HIRAM REVELS PROTESTS RACIAL SEPARATION IN THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH (1876)

by William B. Gravely

Among the Negro minority of the old Methodist Episcopal Church there was a distinguished group of clergymen whose careers embody the tradition of black religious protest against racial segregation in America. One of these ministers was Hiram Rhoades Revels, whose claim to national fame is linked with his brief political career as the first black United States Senator, serving in that capacity from Mississippi for a little more than a year, February 25, 1870 to March 4, 1871.¹

Born in 1822 to free parents in Fayetteville, North Carolina, Revels was one of the few American Negroes who received a college education prior to 1860. After attending a Quaker school in Union County, Indiana and the Drake County, Ohio Seminary, he was graduated from Knox College (Galesburg, Illinois) after which, in 1845, he received ordination in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Throughout the remainder of the pre-Civil War era he taught school, lectured and preached in midwestern and border states. In 1853, following a dispute with Bishop Daniel A. Payne and a portion of his congregation in St. Louis, Revels withdrew from the A.M.E. Church and became, for a time, a Presbyterian, serving as pastor of the Madison Street Church in Baltimore.²

During the Civil War Revels helped to organize Negro regiments for the Union Army in Maryland and Missouri. In 1864 he was serving in Mississippi as a member of the Missouri Conference of the A.M.E. Church, to which he had returned, and as chaplain of a

black regiment. He organized Negro churches in Jackson and Vicksburg before being transferred to Bethel Chapel, Leavenworth, Kansas. After another year in Louisville, Kentucky Revels returned to Mississippi where he first entered Reconstruction politics as an alderman in Natchez. Before he was selected to fill the unexpired term in the United States Senate of ex-Confederate President Jefferson Davis, he was the Republican state senator from Adams County.3

In 1868 Revels joined the Methodist Episcopal Church which had organized an annual conference for the states of Mississippi and Louisiana three years before. He did not become a ministerial member of the conference, however, until after his retirement from politics. He was motivated in his decision, as he wrote eight years afterward, by the belief that "the grand old Church ... could do more than any other Church in the world for the colored people of America." 4

Returning from Washington in 1871, Revels was named president of newly established Alcorn University in Oakland, Mississippi, a school for Negroes. For a few months in 1873 he served as secretary of state ad interim, succeeding James Lynch, another black Methodist preacher-politician who had died suddenly in December, 1872.5 In 1874 when Revels began to dissent from the party politics of Mississippi Republicans, he was fired from the post at Alcorn. The next year he aligned himself with white Democrats to overthrow the state's Republican administration. In August, 1876 he resumed the presidency of Alcorn under the new political regime.6

In 1875 Revels united with the Mississippi Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, resumed his pastoral career and left politics behind, even though he continued as head of Alcorn until 1882.7 At the General Conference of 1876 Revels was chosen editor of the Southwestern Christian Advocate (New Orleans), but he resigned the position when he discovered the circumstances of his election and the financial difficulties which beset the paper.8 For the next quarter century Revels was at various times pastor of churches in Holly Springs and Vicksburg and presiding elder of the Yazoo, Holly Springs (on two occasions) and Aberdeen districts in what

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4 New York Christian Advocate, September 21, 1876; Official Minutes, Year Book and Journal of Proceedings of the Eleventh Session of the Upper Mississippi Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Held at Aberdeen, Mississippi, January 16-21, 1901 (Aberdeen, 1901), 37.
7 Biographical Dictionary of the American Congress, loc.cit. The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, loc. cit., gives 1883 as the date of Revels' retirement at Alcorn.
8 New York Christian Advocate, September 21, 1876.
became, in 1890, the Upper Mississippi Conference. Twice he was selected as a reserve ministerial delegate to the General Conference (1876, 1884). He was attending the opening session of his annual conference in Aberdeen on January 16, 1901, when he was fatally stricken.  

The immediate issue of the document by Revels which follows was the debate prior to and within the General Conference of 1876 over the establishment of racially segregated annual conferences in the South. The Methodist Episcopal Church had already set the pattern for what became the Central Jurisdiction in The Methodist Church of 1939, when the General Conference of 1864 recommended “colored pastorates for colored people” and established two all-black annual conferences (Washington and Delaware) which geographically overlapped existing conferences.  

Four years later Kentucky Methodists also obtained approval to separate along racial lines and the General Conference gave blanket permission to divide other annual conferences in the South where two-thirds of the members concurred. Black Methodists and ex-abolitionists united in 1872, however, to block the plan of white churchmen who sought to divide racially the Georgia and Alabama conferences whose memberships were almost equally divided between whites and blacks. But that victory was short-lived, for immediately the white membership in the middle South began a campaign against racially mixed conferences which culminated in 1876. The momentum of the separatist movement increased considerably after 1874 due to a widespread white backlash in the church against the integrationist policy adopted by the bishop of the southern area and racial equalitarian, Gilbert Haven.

As one of a number of articles in the church press debating the propriety of segregated conferences, Revels’ protest was published on May 4, 1876 in The Southwestern Advocate (New Orleans), which was the only Methodist paper besides Zion’s Herald (Boston) to oppose racial division unequivocally. Throughout the essay Revels inferred that there had been in the Methodist Episcopal Church in the South more interracial cooperation and community than actually had been the case. Almost from the first annual conferences had separate districts for white and black churches and there was only token integration in local churches. But Revels’ argument may have been more significant in another respect. He pointed to the symbolic meaning of interracial communion among the clergy at the annual conference.

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6 Minutes of the Upper Mississippi Conference, 1901, loc.cit.
7 Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1876, 252-253, 263, 485-488.
9 Ibid., 1872, 80, 92-93, 109, 417, 435.
MR. EDITOR—When I wrote the note at Grenada, which has subsequently published in the columns of your valuable paper, I prom-


conference level. He praised the work of white missionaries during the previous decade, many of whom had braved insults from other whites to become teachers and preachers among the freedmen. Revels knew well that the Methodist Episcopal Church, South had continually derided "northern" churchmen because of their "mixed Conferences, mixed congregations, and mixed schools," and that the racial policy of his church was the greatest obstacle to "formal fraternity" between the two Methodist denominations. To legalize the color line, he warned, would inflict an irreparable blow to the self-esteem and pride of Negro members of the Methodist Episcopal Church and would give opponents justification for their charges that the white missionaries had been insincere in their treatment of the blacks. Moreover, he protested that whatever was the actual racial practice of the church, it was a fatal step to write into legislation a policy of segregation, sanctioning as normative the racial separation which was taking place.

In retrospect, Revels' letter is a conservative document. He acknowledged the cultural and intellectual deprivation which chattel slavery had caused its black victims to suffer. But he recommended no radical solution, urging, instead, that his fellow blacks take the very practical steps of educating and improving themselves morally and religiously. He insisted, however, that whites ought to associate with, teach and provide examples for Negroes, rather than abandon and segregate them. In the end Revels underestimated the insidious racism which inhabited all of America's churches and to which, under the guise of practical necessity, the General Conference of 1876 succumbed. There a policy of local option was enacted that set in motion the process which finally destroyed the last vestige of ecclesiastical integration in the Methodist Episcopal Church. The bitter fruits of that decision, and others like it, have lingered for nearly another century during which the dominant tradition of racial Christianity has remained the distinguishing characteristic of the Methodist, as of all American churches. But Hiram Revels' poignant plea resounds and joins other voices of that prophetic minority which has in every age called the church to be, as a model of truly human community, something other than the mirror of the surrounding society.

We Ought not to Separate.

By H. R. Revels, D.D.
ised a more lengthy communication on the same and kindred subjects.\textsuperscript{16} When the Methodist Episcopal Church,—our church—during and after the war, turned her attention to the condition of the unavoidably poor, and ignorant colored people of the South, I greatly rejoiced, and the wisdom of our church in the adoption of that course, may be seen in the fact that she could have done nothing in the line of Christian duty that would have been more productive of good in the highest sense of the word. As the result of the late war, about four millions of human beings, emerged from slavery in poverty and ignorance, and knowing as our church did, that they never could be enlightened, and intelligent, and valuable, and useful citizens, without pecuniary aid—literary, moral and religious instruction; she chose the Southern States as a part of the field of her future operations, and sent some of her ablest ministers to her new work, by whom that work has been ably and successfully prosecuted. As the result of this, there are in Mississippi and other Southern States hundreds of regularly organized and prosperous churches, in which thousands of colored people and their children statedly meet, worship God, and receive enlightening instruction from preachers, many of whom are advancing in mental culture, and the acquisition of useful knowledge. Through the instrumentality of our church, every year, shows the colored peoples' advancing to some extent, in the way of social, intellectual, moral and religious elevation, and also, in a more intelligent manner of worship. If the good that has been accomplished by our church, not merely in organizing churches, for others would have done that, but especially in instructing and enlightening the poor, ignorant colored people of the South, by sending among them in the onset, men of learning and talent to preach the Gospel, and subsequently aiding every year, in instructing in schools of learning, men of their own race and clime to act as preachers and teachers, could be seen by the members and friends of our church beyond the limits of the Southern States, they would at once see that they have not labored and contributed in vain—that but for the efforts of the Methodist Episcopal Church, in their favor, thousands of colored people, who in consequence of those efforts, are now being greatly elevated, would still be asleep in ignorance and darkness. The colored people of the South are free American citizens, who under the organic and statutory laws of our country, enjoy all rights, including the electoral franchise, of free American citizens. And all know that unless they are instructed, and advanced in intelligence, the day will come when the ballot will be a dangerous power in their hands, just as it would

\textsuperscript{16} Ed. note: Revels is referring to his letter which appeared in The Southwest-
be in the hands of ignorant people of any other race, and in view of this fact, should not the Methodist Episcopal Church be commended by all for what she has done in the way of instructing and informing the colored people through her freedman's aid and missionary societies? The results of her labors in these respects may be seen in the large number of comparatively intelligent colored ministers, who were aided by her when receiving [sic] instruction, in the establishment of high schools of learning, in which tuition is free to all, and from which some of the most competent and successful school teachers as well as preachers have come. In this connection I would call special [sic] attention to our flourishing Shaw University of this State. The influence of the Methodist Episcopal Church with the colored people of Mississippi is greater than is that of any other branch of the Methodist Church. Since conference I could have organized a dozen new churches in my district, but I have not as yet done much in that way, for the reason that I have not suitable preachers enough to supply such work.

If it be asked why the Mother Church has so large an influence with the colored people, the answer is, that when she came among them to do good—she showed no pride and offishness toward them on account of their color and previous condition of servitude, but treated them kindly and affectionately, taking them by hand and conducting them into the same fold or church with themselves. The fact of our church making my people a part of herself, instead of organizing so many of them as would unite with her into churches and conferences, and then leaving them to themselves to organize and conduct churches and conferences, when they themselves were ignorant of the true principles of church government, and management[,] has lead [sic] them fully to believe, that she has for them the most kindly and friendly christian feeling. The wisdom of our church in establishing mixed churches and conferences in the Southern States is seen in the fact, that it has had the happy effect of

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17 Ed. note: By 1876, after nine years of operation, almost $600,000 had been disbursed through the Freedmen's Aid Society of the M. E. Church. In that year five chartered colleges, three separate theological schools, a medical college and thirteen secondary level institutions had more than 3,100 students in attendance, not counting pupils in numerous primary schools connected with the M. E. Church. By 1879, one college (Central Tennessee) had enrolled 2,700 students, which included 1,000 teachors, who, in turn, had instructed an estimated 450,000 children in day and Sunday schools over the previous fourteen years. See the Ninth (1876), Tenth (1877) and Twelfth (1879) Annual Reports of the Freedmen's Aid Society, pp. 14, 4-5 and 13-14, respectively.

18 Ed. note: Shaw University in Holly Springs, Mississippi was chartered in 1870. By 1876 its annual enrollment had fluctuated between 140 and 260 students. In 1881 the school's name was changed to honor Richard S. Rust, long time secretary of the Freedmen's Aid Society.
leading the colored people to abandon the belief that because they are of a colored enslaved race, they are so degraded, it would be vain for them to try by any means to become the equals of their more favored white neighbors in intelligence, pure morals and the adorning virtues of life. They have also been benefitted by coming in contact with their more learned and intelligent white brethren in the transaction of church business, and in divine worship. In view of these indisputable facts, the important question is, will the M. E. Church recede one step from the high christian ground which she took in the commencement of her Southern work, and which has given her such a powerful influence with the colored Southern people, and enable her to be a source of so many blessings to them.[?] As our church has been blamed for making her colored members a part of herself, or, for making no distinctions [sic] on account of race or color, in organizing churches and conferences on Southern soil, would not an action of the general conference, dividing the conference[s] and churches on the color line be a virtual acknowledgement that our church has greatly erred, that those who have censured her for her course, were in the right and she in the wrong? Since conference I have visited nine or ten counties in this State, and conversed with quite a number of my people relative to the separation in question, and they declare to me that their earnest hope and prayer is, that the dear mother M. E. Church which has done so much for them in ways already named, will not now abandon that recognition of them which has so much endeared her to them, and led them to hurl from their minds the degrading recollections of slavery, and prompted them to labor for their own and their childrens [sic] elevation as otherwise they would not have done. The election of a colored Bishop, is a small matter with them compared with the question of division on the color line.10 Seeing them as I do, that the separation in question will retard the great work which our church is accomplishing among the poor needy colored Southern people, I am among those who will work and pray against the same. Our white brethren [sic] who are now laboring in the South, will not be harmed by continuing in the same relation to their colored brethren [sic] that now exists between them. But the sundering of that relation would afford the opponents of our church an opportunity of charging them and the M. E. Church generally with having been insincere toward the colored people abinitio. I know that it is

10 Ed. note: Prior to the General Conferences of 1868, 1872 and 1876, there had been discussions in the Methodist press about the possibility of selecting a Negro bishop. Black Methodists continued to urge the action, but it was not until 1920 that Negro bishop in the M. E. Church presided over an annual conference in this country.
said by some, that the colored people [people's], want of intelligence and refinement in worship, is so clearly seen and felt, that their intelligent white brethren [sic] cannot pleasantly and profitably worship with them, and in reply I would say, that this circumstance only affords intelligent Christians an opportunity to do good by going among them and so instructing them by example and otherwise, that they shall abandon what is on Christian grounds, objectionable in their manner of worship. There are colored churches in Mississippi where you will find as the result of intelligent instruction and leadership, the same order and decorum in worship that you will find in any white church. In this connection I would say that if preachers of learning and intelligence would point out to their colored hearers their notions and habits which are not essential to divine worship, but are the results of ignorance, and exhort them to abandon the same, they would as a general thing heed their advice. In most of the colored churches the majority of the members are opposed to what is objectionable in worship, but they can do nothing to remedy this state of things, while the Presiding Elders and Pastors are silent on the subject. In conclusion I would say that I conscientiously believe that the Head of the church lead [sic] the M. E. Church to enter upon her Southern work, and that with his approval she cannot abandon it. Then my humble opinion is, that the safe and wise course for our church to pursue, as regards her Southern work, is to adhere to the plan on which she commenced that work, and on which she has succeeded in doing great good. "Let well enough alone."

Holly Springs, Miss., April 17th, 1876.