The Negro’s Place: Virginia Methodists Debate Unification 1924-1925
by Kirk Mariner

A great debate raged in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in the years 1924 and 1925, a controversy which one historian of the church has called “the bitterest...ever fought in its own ranks.”¹

At issue was unification with the Methodist Episcopal Church (North). The Joint Commission on Unification established by the two churches had just submitted the second proposed constitution for a unified church, a plan which the General Conference and the several Annual Conferences of the northern church had approved by a comfortable margin. The General Conference of the southern church approved the plan at a special session at Chattanooga on July 4, 1924, and church law now required an affirmative vote of three-fourths of the total number of members of the southern Annual Conferences. The next year, 1925, was set by the General Conference as the time when the Annual Conferences would vote on their plan.² During the intervening months the great debate began, and soon blossomed into a bitter controversy.

Although the impending vote was on unification, the year would prove that another issue — the real issue in the minds of many Methodists — lay just beneath the surface. It was the issue of race. The membership of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, was almost totally white. Its former black members had been organized into a separate denomination, the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, back in 1870, and had long since gone their own way with token support from and communication with the southern church.³ A small number of Negroes — “who have given us no trouble,” as one Virginian described them — remained, at the most a few hundred in a church of several million.⁴ The 300,000 Negroes of the northern

²Ibid.
⁴Richmond Christian Advocate, September 17, 1925, p. 19.
Methodist Episcopal Church, however, were still very much a part of that denomination, even if long since segregated into their own completely black Annual Conferences and congregations. Since both denominations had crossed the geographical borderline between Church North and Church South and established congregations in each other's regions, a number of the Negro congregations of the northern church were located geographically in the South. And the question for many a southern Methodist was not whether the church could unite with the North, but whether it could unite with any church in which Negro members were accepted on an equal basis with whites.

That had always been the question, ever since the movement towards unification began in earnest. When the Joint Commission on Unification first gathered in Baltimore in 1916, it was generally agreed that there were three "fundamental and vital issues" before the commissioners, the greatest of which was "the status of the colored membership of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the reorganized Church." Southerners were even more specific: The Negro question was the issue to be decided. Bishop Edwin Mouzon of the southern church said as much in 1917: There was only one serious difficulty before us, and that is the status of the colored membership in the reorganized Church. . . . I do not know what the solution of that question is going to be. God knows.

An Alabama Methodist put it more strongly: Race was "the stumbling block, and the only stumbling block."

In Virginia as elsewhere in the South much of the debate on unification became finally a debate on race, for in Virginia as elsewhere the debate raged at all levels of the church and produced bitterness and acrimony. And in an examination of the arguments and opinions of the white Methodists of the Virginia Conference can be found a number of the racial attitudes that influenced the church's decision.

Prior to the opening of the unification debate five Virginians had served on the Joint Commission on Unification and had already placed on record a spectrum of differing attitudes on race. Most conservative of the Virginians on the Joint Commission was Judge M. L. Walton of Woodstock, who took little part in the proceedings but made it obvious

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6Two black conferences of the northern church had congregations within the present bounds of the Virginia Conference: Delaware Conference and North Carolina Conference.
8Ibid., p. 428.
9Sledge, p. 92.
when he did so that the question of race was of great concern to him. Walton refused even to use the term "Negro," preferring "colored" instead. He defended southerners for having drawn the color line "to protect themselves against the supremacy of the colored man," and was the first Virginian on record to raise the spectre of mass secession of southerners from Methodist ranks if unification with a church with Negro members should occur. Walton once asserted that he was not in favor of expelling the blacks from the united church, "but, brethren, that would be the happiest solution of this whole matter," he told the Commission.

Somewhat to the left of Walton and far more forceful and influential was Bishop James Cannon, Jr. (1864-1944). By birth a Marylander, Cannon was nonetheless educated in Virginia and a member of the Virginia Conference before elected to the episcopacy. By the time he took his seat on the Commission in 1919, he was already one of the foremost temperance advocates in the South, and well on his way to becoming one of the most powerful men in Virginia politics, a lobbyist with many strong ties to influential state legislators.

Cannon believed, and said so at almost every opportunity to the Commission, that the Negro race was an "immature" or "child" race:

We have treated the colored people . . . not as a hostile race, but as a race that is under tutors and governors as the child is.

We of our [southern] Commission think that . . . the negro is an immature race; that the negro is a child race; that he should be dealt with from the missionary viewpoint — not every individual, not every single Church, but as a mass.

Yes, we will take the negro into the General Conference, but as a child race, as an immature race.

There is no question at all of exclusion, of keeping him out of the Church. But bring him into the Church in the relationship in which he ought to be in the Church, as a child race, in the same relation as Mexicans and Brazilians and other races that are undeveloped and have not yet the capacity to come into the great body and to determine the affairs of the Church.

Negroes were not, he insisted, any more capable of making decisions for the church at large than the youngest Cannon children were to run his own household.

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10 Joint Commission on Unification of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1920), vol. II, p. 378.
11 Ibid., p. 379, p. 381.
12 Ibid., p. 381.
15 Ibid., p. 290.
16 Ibid., p. 352.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
Translating this racial attitude into ecclesiastical structures, Cannon argued for two concepts. The first was the segregation of the Negroes into one of several "missionary regional conferences." Such separate structures would be created for foreign (i.e., non-white) Methodists, and each of them would have the option (which Cannon apparently hoped they would exercise) of organizing into an autonomous Associate General Conference upon reaching a membership of 400,000. His "regional conference" concept differed from the separate Negro jurisdiction proposed by some others (and ultimately adopted by the church in 1939) in that it was designed ultimately to remove the Negro Methodists from the rest of the Church.

Cannon argued, second, that the Negro should not be allowed to compose more than five percent of the total members of the General Conference, since such limited representation was "suited to his [the Negro's] immaturity, his lack of development."

By far the most progressive Virginian on the Commission was Robert Emory Blackwell (1854-1938), a native of Warrenton and a highly respected scholar who served as president of Randolph-Macon College. As early as 1917 Blackwell argued what was for white Virginia Methodists of that time a very liberal position. He hoped for "a new conscience on the subject of the Negro" in the unified church. The South's record of having separated its Negroes into another denomination was, to his mind, lamentable; indeed, said Blackwell, the states of the South were doing far more to help the southern Negro than the Methodist churches of the South had ever done.

Blackwell was not alarmed at the prospect of blacks in the unified church provided — and this he argued against his southern colleagues — they be given a separate jurisdiction of their own. If the plan for a separate jurisdiction were to be adopted, "What shall we have?" he asked:

The negroes would be in separate Churches, separate District Conferences, separate Annual Conferences, and once in four years they would have a small representation in the General Conference. Is there anything alarming in that? . . . I do not see that there would be any danger to our Church in having a few Negroes in the General Conference.

Such was the most liberal attitude expressed by a Virginian during the early stages of the unification process, and the kind of thinking that was written into the new denomination of 1939. Yet when his progressive
ideas generated criticism from other southerners on the Commission and outside of it, Blackwell was quick to read into the record his personal attitudes toward the Negro:

R. E. Blackwell: I want to say that I do not believe I have said once in this meeting that I loved the Negro.

The Chairman (Bishop Cooke): That is your privilege.

R. E. Blackwell: It is not a privilege, but a fact.25

Two other Virginians on the Joint Commission were both bishops: Warren A. Candler (1857-1941) and Collins Denny (1854-1943). Candler, a native of Georgia, was the bishop of Virginia from 1922 to 1925, when the great debate on unification took place. Denny, a native of Winchester, succeeded him as bishop in Virginia in 1926. The two men were the foremost opponents of unification in the southern church, and each of them had decided opinions on race. Candler as a small boy had watched Sherman’s army march past his home; Denny had vivid memories of his father marching away to fight for the Confederacy.26 Both remembered Reconstruction and remained distrustful of northerners throughout their lives. Yet this early stage of the debate found them quiet on the subject and taking very little part in the proceedings of the Joint Commission. Candler’s position was that “since he was opposed to union, he should have very little to do with creating a plan,” and he functioned only as an occasional chairman who made virtually no contribution to the Commission’s debates.27 Denny took a somewhat more active role, but was more interested in procedural questions and guiding the meetings along than in adding to the discussions.

The racial ideas of Walton, Cannon, and Blackwell provided the framework for the debates of their fellow Methodists of Virginia, but that debate was delayed by several years. In 1920 the Joint Commission presented its first proposed constitution to the two churches. It contained almost intact Bishop Cannon’s concept of a regional conference for Negroes with limited representation in the General Conference. With little ado the proposed plan was rejected by both churches, by the northern General Conference in 1920, by the southern in 1922, without coming to a vote in the Annual Conferences. Both churches reaffirmed their support of the idea, if not this particular plan, of unification, and the Joint Commission reconvened.28 It was the second proposed constitution, presented to the churches in 1924, that was to spark the real debate.

25Ibid., p. 687.
28Ibid., pp. 161-164.
Ironically, the proposal that sparked so much racial discussion in 1924 never really dealt with the Negro question at all, and sidestepped the issue altogether. The second plan contained no proposal for a separate Negro jurisdiction, as the first had. Instead it called for a united church with only two jurisdictions, one composed of the existing northern church, the other of the existing southern church. Over both would be a single General Conference. Each jurisdiction would elect its own bishops, who could serve in the other jurisdiction only with the consent of its bishops. Each area of the church was, accordingly, free to continue its own policies regarding race. Only in the College of Bishops and in the General Conference would blacks and southern whites find themselves together as equals.

Even so, the heated debate that followed centered principally on the racial implications of uniting with the northern church and its 300,000 Negro members. To complicate matters, the Methodist Episcopal Church had elected two black men to the episcopacy in 1920. The spectre of a racially mixed church, and of a white conference presided over by a black bishop, soon became one of the principal arguments against the proposed plan of unification.

It was in the College of Bishops that the battle began, and from that direction that it spread throughout the rank and file of southern Methodism. Even before the General Conference at Chattanooga had adjourned the battle lines were drawn: Bishops Mouzon and Cannon headed the pro-unification forces, Bishops Denny and Candler the anti-unification party. Each faction backed the creation of an organization designed to promote its cause: a "Friends of Unification" and an "Association to Preserve the Methodist Episcopal Church South by Defeating the Pending Plan of Unification." In Virginia as elsewhere the participating bishops launched a written war in the various journals of the church press, and within a short time they had descended to acrimony and ad hominem arguments.

The Richmond Christian Advocate, the weekly journal of the Virginia Conference, chronicles the debate. Candler opened in early June 1924 with "Some Objections to the Proposed Plan of Unification." Candler's objections were clearly racial, chief among them his fears that the Negro bishops of the northern church would exercise authority over the entire church, southerners included, and that the proposed Judicial Council would contain Negro members equal to whites. Mouzon

29Maser, p. 437.
30Sledge, p. 97.
31Shaw, p. 144.
32Sledge, p. 102.
33Ibid., pp. 102-103.
34Richmond Christian Advocate, June 12, 1924, p. 4.
countered the following week with assurances that the Negro bishops of the North were elected to serve northern, not southern, Methodists and in the new church would have "nothing whatsoever to do with our work in the South." And to these assurances he added the charge that Candler's racial attitudes were "out of harmony with his own Church." Cannon entered the argument the following week by asserting quite simply that equality of the races would not exist in the united church:

It was distinctly and frankly stated during the meetings of the Joint Commission that the provisions indicated above [about bishops serving only in their own jurisdictions] had been inserted to prevent any possible friction on the question of Negro supervision of the white churches, or of Negro presidency over white Conferences or over the General Conference. Candler's talk of a black bishop presiding over a white conference was, Cannon stated explicitly, a "bugaboo" which a careful reading of the proposed plan of union would "very effectually dispose of."

The reply from Candler, in an August issue, was an angry one. Such assertions by southern unificationists were not, said he, in agreement with statements by northern unificationists, white and black. Black Methodists of the North were already celebrating the fact that unification would bring full equality to all Negro Methodists and full authority throughout the church to the two Negro bishops, said Candler, quoting extensively. He entitled his argument "Who Misunderstands and Who Is Misled?" and warned southern leaders that it was his opponents who were being misled.

In September, Mouzon lamented Candler's effort to "lug in the question of social equality with negroes by the ears," a tactic which he labeled "completely out of order and out of place." Once more he repeated the pro-unification argument inherited from Blackwell: Southerners who dislike blacks need not fear unification for the color line would remain in the united church.

The consummate merit of our plan is exactly this, that it AVOIDS COMPLETELY the complicated question of the place of the negro in the Church by protesting at every point our Southern ideals and leaving our Northern brethren to work out their own problems.

And Mouzon quoted the late southern Bishop Hoss: "God Almighty has drawn the color line in indelible ink."

As the weeks went by the arguments continued, filling column after column with increasingly vitriolic language, neither bishop convincing the

35Richmond Christian Advocate, June 19, 1924, pp. 3-4.
36Richmond Christian Advocate, June 26, 1924, p. 4.
37Ibid.
38Richmond Christian Advocate, August 14, 1924.
39Richmond Christian Advocate, September 18, 1924.
40Ibid.
other. The second issue of 1925 found Candler criticizing Mouzon for criticizing Candler in what was, by now, an on-going and convoluted argument. Each had, by now, accused the other of “sharp personalities” and “unbrotherly insinuations,” and neither had won the slightest point from the other regarding the proposed union. Candler’s stand in January 1925 was exactly what it had been six months earlier:

What I have opposed, and do oppose, is putting white people under the rule of Negro officials. That would not help either white people or Negroes, nor would it promote Methodism in the South.\footnote{Richmond Christian Advocate, January 8, 1925, p. 7; January 22, 1925, p. 6.}

And Mouzon was equally as unmoved:

[The Negro in the northern church] is not seen among white folks. He lives his own life, goes his own way. He \[is\] given fellowship only in those places where his interests come in contact with the common good and where they overlap those of other members of the community.\footnote{Richmond Christian Advocate, January 22, 1925, p. 7.}

And in February, J. W. Rowland, editor of the Advocate, stepped into the fray with an editorial warning against continued debate. Rowland feared “a dissension among ourselves,” “a slackening of our work,” and “hurt to spirituality” if the debate continued.\footnote{Richmond Christian Advocate, February 12, 1925, pp. 5-6.} Thereupon the bishops suspended their printed arguments, although the church at large was only about to begin to take up arms.

In March 1925 the Baltimore Conference became the first of the southern Annual Conferences to vote on unification, a decision crucial to the morale of both sides. Candler was the presiding bishop of this conference, which included a large section of Virginia. When the vote was counted, it was 141 against unification, 137 for, and was disputed by both sides. A recount revealed one extra vote for unification, which Candler allowed, but he refused to disqualify three negative votes that were discovered to have been cast by ineligible voters. Had those votes been disqualified the decision would have been a tie — still a defeat for unification, since a three-fourths majority was required. What emerged in the Baltimore Conference in March was to happen again and again during the summer and fall of 1925: (1) an intense partisanship during the voting, with contested votes and political maneuvering, and (2) the pattern in which Annual Conferences tended to vote with their bishops on the issue.\footnote{Sledge, p. 104.}

The Virginia Annual Conference, also Candler’s, was not due to vote until October 1925, and no sooner were the results of Baltimore’s vote known than the battle was joined throughout the conference. By April the
conference was resounding with predictions of the secessions from the church that were likely to occur, but who was presumed likely to secede depended upon who was speaking. J. W. Moore of Norfolk, a unificationist, feared the withdrawal of pro-unification Methodists in border states like Virginia "if the Southern Church refuses an offer so fair and so generous" as the plan offered. Rev. Samuel C. Hatcher, on the other hand, was estimating that as many as 750,000 opponents of unification would leave the southern church if union should be approved.46

By spring virtually every issue of the Advocate was debating unification. J. T. Routten, a preacher on the Norfolk District, published an elaborate allegory on unification, the rather unveiled point of which was that the race issue was a false issue, a "scarecrow" without substance put forth by those who did not favor unification.47 Routten's imagery was repeated several issues later by no less a person than Robert Emory Blackwell, who made the same warning. Many who were using the race question to sway the votes of delegates were, he said, against any unification proposal, and to set at rest the minds of Virginia Methodists who might fear the ascendancy of the Negro should unification occur, Blackwell calmly reassured:

Not a cent of our money will go to the Negroes in the Northern Church, the plan expressly providing for our caring for our Colored Methodist Episcopal Negroes. No Negro Bishop can function in our Jurisdiction. Anyone who knows the Negroes knows perfectly well that they are not going to join the white churches and put themselves under the disciplines of white ministers belonging to the class of the former slave owners.... In fact, this terrifying monster of the Negro in the unified Church, if anyone will summon up courage to go up to it, will be found to be merely a scare-crow covered with the cast-off garments of politicians of a former generation.48

By now it was clearly the pro-unification tactic to assure the Methodists that racial practices in the unified church would be no different from those in the southern church. Rev. T. C. Ragsdale said as much in a July "catechism" on unification:

What will be the status of the negro in the united church?
Precisely the same as at the present. The negroes in the Methodist Episcopal Church will belong to Jurisdiction No. 1 of the united church. The negroes of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (and there are such members) will belong to Jurisdiction No. 2.

Will not this union tend toward the obliteration of established racial lines?
There are no such lines existing now in the Discipline of either Church; the law that separates the races, each worshiping in separate churches, is the unwritten law of racial instinct and integrity, and not the enactments of conventions or conferences.

46Ibid., pp. 117-118.
47Richmond Christian Advocate, March 25, 1925, pp. 6-7.
48Richmond Christian Advocate, June 18, 1925, pp. 9-10.
What guarantees have we, under this plan, that negroes will not wish to join our churches?
(1) There is nothing in the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church South to prevent their doing so now.
(2) The Methodist Episcopal Church (North) has many congregations white and colored existing side by side... but the Negroes do not join the white churches.49

In the first September issue of the Advocate, a month prior to the convening of the Annual Conference, editor Rowland declared a moratorium on the receipt and publication of further unification articles, except as needed to round out the two sides evenly. “At this time the Pros are ahead by a good count,” he wrote, “and we have promised to let the Antis catch up.”50 When the policy encountered immediate criticism from both sides, Rowland elaborated upon it:

It would perhaps be no exaggeration to say enough material [on unification] has come into this office to fill up the unabridged dictionary, Montgomery Ward’s catalogue, and the Congressional Record for the next Congress. Much of this went in the waste basket at once, because it was from men far and wide over the land and in its turn never could get in the paper. Much more found its place there, from high and low, because it was not fit, in our judgment, to be published in a church paper, and it came from both sides.

We have published to date FOUR HUNDRED AND TWENTY columns of Unification material (thirty-five full issues of the paper)... since we started. And, gentlemen, that has been all the most of the people have cared to see, and it has lost us some subscribers.51

The writers from outside the Conference who submitted articles to him for publication were, Rowland continued, “multitudinous and prolific,” particularly the unificationists. His policy had been to publish pro and con articles in equal volume, as much as possible, giving bishops and conference members priority over outsiders. He had on hand still one anti-unification article from “Brother Rowe” which space had not permitted him to use for some weeks. He would now publish it, in hopes of evening things out, and nothing more on the subject would follow except a closing “official” statement from each side on the eve of the Annual Conference.52

Rev. E. H. Rowe, junior pastor from Bowling Green, published his two-part statement beginning September 17. It was entitled “One Thing Makes Unification Under the Present Plan Impossible,” and it is perhaps the most inflammatory racial argument to come out of the whole debate in Virginia. The “one thing” making unification impossible was, according to Rowe, the assertion that the plan gave the Negro the “right of absolute membership in the United Church, and so in any Southern Methodist

49Richmond Christian Advocate, July 2, 1925, p. 22.
51Richmond Christian Advocate, September 17, 1925, p. 7.
52Ibid.
Church.” He fundamentally disagreed with the quiet assurances of Mouzon, Blackwell, and others that the status of the Negro was not changed by the plan. When the united church gave to the Negro the “liberty to do as he pleases absolutely, freed or loose from any limitation or condition, uncontrolled, as much as any white member” (a phrase Rowe used many times in his article), then the southern churches were very clearly facing the threat of invasion by the Negro.

All a Negro would [have to] do to become a member of any Southern Methodist Church would be to present his certificate of church membership to the pastor.53

This, as Rowe saw it, was entirely different from the present racial setting in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The few Negroes of that church were “those who have given us no trouble,” not “modern” Negroes who would demand “rights” to sit where they chose, as they were now doing in public transportation facilities in northern cities (and he cited an alleged incident to that effect in Ohio).

The Negro in the Southern Methodist Church has never had the slightest trace of any idea of “rights” to membership. He knows it is an act of favor and good will, Christian brotherhood, on the part of the white people to admit him to membership and the benefits of the Church. His Spirit and his manner and his conduct are all accordingly.54

Furthermore, insisted Rowe, the race issue is not as “static” as some of the proponents of unification would have people believe. Rather, with the education and affluence of Negroes on the rise, who can say what the Negro, given the “absolute right to membership,” might not claim next? He then cited incredulously another alleged incident in a northern Methodist church where a Negro man dared to lead the white congregation in devotions at Sunday school. If the possibility of any such thing arises in the South, Rowe predicted, “There is going to be a landslide of transfers [withdrawals from the church].”55

Rowe ended with a rousing appeal that the issue be carried to the people, to the membership of the local churches, lest it be decided against the people’s will at an Annual Conference where the clergy predominated:

I can say, I hope, to the rest of the Southern Methodist Church that the Church of the Virginia Conference is never going to allow the preachers of the Annual Conference or of the General Conference to vote their convictions when they know they are contrary to those of the people, and then say to them, “We are sorry, but we voted our convictions....” The Methodists of Virginia are going to say... “Never!”56

It was not the first time the debate had created a call for the vote to be

53Richmond Christian Advocate, September 17, 1925, p. 10.
54Ibid., pp. 19-20.
55Richmond Christian Advocate, September 24, 1925, p. 20.
56Ibid., p. 22.
given to the laity, nor would it be the last. 57

Despite Rowland’s promise that the unification debate was over in the Advocate except for the official summations, Bishop Candler was allowed one final article opposing unification in early October, and in it he made the most openly racial argument he had yet presented to his people. The Colorado Annual Conference (M.E.), meeting in September, had voted a resolution that greatly disturbed the Bishop: “The citizens of the United States are realizing as never before the stupendous task we have before us in the amalgamating of our population into a unified whole,” and “Not the least difficult of these problems is that of the assimilation of the Negro.” The resolution enraged Candler, who replied at length and asserted that:

No good man will object to the Christian education of the Negro, but a process of education which aims at “amalgamation” and “assimilation” is another matter! 58

It was his last word on the subject in the Advocate. Coming as it did from the presiding bishop just before the Annual Conference, it undoubtedly carried great weight.

On October 8, 1925, the week before the Annual Conference was to convene, Rowland opened the pages of the Advocate to a final statement by each side. Twenty-six members of the conference, the “Friends of Unification,” signed the pro-unification statement, which was in the main an appeal for calm and clear thinking in the face of the false racial argument:

In the discussion of this question, the Negro has figured largely. An appeal to prejudice has been so manifest that it is hard to treat the objections with that patience which ought to characterize the consideration of a matter of church government.

The unificationists decried the low level the campaign had reached:

A leader of the opposition to unification has said that “all that would have to be said in the lower South [to defeat unification] was the one word ‘Nigger’ ”

But despite the continuing racial campaign the Negro threat was no threat at all:

The difference between the two churches at this point are not many nor marked. Both draw the color line; both have colored members; both have colored conferences.

(We gave our conferences autonomy, whilst they did not.)

As for whether the North’s two black bishops would ever preside over white southern conferences, the unificationists reminded:

Outside his own episcopal district, any bishop, white or black, is just a Methodist preacher. 59

57 See also a letter to the editor by M. E. Watson of Horntown, Virginia, Richmond Christian Advocate, April 23, 1925, pp. 5-6.
58 Richmond Christian Advocate, October 1, 1925, p. 22.
59 Richmond Christian Advocate, October 8, 1925, pp. 4-5.
The anti-unificationists offered no argument at all. Their summation was simply a report of an interview in the secular press with Dr. G. E. Booker, one of the leaders of the anti-unification forces in the conference. Booker stated that he was certain that the Virginia Conference would vote against unification, and that the plan as a whole would be defeated throughout the South.60 Indeed, Booker was not alone in that prediction. As early as January, Candler had predicted that “the proposed plan will probably be defeated in the Annual Conferences,” and by October the lack of the required three-fourths majority seemed certain.61

On Wednesday, October 14, 1925, the 143rd Session of the Virginia Annual Conference convened in Broad Street Church in Richmond. “Interest not circumscribed by denominational bounds attaches to [this session of] the annual Virginia Conference,” editorialized the Richmond Times-Dispatch on that day.62 The impending vote on unification was front page news in Richmond’s secular press, and the opening conference found an unusually large and excited crowd in attendance. “The church was packed to the doors and windows today,” reported the Richmond News Leader. “The galleries were filled with visitors and there was not a vacant seat downstairs.”63 On the platform before the conference sat the presiding bishop, Warren A. Candler, the man “whose influence did more to defeat [unification] than any other single factor,”64 and at his side at the secretary’s table B. F. Lipscomb, one of the conference preachers and a leader of the unification party. The voting was done without debate, by ayes and nays, and required an hour. When it was over the predictions of Candler and Booker were confirmed: 202 were opposed to unification, 168 in favor. Only 19 votes for unification were cast by laymen;65 the entire Richmond District delegation voted against unification.66 Like most other Annual Conferences of the South, Virginia voted with its bishop.

And it was not long after the Virginia vote that the entire vote of all the conferences across the South was known: 4,528 for unification and 4,108 against. Although a majority of the southern delegates had voted for unification with the northern church, the required three-fourths had not, and the plan was defeated.67

The issue did not die, however, in Virginia or across the South. The same session of the conference that defeated the proposed constitution in

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60Ibid., p. 5.
61Richmond Christian Advocate, January 8, 1925, p. 6.
62Richmond Times-Dispatch, October 14, 1925, p. 6.
63Richmond News Leader, October 14, 1925, p. 1.
64Maser, p. 448.
65Journal of the Virginia Annual Conference (M.E. Church, South), 1925, pp. 48-50.
66Richmond News Leader, October 20, 1925.
67Maser, p. 438.
1925 approved a memorial to be sent to the 1926 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, that read in part:

Whereas it is generally conceded that the pending Plan will hardly gain the constitutional majority needed to effect its passage, be it

Resolved that the Virginia Conference hereby reaffirms its devotion to the cause of the unification of the two Methodisms... and [approves] continuance of negotiations with the Methodist Episcopal Church to this end.\(^{(48)}\)

And of the eight clergymen elected as delegates to the General Conference, at least half were unificationists.\(^{(69)}\)

The southern church’s refusal to approve the plan of unification in 1925 was not, of course, the end of the movement. Bishop John Moore of the southern church, one of the foremost leaders of the unification movement, later referred to the decision of 1925 as a “detour” on the “long road to Methodist union.”\(^{(70)}\) Yet even before unification was achieved in 1939, the great debate of 1924 and 1925 exerted its influence on the church. One of its effects was felt almost immediately across the southern church. The laity, insistent upon a larger share in directing the church’s affairs, pushed through the General Conference of 1926 a rule granting to every pastoral charge a lay delegate to the Annual Conference, thus more nearly equalizing lay and clerical influence in the church. That its passage followed directly from the unification debate is certain. Some of the laity insisted that during the debate the preachers had “tried to put something over on them.”\(^{(71)}\) Others had witnessed the unseemly display of bishop against bishop in sharp debate, and had moved for increased lay power as the solution to that problem.\(^{(72)}\)

The Virginia personalities involved in the debate continued to exercise influence in varying degrees. Robert Emory Blackwell never lived to see the union of Methodism that he had worked to promote; he died in 1938.\(^{(73)}\) James Cannon, Jr. retired from the episcopacy in that same year and never gave active service in the united church, though he supported unification to the end.\(^{(74)}\)

Most influential of all was Bishop Collins Denny, whose great battle against unification was still to come. Denny’s distaste for unification did not diminish but increased with the passing of the years. Denny and Candler together, with the assistance of Collins Denny, Jr., a layman, led the opposition to union in the late 1930s. The ostensible objections to

\(^{(48)}\)Journal of the Virginia Annual Conference, 1925, p. 72.

\(^{(69)}\)Richmond Christian Advocate, October 29, 1925, pp. 6-7.

\(^{(70)}\)Moore, p. 179.

\(^{(71)}\)Maser, p. 439.

\(^{(72)}\)Sledge, pp. 121-122.

\(^{(73)}\)Richmond Christian Advocate, July 21, 1938, p. 5.

union at that time were, as before, legal; but not far beneath the surface then, as before in the 1920s, lay the race issue. The two bishops were able to continue their anti-unification battle to the end in part because they kept the race issue alive, long after the rest of southern Methodism was convinced it had nothing to fear from merger. In 1938 the preachers of the Norfolk and Portsmouth Districts went on record opposing the "prejudice and sectionalism" of the two bishops, and J. W. Rowland, the Advocate editor, a month later condemned the "poisonous folds of racial misunderstanding" that were keeping the racial issue alive in the unification discussion. Said Rowland,

If we are not Christian to those who work in the kitchen, the nursery, the field and the factory, can we claim to be Christian anywhere? 75

Denny himself refused to enter The Methodist Church or occupy office in it, and died in 1944 still calling himself a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Wrote one of his contemporaries: "There was more of the spirit of unity in Methodism and less danger in the associations of a united Church than many of us, including Bishop Denny, had come to realize." 76

Even so, the great debate of 1924 and 1925 left its mark on Methodism. Unification was delayed, not prevented, by that decision. And when finally it was achieved, there was written into the law and structure of The Methodist Church not full racial equality, but a segregated, racially defined structure for Negroes called the Central Jurisdiction, not substantially different from the kind of structure that had been promoted by southerners for a generation or more. When he proposed such a structure in 1917, Robert Emory Blackwell represented not a conservative, but a liberal racial attitude, perhaps the most progressive stance current among white southern Methodists of that day. Yet even liberals like Blackwell fell far short of advocating full racial equality, and assured white southerners that their proposals would not upset existing racial practices. The lesson of 1925 was not lost upon the church as a whole: the South must be assured that its racial attitudes did not have to change before unification could occur. So assured were they that the delegates to the Virginia Annual Conference in 1937, Bishops Denny and Candler notwithstanding, voted overwhelmingly — 395 to 37 — to approve the Plan of Union. 77 This time the Richmond Christian Advocate reported the vote with a simple mention; it was by no means the issue that it had been twelve years earlier. 78

75Sweet, pp. 395-399.
77Journal of the Virginia Annual Conference (M.E. Church, South), 1937, p. 33.
78Richmond Christian Advocate, October 21, 1937, p. 4.
It would be another thirty years from that date before black and white Methodists in Virginia would meet together at the same Annual Conference session. Who can say how many more years will pass before the final racial barriers between local congregations and individual Christians will fall?

**WESLEY HERITAGE CONFERENCE**

An Australian and Pacific Regional Conference of the World Methodist Historical Society will be convened at Wesley College, University of Sydney, Newtown, N.S.W., Australia, August 10-15, 1980.


**Conference Costs**

- Registration — $20.00
- Accommodation at Wesley College — $60.00
- Meals are available at College for those living in Sydney.
- Visitors — $5.00 per day registration, plus meals.

An Historical Pilgrimage of Early Methodist/Presbyterian/Congregational Witness in Australia is planned for Wednesday, with lunch at Parramatta. Cost for the bus trip is $10.00.

For further information, please contact the Conference Registrar:

Mrs. Lilian McDonald
Uniting Church Archives
123 Clarence Street
Sydney, N.S.W. 2000
Australia