

UNION NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN BLACK METHODISTS IN AMERICA

by Roy W. Trueblood

For one hundred years three major black Methodist denominations have co-existed within the United States: the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. Today these churches count approximately three million members. No one has seriously questioned the similarities that exist between them. They are of the same race and faith, share the same episcopal form of church government, are dedicated to the same goals, i.e., the conversion, education, and general uplifting of the Negro race. With so much in common, the question naturally arises, why have they been unable to unite, merge, join forces in order to be stronger and more efficient? Why is it necessary in some communities for two or more small black Methodist congregations to compete with one another? Of course, these questions and considerations first arose among the black Methodists themselves. They have been aware of the possible benefits of organic union, have felt keenly the words of Jesus' prayer, "That they all may be one. . . ." Almost continuously over the course of their denominational histories, leaders have arisen to plead passionately for union. Plans have been made, debated, and voted upon, but merger has yet to be accomplished. Why? This paper as a partial attempt at answering the question.

First, we must get the situation clearly in focus.

Negroes were a part of the history of American Methodism from the very beginning. The first Methodist congregation in the colonies met at Philip Embury's house in New York, in 1766. One of the five attending was a Negro slave girl named Betty. Both black and white youths attended the first Sunday school in the United States organized by Francis Asbury in 1786 at the home of David Crenshaw in Maryland. The Negro membership grew rapidly during the first fifty years of American Methodism. By 1793, nearly forty percent of Methodists in America were black.¹

Before long separate congregations of black people were organized and Negro preachers ordained to care for them, but always under the oversight of white bishops and conferences. The desire for independence grew until black leaders insisted upon their own church organizations with black leadership. A historic event occurred when Richard Allen, an ordained Negro minister, walked out of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1787 and was instrumental in organizing the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The first church,

¹ David Henry Bradley Sr., *A History of the A.M.E. Zion Church, 1796-1872* (Nashville, 1956), p. 40.

Bethel, was dedicated in Philadelphia in 1794 and remains the mother church of the denomination.

Problems similar to those in Philadelphia arose in New York. Negro Methodists were allowed to form their own congregation in 1796 and later build their own church, Zion Chapel (they also organized a second congregation which came to be known as Asbury Chapel). Since the Negro members were completely subordinate to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church which was composed of white ministers and bishops, they began to fear that their property might eventually be taken away from them. When William Stillwell, a white Methodist minister, informed the Zion congregation that he and several other white brethren had broken with the Methodist Episcopal Church over certain resolutions which were aimed at placing more authority in the hands of white ministers, their fears were compounded. In 1820, they decided to form an independent organization and place their church property in the hands of their own trustees.²

The Bethel Church in Philadelphia and the Zion and Asbury Chapels in New York were organized for the same purposes and because of the same fears. Richard Allen broke away several years before the members in New York decided to do the same. Why didn't the New York black Methodists seek to unite under the leadership of Bishop Allen? Why would they seek to organize a separate denomination?

In the first place, while the Zion and Asbury Churches were struggling for their independent existence, instead of sending words of encouragement, Bishop Allen sent one of his preachers to New York to organize a Bethel Church. The members of Zion could only conclude that Bishop Allen was seeking to take advantage of their necessity, seeking to lure discouraged members away into his own fold. They were justifiably bitter. Zion Church forbade their ministers to have anything to do with the "Allen Movement." But their anger cooled. Bethel Church in New York was dedicated on Sunday, July 23, 1820, and soon thereafter Bishop Allen came for a visit. Zion preachers were in the congregation when he came and Christopher Rush reports that James Varick opened one of the meetings for the Bishop.³ But when a Zion committee was sent to Bishop Allen later to see if he would ordain their ministers, he was stubborn and refused to do so unless they agreed to put themselves under his authority and charge. This the New Yorkers were unwilling to do and, thus, they found themselves rejected by both their black and white brothers. Without a doubt this early bitter-

² Christopher Rush, *A Short Account of the Rise and Progress of the African M.E. Church in America* (New York, 1843), pp. 1-36.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

ness and resentment remained a factor during union negotiations which took place later.

It should also be noted that there were serious structural differences between the two connections. Zion Methodism laid particular stress on the place of lay people in their organization. It was the laymen in the New York congregation who pressed for a separate Charter. Again, they elected superintendents, not bishops, to places of leadership. These superintendents were never meant to be the equal of a bishop and were elected for four years with the possibility of re-election. The Bethel connection was more closely aligned with the traditional episcopal form of church government. With this in mind it becomes a little easier to understand the reluctance of Zion members to place themselves under the authority of Bishop Allen and, thus, jeopardize the place of lay leadership within their movement. This basic structural difference was also a significant factor in the breakdown of union negotiations in 1864, as we shall see shortly.

It must be said in behalf of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, that the initiative for union negotiations came from them, by and large, over the next few decades. For example, before the meeting of the General Conferences of both church bodies in 1864, the Baltimore Conference of the A.M.E. Church presented a resolution asking their denomination to appoint a committee on church union which would meet with a similar committee from the A.M.E. Zion Church. The A.M.E. General Conference complied with this request and sent a delegation to the A.M.E. Zion Conference suggesting that a commission on union be formed consisting of one elder from each Annual Conference District and two bishops from each denomination, and that this commission be empowered to call a convention to draw up articles of consolidation which would then be sent to the various Annual Conferences of the two denominations for consideration. A majority vote of the Annual Conferences would be required for approval. It is interesting to note that the Methodist Episcopal Church offered some of their bishops to act as mediators. The Zion Church favored the proposal and a convention was held in Philadelphia on June 14-16, 1864. A platform and articles of agreement were drawn up to be ratified at their 1868 General Conferences.

A committee from the Zion Church reported to the 1868 General Conference of the A.M.E. Church that a majority of their annual conferences had voted in favor of the articles of consolidation drawn up in 1864. In fact, the vote had been almost unanimous. The committee then wanted to know what the A.M.E. Church had done during the intervening four years. The committee from the A.M.E. Church responded that not all their annual conferences had

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voted on the issue, but those which had considered it were agreeable to union. However, they were dissatisfied with the plan agreed upon in 1864. They proposed another meeting to draw up another plan of union which would be more acceptable to their people. Of particular importance was the implication that the members of the A.M.E. Church at large would abide by the decisions their bishops and pastors would make in future negotiations. The Zion committee could not see the need for changing the articles of agreement drawn up in 1864, and were specifically opposed to any negotiations which would not take into consideration the desires of their membership at large or deny them the right to vote. Again, the structural differences between the churches were crucial factors. The Zion connection were willing to submit their superintendents to ordination as bishops and adopt the new name, United African Methodist Church in America, but they would not sacrifice the principle of lay representation and participation in matters of denominational policy. Thus, negotiations were temporarily broken off.

Again in 1885, a Joint Commission on Organic Union of the two churches met in Washington, D.C., July 15-17. At this meeting a new name was suggested: First United Methodist Episcopal Church. The Report also listed points on which the denominations were already agreed:

doctrine, mode of worship, system of itinerant ministry, class meetings, prayer meetings, love feasts, general rules, official boards, quarterly, district, annual, and general conferences.⁴

There then followed fourteen articles of agreement.

Another meeting was held in Philadelphia in 1886, with a majority of bishops from both denominations present. Here disagreements arose over the proposed new name and the article relating to the episcopacy. It is not clear what these differences were. Certainly each denomination had a vested interest in its name. There also seems to have been some question in the minds of A.M.E. delegates concerning the manner in which A.M.E. Zion bishops had been elected and ordained. The term of office may also have been an issue, but Jenifer, who was chairman of his delegation, fails to shed any clear light on the specific conflicts.⁵

The delegates decided to adjourn and reconvene at Atlantic City, New Jersey, in August, 1887. At that time, a majority of the A.M.E. bishops showed up but only one bishop from the Zion faction. They waited two days for the latecomers, but since none came they took

⁴ John T. Jenifer, *Centennial Retrospect History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville, n.d.), p. 344.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 349.

no action and postponed indefinitely plans for further union negotiations.

The next serious attempt at union occurred in 1892 at the General Conference of the A.M.E. Church meeting in Philadelphia. Another resolution was introduced aimed at beginning union negotiations. (Note that the C.M.E. Church had been in existence since 1870, but was not included in the union negotiations at this time.) A committee was sent to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where the A.M.E. Zion General Conference was in progress. There a joint commission became deadlocked on the name to be given the new church. Shaw writes cryptically, "Bishop Turner (A.M.E.) put his powerful influence against the adoption of any name other than that of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and so the proposal for organic union was lost."⁶ This was not the first nor would it be the last time a bishop would exert his influence to wreck an attempt at union.

The next attempt at union would take into account the existence of another black Methodist denomination, the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. This church was composed of former Negro members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. After the Civil War, the Methodist Episcopal Church, the A.M.E. and A.M.E. Zion Churches began to make inroads into the south luring away former slaves connected with the M.E. Church, South. It became evident that before long nearly all their Negro constituents would become members of the other Methodist denominations unless something was done.

In 1866, the General Conference of the M.E. Church, South, meeting in New Orleans, asked that colored members be separated and set apart into a denomination of their own that would continue to be closely affiliated with the "mother" church. Bishops and leaders in the southern church knew that something would have to be done. Their finances were depleted and they could no longer support the kind of mission work among the Negroes they had maintained before the war. Negroes consented to the request and formed themselves into a separate body in 1870. There seemed to be amicable feelings between black and white and the new denomination began its existence with approximately 80,000 members and several millions of dollars worth of church property.⁷

Because of the close relations with the white church, the C.M.E. people were often ridiculed by their black brethren. They were called "rebels," "democrats," and other derogatory epithets were hurled at them. Today, they would be called "Uncle Toms." This

⁶ J. Beverly F. Shaw, *The Negro in the History of Methodism* (Nashville, 1954), p. 132.

⁷ J. C. Hartzell, "Methodism and the Negro in the United States," *Journal of Negro History*, 8:301-315, July, 1923.

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was probably a major reason why they were not included in the 1885 and 1892 union negotiations. Bishop Miles stated in 1873, "We still have the political influence of the Methodist Episcopal Church and African Methodist Episcopal Church to contend with. I wonder if they will never get tired of telling falsehoods on our church."⁸ In addition to these criticisms, often A.M.E. preachers went into the south after the Civil War and occupied former black M.E. South churches. After the C.M.E. denomination was formed, many refused to give the congregations and church property over to the rightful owners. Recognizing this problem, Bishops Miles and Vanderhorst of the C.M.E. Church addressed a memorial to the General Conference of the A.M.E. Church meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, requesting a peaceful settlement of church property disputes.⁹ These and many other incidents resulting in hostility, bitterness, and resentment must be kept in mind as one considers why these denominations have not yet united.

The three denominations agreed upon the organization of a Tri-Council of "Colored Methodist Bishops" to consider organic union and other matters of interest to the three bodies. The first meeting was held in Washington, D.C., on February 12-17, 1908. A second meeting was held in Mobile, Alabama, February 9-12, 1911. At this meeting "a declaration strongly favoring organic union was adopted."¹⁰ When the Tri-Council met in Louisville, Kentucky, on February 16-17, 1918, they appointed a committee to meet and draw up a plan of union. One of the bishops present at Louisville was to play a fateful role in this effort at union. He was C. H. Phillips, secretary for the bishops of the C.M.E. Church. In a report of the Louisville meeting printed in the *Christian Index*, he wrote,

We feel especially called upon, at this time of strife and divisions among the nations of the earth, to direct the minds of our people to the great need of unity and fellowship among Christians . . . With many of these there is not a hair's breadth difference in doctrine and tenets. Why then, should these divisions be, and why should these separations continue? . . . Is not this the opportune moment?¹¹

The committee appointed by the bishops did meet in Birmingham, Alabama, on April 3, 1918. In one day they drew up a plan of union to be presented to the several General Conferences; the C.M.E. meeting in 1918 and the A.M.E. and A.M.E. Zion meeting in 1920. The so-called "Birmingham Plan" became a bone of contention especially within the C.M.E. Church.

⁸ C. H. Phillips, *The History of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in America*, 3rd Edition (Jackson, Tennessee, 1935), p. 72.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

¹⁰ Charles Spencer Smith, *A History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia, 1922), p. 289.

¹¹ *Christian Index*, 45:9, February 28, 1918, p. 4.

There is little doubt, however, that the average black layman and pastor did not take these attempts at negotiation very seriously. When the editor of *Christian Index* summarized his position on the various issues facing his church (C.M.E.) before the General Conference in 1918, he listed ten proposals, none having to do with church union or ecumenicity.¹² In the same issue, the Birmingham Plan was printed in full! Those writing letters and articles for the weekly paper seemed much more concerned with the pension plan, the election of more bishops and their tenure than in church union. And, interestingly enough, in the Bishop's Quadrennial Address (prepared and read by Bishop Phillips) it was specifically stated with regard to relations with the African Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal Zion Churches:

The Colored Methodist Episcopal Church is identified in doctrine and faith with our sister churches, though different from them in polity and some other nonessentials. *While there are no negotiations at present between us looking toward organic union*, there is however, the spirit of cooperation, of brotherly love and Christian fellowship, of mutual understanding and closer fellowship, that seem to auger a larger future and brighter prospect for the three methodisms.¹³

At this same General Conference the Birmingham Plan for organic union was presented and adopted! Was Phillips in the Bishop's Address belittling the plan of union? It is true that when the plan was brought before the Conference for vote he rose and made a speech in opposition. However, Bishop R. A. Carter followed with a statement in favor of the plan. Some of the comments on Bishop Carter's speech by the editor of *Christian Index* are significant enough to quote.

Carter is wonderful, powerful, great! He analyzed the report with matchless simplicity and power; nettled at first by interruptions, he possessed himself, laid his foundation, pitched his argument; and step by step he swept the way before him, carrying the crowd, and rose majestically sublime until he was lost beneath the wings of angels who had come out to witness and record the event. It was Carter's day. It was Carter's crowd. The report was adopted by 302 to 48.¹⁴

Carter won the battle, but Phillips ultimately won the war. This time eloquence was not enough.

After the General Conference of 1918, Bishop Phillips drew up fourteen objections to the Birmingham Plan and had them printed and distributed throughout the church. He also went across the

¹² *Christian Index*, 45:16, April 18, 1918, p. 2.

¹³ *Christian Index*, General Conference edition, 1:5, May 8, 1918, p. 6 (italics

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¹⁴ *Christian Index*, 45:21, May 30, 1918, p. 4.

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country preaching against the plan. It was necessary for each Annual Conference to approve the plan, and after the Phillips campaign, it was obvious that the C.M.E. Church would have no part of it. Bishop Carter was so disgruntled at the returns from other Annual Conferences that he did not allow the plan to come up for vote in his episcopal area.

What were Phillips' objections? His major objection was that the so-called plan was no plan at all. The denominations were asked to sign a blank check, to agree to unite and trust the negotiators to work out the terms of agreement later. Phillips wanted the terms of agreement worked out *before* union was negotiated. He was convinced that no valid plan for union could be produced in *one day*. He was well aware of the fact that the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, had been negotiating toward union for fifty years and had not made it yet.¹⁵ He was present at the historic Conference on the Union of American Methodism held at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, February 15-17, 1916.¹⁶ He was one of three bishops who addressed the Conference on the subject of the comparative value of church federation as over against organic union. With this broad experience and perspective he could see nothing but heartache in rushing through a marriage of churches that might end in tragic divorce. He also feared the power of the A.M.E. Church, largest of the three. This denomination could swallow the other two like the whale and Jonah. He was not willing to see the efforts of his spiritual forebears go down the drain. The rights of the minority in such a union must be protected and the Birmingham Plan offered no such guarantees.

When the C.M.E. annual conferences failed to ratify the plan of union, the General Conferences of the A.M.E. and A.M.E. Zion Churches meeting in 1920 had nothing to consider. They could escape the embarrassment of putting the plan to a vote among their constituents and place the blame for failure on the C.M.E. Church and specifically, C. H. Phillips. Bishop Phillips was aware of these factors and it is a tribute to his courage that he persisted in his opposition to the plan in the face of inevitable criticism and misunderstanding. He wrote:

. . . the author entertains the opinion that the failure at unification was far more pleasing than displeasing to the other two churches, and so the way out is just to make the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church the scapegoat, place the failure for union upon her symbolical head and dismiss the subject without remorse or tears.¹⁷

¹⁵ Phillips, Addendum I, p. 596 ff.

York, The Methodist Book Concern, 1916.)

¹⁶ A Working Conference on the Union of American Methodism. (New

¹⁷ Phillips, *History*, p. 537.

After the defeat of the Birmingham Plan, negotiations toward church union subsided for a time. On June 22, 1922, in Washington, D.C., another committee met and one can sense the feeling of depression and frustration in their short report.

We, your Committee on Plan and Procedure, beg leave to submit the following report:

Whereas, we believe that organic union of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, The African Episcopal Zion Church, and Colored Methodist Episcopal Church is practicable, desirable, and feasible (note same language from Birmingham Plan).

Resolved, that during the period of negotiation the members of our respective Churches, Annual Conferences, our pastors, presiding elders, general officers, and bishops be urged to exercise the most kindly fellowship and cooperation, looking toward that unity of spirit and service which will consummate organic union.¹⁸

The negotiations and eventual union of the Methodist Episcopal, Methodist Episcopal, South, and Methodist Protestant Churches in 1939, served to forestall any further serious movement toward merger between the black Methodist churches. They adopted a cautious attitude, waiting particularly to see what the new Methodist Church would do with her Negro members. The Central Jurisdiction was formed allowing Negro members and ministers to stay within the fold but have their congregations, annual conferences, and elect their own bishops at their own jurisdictional conference. This is precisely what black Methodists in New York, in 1820, wanted! It was hoped that once the A.M.E., A.M.E. Zion, and C.M.E. church leaders saw that The Methodist Church had within its body full fledged black bishops, these separated Methodists would flock to the doors seeking to get back in and become a part of "mother Methodism" again. Well, it didn't quite work out that way. Maybe it's just as well. It took several years of negotiation to create the Central Jurisdiction and it was an unwanted baby almost from birth. Nearly thirty years later it was eliminated.

Upon merger with the former Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968, the new United Methodist Church is attempting to be a truly racially integrated church. Negro pastors and congregations are now in the same annual conferences with white ministers and laymen. Some black bishops preside over predominantly white episcopal areas. Black Methodists are occupying places of influence on national boards and agencies. So, it would appear that the climate is more favorable now than ever before for the ultimate reunion of the separated black Methodists.

The black denominations under consideration in this paper have continued to strive toward eventual unification among themselves.

¹⁸ As quoted in Shaw, p. 138.

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It is certainly true that together they would be in a much more powerful negotiating position with The United Methodist Church or any other church body. It is especially to their advantage, or so it would seem today, to seek organic union among themselves. Bishop Herbert Bell Shaw of the A.M.E. Zion Church brings us up to date on merger talks.

In the month of April, 1965, the Bishops of the three major Negro Branches of Methodism: namely, the A.M.E., C.M.E., and A.M.E. Zion Churches, met in St. Louis, Missouri, for the purpose of renewing and intensifying our efforts toward union. The three senior Bishops of these churches, Bishop Sherman L. Green, Bishop Bertram W. Doyle, and Bishop William J. Walls, were delegated by their respective General Conferences to lead the way to union. There were 39 Bishops present at this meeting, all expressing a strong desire for uniting the three churches. The ultimate time limit set for this great event is the year 1972. The Bishops of these churches have agreed to meet in joint sessions at least two times a year to keep this movement on the way to successful culmination. Commissions are being appointed to work out the many intricate problems involved in the uniting process. Reports will be made to our forthcoming General Conferences for favorable action. It was decided to invite all the smaller Methodist churches to this movement for unification.¹⁰

The latest meeting of this commission to date was held at Chicago on January 28-29, 1969. The tempo seems to be quickening.

The United Methodist Church is continuing to seek unification with these churches. At the General Conference held in Dallas, Texas, in 1968, the Commission on Ecumenical Affairs was directed to explore the possibility of unification with the black churches. The secretary of the Commission, Robert Huston, and Chairman, Bishop Paul A. Washburn, have appointed a committee to carry through on this directive. At this writing, the committee has not met.

To add to the complexity of the situation, the black churches are involved in the Consultation on Church Union where each denomination has a representation. If they were united with The United Methodist Church or even among themselves, their representation and power would be reduced. As it now stands, they are able to stick together to insure the black man a place of honor and authority in the proposed new "super church." Their representatives have been most vociferous in opposing any attempt to eliminate, change, or reduce the office and power of the bishop in the proposed new ecumenical body.

To add further to the confusion, a change has taken place in the overall psychology of the black man in the United States. He is experiencing a new birth of racial pride. It is good to be proud of one's

¹⁰ From the copy of a speech delivered by Bishop Herbert Bell Shaw, entitled "Negro Methodism in the Ecumenical Movement," sent to me as a result of

personal correspondence with Dr. Lee F. Tuttle, secretary of the World Methodist Council.

race and heritage. This new racial pride, of course, has its effect on the black churches. Union with white Christians is not nearly so desirable as it once was even if the black man can come in on an equal footing. It seems much more likely that the black churches will unite themselves than that they will seek to unite with The United Methodist or any other predominantly white church body.

If the black church is to speak to the whole black community and offer leadership, the Black Power movement must be taken into account. This is causing considerable internal conflict with black church leaders. There seems to be competition between largely secular Black Power advocates and churchmen for leadership roles in the emergence of black pride. C. D. Coleman, General Secretary of the Board of Christian Education of the C.M.E. Church in an address delivered at St. Mary's Church in Bastrop, Louisiana, is quoted as saying, "Black Power is just as bad as white power We must be concerned about our children, or the militants will We are now confronted with a new situation. We are not trying to be like the white man anymore. We are determined to be Black, Beautiful and Proud. Without black pride we are lost."²⁰ But how will they be able to give leadership to both the militants in their midst and the liberals who are willing to make sacrifices to achieve a truly integrated church and society?

That they are having trouble with their own younger generation is tragically evident in a recent incident at Lane College. On March 21, 1969, dissident black students burned down the I. G. Tigrett Science Building at an estimated value of \$500,000. Edward A. Hudson, head of the science department lamented, "Seeing my life's work go up in smoke is too much."²¹ How can a black church which is a part of a black culture facing such internal turmoil have any energy left to think about merger with anyone, black or white? For effective union each party should feel they are negotiating from a position of strength and unity within their respective bodies. This unity and strength just is not evident at the present time.

The black man is neither more of a saint nor a sinner than a man of any other color or race. One cannot rule out personal pride and ambition as factors hindering a merger among the black Methodists. Alexander Walters, a bishop in the A.M.E. Zion church who had been an active participant in union negotiations over a period of twenty-five years, remarked at the 1916 Evanston Conference, "In many of the efforts for organic union there has been a greater ambition to excel in ecclesiastical diplomacy than there has been to effect a permanent union of the parties concerned."²²

²⁰ *Christian Index*, 102:7, April 10, 1969, 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²² *Op. cit.*, *A Working Conference on the Union of American Methodism*, 432.

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It must also be borne in mind that the church as an institution has offered the black man sometimes the only opportunity to "make it" in a white man's world. The black church is his. Here he is the boss, the man. Here, if he has the ability and industry he can succeed, be a respected member of the community, sit on community and ecumenical councils on an equal footing with anyone else. Here, some can even become bishops. The white man can afford to negotiate with his church because his identity is not exclusively tied up with her. He can make it in business, industry, education, and politics. The church is just not all that important to him. But for many black Methodists it is their life, their history, their hope for the future. Can we honestly expect them to play fast and loose the game of church union? They are playing for high stakes and they know it.

Only time will tell whether or not enough trust and confidence can be engendered and a workable plan developed to bring all black Methodists together. There are many obstacles in the way, some of which we have been able to point out in this paper, others of which are not so evident. We can only hope if merger does come it will be of benefit to the black people of all the churches and will not jeopardize either their past victories or future triumphs.