Negroes. The number of these who attend on my ministry at particular times is uncertain, but I think there are about three hundred who give a stated attendance, and never have I been so much struck with the appearance of an assembly as when I glance my eye on one part of the house adorned (so it has appeared to me) with so many black countenances, eagerly attentive to every word they heard, and some of them covered with tears. A considerable number of them, about a hundred, have been baptized after they had been fully instructed in the great truths of religion, and had evidenced their sense of them by a life of the strictest virtue—

They are exceedingly delighted with Watts' songs, and I cannot but observe the Negroes, above all of the human species I ever knew, have the nicest ear for music.

Numerous references of this kind in every period of the Methodist movement indicate that there is an authentic history of the Central Jurisdiction which merits inclusion in the broader history of Methodism. The preservation of this phase of the story of Methodism will require more than mere chronological investigation and narration. The story must be told in a way to relate the life of the church to the social order. It will be necessary to use what James Harvey Robinson called the new approach to history, the approach which escapes the limitations formerly imposed upon a study of the past. In writing this history we must relate events to underlying causes and show how the events in turn contributed to succeeding changes and developments in human society. Such is the way in which the history of the Central Jurisdiction should be analyzed as one at-
tempts to weave it into the main stream of the history of Methodism. The principal factor in the history of the Central Jurisdiction is, I think, the moral and practical influence of the church upon its Negro members and conversely the impact of this ethnic group upon the total life of the church. With this in mind let us look at several phases of the history of the Central Jurisdiction in its relationship to the Methodist movement in America.

I. The Ministry

The history of the Negro Methodist ministry is a dramatic and revealing story. Whatever may be the weaknesses and imperfections of the clerical membership of the Central Jurisdiction, it represents a segment of the ministry of the church in which are symbolized a number of essential characteristics without which the Christian ministry as a whole would be greatly impoverished.

Among those gifts and graces for the work of the ministry which the Negro preacher has demonstrated from the very beginning of his role in Methodism is the capacity for fervent preaching. This has been one of the Negro preacher’s most prominent characteristics. This tendency toward passionate, sound biblical preaching which appeared so vividly in Harry Hosier, or Black Harry, as he was affectionately referred to by the contemporary fathers of Methodism, has never ceased to manifest itself among his ecclesiastical posterity. The power to preach fervently is a homiletical qualification which Negro preachers on every level of the Methodist ministry, from the approved supply pastors to members of the episcopacy, have admired and have sought to develop. This great spiritual value which has accrued from the efforts of the ministry of the Central Jurisdiction, if it is preserved in the final processes of the merger of this Jurisdiction with its regional counterparts, may well become the motivating power in leading the whole church in recapturing its passion for relevant prophetic preaching as an essential for church renewal.

A second outstanding mark of the ministry of the Central Jurisdiction is its strong advocacy of the concept of a “free pulpit.” The Negro preacher has experienced a degree of freedom in determining the nature and scope of his preaching that has not been equaled by any other group in The Methodist Church. The privilege which the Central Jurisdiction minister enjoys in occupying a free pulpit where free men preach a free gospel has provided him the opportunity to become an influential and prophetic voice in the community.

This is not to say, however, that there is to be heard from every Methodist pulpit of the Central Jurisdiction a proclamation of the
word of God which resembles in conviction and clarity the preaching of the ancient Hebrew prophets. Many Negro preachers, like a number of their colleagues of other races, are notorious for the emptiness, the evasiveness, and the generalities in their preaching. But where this type of weakness exists in the Central Jurisdiction, it is usually the result of the minister's personal deficiency rather than the influence of some outward pressure. The voices of Negro preachers whose messages fail to reflect freedom are very seldom subdued by pressures exerted by prestige individuals who constitute the economic and political power structure in many communities.

While no one cherishes the handicap which racial discrimination has imposed upon a large segment of the Negro laity of The Methodist Church, it has served as one of the protective factors in the maintenance of a free ministry in the Central Jurisdiction.

As The Methodist Church moves nearer to the full realization of an inclusive fellowship, there is no quality which it may seek to attain that will give more power and validity to its Christian witness than the ability to proclaim a free gospel to free people.

This is the great call which Bishop Everett W. Palmer makes to the Christian church of this century when he says in his book, *The Glorious Imperative*: "That truth, which the church exists to proclaim and practice, must not be diluted to suit our convenience, compromised to fit what we may think is practical and feasible, or smothered to please and hold the crowd. The Sermon on the Mount is not ours to tamper with. We did not proclaim it. The gospel does not belong to us to make of it what we choose."  

For the maintenance of a pulpit where the Christian ministry may fulfill its prophetic functions with relevance and freedom from all human limitations, the clergy of the Central Jurisdiction will continue its strivings in the new United Methodist Church.

A great chapter has been written in the history of American Methodism by the Negro minister in the area of community leadership and service.

Here again is to be found a condition which for a long period in American history was highly characteristic of the Negro community. Following the emancipation of the Negro from slavery and continuing for several decades, it is quite obvious that the Negro minister emerged in most instances as the best informed individual of his racial group in the community. This advantage, though generally limited, gave the preacher of color a degree of versatility which naturally distinguished him as "parson," or the person, as the term signifies, of the community.

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The ministry of the Central Jurisdiction took an early lead in its service to the community as various necessary occupational combinations were formed. It is still not unusual to find Negro Methodist preachers acting as pastor and teacher, minister and social worker, and in many other dual capacities. They also appear quite frequently as leaders in such civil and political movements as voter-registration drives, better housing campaigns, crime prevention projects, temperance crusades, child welfare programs, and numerous other endeavors for human betterment.

While the history of this particular phase of the work of the ministry of the Central Jurisdiction should never be used to attempt to justify part time pastors, it may, however, serve a worthy purpose in accentuating the broad concern for community life and problems which each minister should possess and exemplify.

II. The Laity

Of no less importance in the life of the Central Jurisdiction is the role of its laity. The Negro Methodist laymen have demonstrated a depth and genuineness of faith in the church that is almost unprecedented in church history.

In his search for religious nurture, the Negro has acquired the spiritual insight which enables him to view the institutionalized church eschatologically, not as it is, but in the light of what it hopes to become in response to the will of Christ who is its Lord.

I have been amazed at the attitude and conduct of Negro laymen in recent years. As we know, there has been tension in The Methodist Church because an ideology which upholds racial segregation has been in conflict with the Christian doctrine of man in which equality and universal brotherhood are fundamental principles. As I recall, in every instance in which exponents of these two views have confronted each other in church gatherings, the laymen in some regional annual conferences and local churches have indicated strong resentment because of coercion seemingly exerted by the General Conference and other outside forces. They point out that this is a delicate problem for the church, and one cannot dispute the claim or deny the sincerity of the laymen. But at the same time I remember that the typical layman of the Central Jurisdiction has adjusted his thinking and his attitudes and has yielded to a type of coercion that is distasteful to him; he has been forced to accept racial discrimination in a church to which he is devoted and loyal. The acceptance of such coercion, or, to put it another way, this kind of commitment on the part of the Negro layman can be understood only as an expression of the faith which he has in the inherent power
of the church to bring itself to a level of Christian maturity in which it will heed the categorical imperative of Christ and become the true inclusive fellowship which was the highest goal of his life, death, and resurrection.

This ability to accept The Methodist Church as a part of a growing, worshiping, witnessing, spiritual community, the full dimensions of which do not yet appear, is reflected in the attitude of the laity of the Central Jurisdiction toward every aspect of the mission of the church.

The value of the history of this group of Methodist laymen is well put in a statement by Robert S. Clemmons who says, "Any real assessment of the lay potential in the church needs to bring into clear focus the long history of lay relationship in the church. In any crisis it is likely to come up for reassessment. Any new design in church organization and function needs to review and reappraise former structures, the contributions which laymen have made, and the problems which the church has encountered. We are a people of God with a history. We can learn from that history."

III. Institutional Life

Like the history of any people, the story of the origin and development of the Central Jurisdiction would be deficient without some account of its institutional life.

As the former branches of The Methodist Church began to develop a concern for the moral and cultural advancement of the Negro freedmen through spiritual guidance, the need for establishing institutions for this purpose became evident. In addition to organizing local churches, major efforts were made on behalf of the education of Negroes. The history of mid-nineteenth century American Methodism contains a dramatic chapter on the organization and the work of the Freedman's Aid Society through which a large number of predominantly Negro secondary schools and colleges were founded. These institutions were designed to administer to the intellectual needs of the Negro people on those beginning levels which were necessary at the time of their emancipation.

For a long period, these schools were the only institutions that offered educational opportunities for Negroes in regions where public schools were not provided for them by the states. It is not possible to relate in depth the history of these educational institutions in this paper. But at least two observations about the schools should be considered in connection with this endeavor to evaluate

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the history of the Central Jurisdiction as whole in the light of its relation to the broader scope of Methodist history.

First, the history of these schools reveals their ability to move progressively from the point of their meager and primitive beginnings to the development of the caliber institutions that are able to produce the quality of education which contemporary society requires. In order to attain this level of operation, it was necessary in some cases to merge weaker schools with stronger institutions and to discontinue several units where wholesome survival appeared impossible.

Second, the history of these schools depicts the rise of a people, with the assistance of the church, from slavery to positions of leadership in the institutions in which they were trained.

No stronger evidence is needed in support of the missionary program of The Methodist Church than the results achieved by the church in its program of Christian secondary and higher education for Negroes.

Conclusion

The history of the Central Jurisdiction has been glorious in its nature and far reaching in its influence and significance. It speaks as with a clarion voice across two centuries of American Methodism and it will be heard in the years ahead in The United Methodist Church, reminding those who constitute this fellowship that God has provided some better things for us, that they of the past, present, and future, “without us should not be made perfect.”

This is the heritage that we count as sacred and that we seek to transmit as a part of the nature and mission of the church which we love so dearly.