METHODIST EPISCOPAL POLICY ON THE ORDINATION OF BLACK MINISTERS, 1784-1864

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This essay surveys the official policies of the Methodist Episcopal Church concerning the ordination of black ministers from the organization of the denomination in America through 1864. The efforts of blacks to achieve clerical parity within Methodism were preceded by a period during which separate congregations were organized. From the first American Methodist meeting in 1766 until the latter part of the 1780s, blacks and whites generally worshiped in the same churches, but, as the number of black Methodists increased, so did their resentment against the growth of demeaning racial distinctions. As a result, many of them withdrew in order to worship in buildings of their own and to determine which ministers would supervise them. Their efforts to exercise such authority brought them into conflict with M. E. officials, who maintained that according to church law, individual congregations could not own property and that the assignment of ministers was the exclusive prerogative of the episcopacy.¹

The conflict was irreconcilable. Blacks felt that in order for them to remain Methodists, as they wished to do, they needed to be able to prevent a recurrence of the discrimination that they had experienced and the authority to set some of their own priorities. On the other hand, officials of the denomination contended that the autonomous status that they sought was incompatible with the polity of Methodism. For over two decades, they vied with each other for control of the buildings,

congregations, and pulpits in question.²

In April 1816, the issue was resolved, at least for a large number of black Methodists. At that time, representatives of churches in Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey met at Bethel Church in Philadelphia and decided to definitively sever their ties with the M. E. Church and found an independent denomination called the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Thenceforward, it would be possible for black ministers to have charge of the churches belonging to the new organization. Richard Allen, who had spearheaded the effort to organize black Methodists, became the first bishop of the denomination. On April 11, he was consecrated for that office by “five regularly ordained ministers, one of whom was a presbyter of the Protestant Episcopal Church.”³

Seventeen years earlier, Allen had become the first black preacher in the M. E. Church to be ordained a deacon, the lowest level in the hierarchy of ordained clergy. At the time of his ordination, he had been a preacher for over twenty years and was a prominent leader of the black community of Philadelphia. In addition, he took responsibility for administering Bethel Church, which he had founded and organized in 1794, although the M. E. denomination gave charge of the church to the ministers of the congregation from which Allen had withdrawn, and they often contested his authority.⁴ If anything, Allen was overqualified to

²Those two perspectives and the crux of the dilemma can be seen in the following comments. In October 1795, Francis Asbury complained about the situation in Baltimore: “The Africans of this town desire a church, which, in temporaries, shall be altogether under their own direction, and ask greater privileges than the white stewards and trustees ever had a right to claim.” In 1807, the members of Bethel African Methodist Church in Philadelphia took legal steps to insure that their officers would have exclusive control over church property. Following that event, Richard Allen, who had founded the church thirteen years earlier, wrote Methodist officials “to prevent any misconstruction and to guard against a wrong understanding of our motions and designs.” He explained: “We have no purpose or intention whatever of separating ourselves from or of making ourselves independent of the Methodist Conference and the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Our only design is to secure to our selves our rights and privileges, to regulate our affairs, temporal and spiritual, the same as if we were white people, and to guard against any opposition which might possibly arise from the improper prejudice or administration of any individual having the exercise of discipline over us.” Francis Asbury, The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, 3 vols., ed. Elmer T. Clark (Nashville, 1958), 2:65, 3:367n.

³Allen, p. 35; Carol V. R. George, Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Emergence of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840 (New York, 1973), pp. 90-115; Wesley, pp. 124-57; Abel Stevens, History of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 4 vols. (New York, 1867), 4:260-61. Daniel Coker, who led the delegation from Baltimore, was, in fact, the first man elected to the episcopacy but he declined the office.

⁴Allen was ordained June 11, 1799. Jesse Lee, A Short History of the Methodists in the United States (Baltimore, 1810), pp. 270-71. In ascending order of importance, the ranks of the clerical hierarchy were as follows: exhorter, preacher, deacon, elder, presiding elder, (continued)
serve as a deacon, but, by ordaining him, Bishop Francis Asbury took a step that was of uncertain legality.

The bishop attempted to clarify the situation in 1800 when the supreme policy making body of the denomination, the General Conference, convened in Baltimore for its quadrennial meeting. Asbury moved that the denomination adopt criteria for “recommending and ordaining black and coloured people.” As a result, the Conference gave bishops the authority to “ordain local deacons of our African brethren, in places where they have built a house or houses for the worship of God.”

According to Methodist historian, Jesse Lee, who was present, a number of the delegates, particularly some of those from the South, were “much opposed” to the new rule. In fact, in deference to the wishes of “most of the preachers” in attendance, it was not printed with the other laws of the church in the subsequent edition of *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, commonly referred to as the *Discipline*. Nevertheless, Asbury made use of that less-than-overwhelming mandate and ordained several black deacons. It is difficult to get an accurate count of the number of men that he ordained before his death in 1816, but it probably amounted to no more than a dozen, principally in the New York and Philadelphia areas, although in one instance he incurred the ire of some Virginia Methodists by ordaining a black in that state.

But even if the number of ordinations had been larger, Asbury’s efforts could not have alleviated the central problem that confronted black preachers. Even those who had been ordained as local deacons could not lead the observance of the Lord’s Supper or be given charge of

and bishop. For explanation of the organizational structure of Methodism see the following note. *Re* Allen’s accomplishments prior to his ordination and his contested administration of Bethel, see Allen, pp. 23-35; George, pp. 49-71; Wesley, pp. 99-114.

"The General Conference, which met every four years, was the highest level in the organizational hierarchy of Methodism. The election, ordination, and assignment of bishops took place at that level. Delegates to the General Conference represented annual conferences, which were the next level in the hierarchy. Their boundaries were roughly equivalent to metropolitan areas (Baltimore Conference), states (Virginia Conference), or regions (New England Conference). Bishops ordained ministers and assigned them to churches as itinerants at that level. Annual conferences were subdivided into administrative units called districts, which were supervised by presiding elders. Finally, presiding elders usually conducted quarterly conferences for each church or circuit (two or more congregations supervised by one pastor) in their districts. The licensing of exhorters and preachers took place at that level. M. E. Church, *Discipline*, pp. 19-24, 65-68, 151-55; M. E. Church, *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1800* (New York, 1855), pp. 40, 44.

*Lee, p. 270. The ordinations referred to in Asbury’s journal include the following: May 16, 1806, New York, ordained “three Africans” (Walls identifies them as June Scott, Abraham Thompson, and James Varick, p. 66); April 27, 1808, New York, ordained Daniel Coker (continued)
churches. Only ordained elders who were members of an annual conference had such authority. Under normal circumstances, ministers were ordained and assigned to churches as itinerants at the sessions of annual conferences. The boundaries of annual conferences embraced regions, states, or metropolitan areas.

In 1821, a group of black Methodists proposed a way to make it possible for black preachers to belong to a conference and be ordained as elders. This group was composed of the lay leaders and the black ministerial staffs of churches in Philadelphia, New York City, Long Island, and New Haven, Connecticut. These leaders had chosen not to affiliate with the African M. E. denomination. Instead, in an adroitly drafted petition, they requested that the Philadelphia and New York Conferences of the M. E. Church cooperate with a plan “to establish a Conference for African Methodist preachers, under the patronage of the white Methodist Bishops and Conference.” The petitioners pointed out that there were “many preachers” whose usefulness was “greatly hindered” because they could not secure ordination or itinerant status. “It seems,” they contended, “the time is come when something must be done.”

The Philadelphians considered the petition at their annual conference in April 1821. When the New York Conference met two months later, its delegates were able to consider the petition and the recommendations that had been made by the Philadelphians. The

and William Miller; April 9, 1809, Kensington, Pennsylvania, ordained Jacob Tapsco and James Champion. While in Virginia in February 1812, Asbury noted: “A charge had been brought against me for ordaining a slave; but there was no further pursuit of the case when it was discovered that I was ready with my certificates to prove his freedom; the subject of contention was nearly white, and his respectable father would neither own nor manumit him. I shall mention no names.” In addition, in publications printed in 1810, Jesse Lee noted that a black had been ordained in Lynchburg, Virginia, and Daniel Coker listed Jeffrey Buley as being an ordained minister in Philadelphia. Asbury, 2:506, 568, 596, 694; Lee, p. 271; Daniel Coker, *A Dialogue Between a Virginian and an African Minister* (Baltimore, 1810), p. 40.

James Varick et al., “Memorial to the Bishops and preachers of the Philadelphia and New York Conference,” March 28, 1821, printed in *Discovery* 1 (Spring 1963): 3-5. The other signers of the petition were Robert Brown, George Collins, and Cyrus Potts. Also, see Varick, “Founders’ Address,” 1820, reprinted in Walls, pp. 49-50. Zion and Asbury churches in New York led the movement to establish the African Conference. On at least two occasions, Richard Allen attempted to persuade the leaders of the two churches to affiliate with the African M. E. denomination. Allen’s efforts to establish the independent denomination in New York in 1820, alienated some of Zion and Asbury’s leaders, because they felt that he was taking advantage of the serious difficulties that both churches were experiencing at that time. See Rush, pp. 32-3, 40-2, 44. In the first document referred to above, the petitioners noted that they did not “desire to unite with our brother Richard Allen’s connexion, being dissatisfied with their general manner of proceedings (for our brethren, the members of the Wesleyan Church in Philadelphia, withdrew from them to build their present house of worship, named as above.)”
responses of the two conferences were very different.  
The Philadelphians noted that the blacks intended to establish their own conference "whether patronized by us or not," so they recommended that one of the M. E. bishops preside over the proposed conference; ordain the men who had qualified to be elders; and assign them to churches. On the other hand, the New Yorkers maintained that complying with a request like that of the petitioners would "prostrate the constitution and government of the Church," because the blacks intended to govern their conference independently, according to an altered form of the Discipline. They also pointed out that only the General Conference had the authority to sanction the formation of a new conference. 

However, in order to bring back the petitioners from their "wandering," the New Yorkers recommended that black preachers be employed as pastors until the General Conference had met, if they would "agree to be subject to the government of the Methodist Episcopal Church." The New Yorkers also contended that black Methodists were "entitled to the same rights and privileges, with respect to the election and ordination of local deacons and Elders, as the white societies." Those recommendations were not very helpful to the petitioners, who had already elected men to serve as pastors until ordination could be secured, and who were only too well aware that there were no explicit proscriptions against the ordination of black elders.

None of the parties involved even suggested admitting black preachers to membership in the Philadelphia and New York Conferences, which would have made it possible for them to be ordained and assigned to churches through the normal procedures. The petitioners dismissed that alternative with the observation that they had "not the least expectation that African or colored preachers will be admitted to a seat and vote in the Conference of their white brethren."

The Philadelphians concurred with that perception of the limits of racial tolerance and the New Yorkers did not contradict it. 

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8 The conferences appointed committees to consider the memorial and draft recommendations which were then voted on by all the delegates.
9 Ezekiel Cooper, Thomas Ware, and Alward White, "Report of the Committee to whom was referred the memorial of the official members of the African Methodist Zion and Asbury churches in the city of New York, and the African Wesley church in the city of Philadelphia," April 18, 1821, Ezekiel Cooper Collection, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Ill.; New York Annual Conference, "Report of the Committee to whom was referred the Memorial of the Africans in the city of New York and other places," reprinted in Walls, pp. 81-82.
10 Ibid.
The petitioners were left with a problem. The report of the New York Conference obliterated the hopes that they had entertained since the end of the Philadelphia Conference, particularly since the Philadelphians had made enactment of their recommendations contingent upon the concurrence of the New Yorkers. Waiting three years to petition the next General Conference was not an option that was open to the blacks if they were to hold together their association of churches. So, they decided to proceed as if the recommendations of the Philadelphians had been adopted as denominational policy.\textsuperscript{12}

It was little use to make such a decision without the power to implement it. Despite efforts by the group’s leaders, no bishop attended the sessions of the African Conference or ordained any of its preachers. Before the conclusion of its second yearly meeting, some preachers had abandoned the conference and others had abandoned their pursuit of ordination.\textsuperscript{13}

Finally, the leaders of the conference approached a group of dissident white Methodists, known as the Methodist Society in the City of New York. On June 17, 1822, three of the Society’s elders conferred ordination on three black elders, Abraham Thompson, James Varick and Leven Smith. For all intents and purposes, the African Conference had passed the point of no return on the path that had been leading toward total separation from the M. E. Church. In later years it became known as the African Methodist Episcopal Zion denomination.\textsuperscript{14}

Nevertheless, some members of the new denomination thought that it still might have been possible to come to an agreement with the M. E. Church, so they petitioned the General Conference when it

\textsuperscript{12}Rush, pp. 67-68.

\textsuperscript{13}According to Christopher Rush, the leaders of the African Conference asked M. E. Bishop Enoch George to preside over its first session. He told them that he had other engagements and that the two other bishops were sick. The next year, the bishops told the conference leaders that they “could not attend on them officially.” In May 1822, the leaders asked Bishop William McKendree about the possibility of ordination. In accordance with his wishes, they submitted their request in writing. The next month, Bishop George and Bishop Robert Roberts replied that, they “could not do anything” unless the blacks “submitted to their government, as heretofore.” Rush, pp. 68-77.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 78. William Stilwell, a white elder, was one of the organizers of the Methodist Society in the City of New York. Until July 16, 1820, when he withdrew from the M. E. denomination, Stilwell had had official charge of Zion and Asbury, the churches which subsequently became the leaders of the movement to establish an African Conference. \textit{Re the formation of the Methodist Society, see Samuel Stilwell, Rise and Progress of the Methodist Society in the City of New York} (New York, 1821). Until 1848, the new black denomination was known as the African Methodist Episcopal Church. In that year, “Zion,” the name of the mother congregation, was added to distinguish it from Allen’s denomination. Walls, p. 50.
convened in May 1824. Ezekiel Cooper, who was a member of the Philadelphia Conference, moved that the General Conference establish a “Committee on the Affairs of People of Colour” to consider the petition and other related matters. Cooper’s motion was seconded by Stephen G. Roszel of the Baltimore Conference, which also had a large number of active black Methodists.  

In its report, the committee observed that, while “many” black preachers were “well qualified” to serve as ministers, “some” were “dangerously disqualified [sic].” It concluded that it was “not yet time” to establish a conference for them. The committee did recommend that black preachers be allowed to participate in quarterly and district conferences to the extent that the “usages of the country, in different sections” would permit and that annual conferences be allowed to use blacks as pastors “when they judge their services necessary.” The General Conference adopted the recommendations.

In all probability, the blacks who felt most strongly about the limitations that were imposed upon black preachers left the M. E. Church at the time of one of the African Methodist independence movements. But the issue did not die. Under the leadership of Simon Murray, black Methodists from Philadelphia petitioned the General Conference of 1832, but unlike former activists, they did not request ordination, the itinerancy, or the establishment of a conference. They only asked that the denomination “give the Bishop power to appoint ministers of colour to coloured congregations when asked for.” Perhaps the petitioners reasoned that the bishops, acting alone, would exercise that power more often than the annual conferences had done since the General Conference of 1824.

The blacks contended that white ministers were devoting much of their time to the increasing number of white Methodists, at the expense of black congregations. Giving black preachers responsibility for black churches, they argued, would prevent them from leaving the denomination to seek a wider sphere of usefulness and would also induce them to acquire “that knowledge so necessary for the Gospel ministry.” The petition, as well as one submitted by “a number of persons in Virginia,” was referred to the “Committee on the Rights and Privileges of our People of Colour” that had been established in response to a motion made by Stephen Roszel.

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13Rush, p. 81; M. E. Church, Journals, 1824, pp. 244, 246, 254.
14Peter Cartwright et al., “Report of the committee to whom was referred the affairs of the people of colour,” May 27, 1824, General Conference Papers, Drew University, Madison, N.J.
15Cyrus B. Miller and Simon Murray, “Petition to the General Conference,” April 23, 1832, General Conference Papers, Drew University.
16Ibid.; M. E. Church, Journals, 1832, p. 367.
After considering the documents for a day, the chairman of the committee reported that it was "inexpedient to act upon them at this time." Nat Turner probably contributed to the committee's cautious ambiguity. Turner, who was a preacher, had been hanged only six months before the opening of the Conference. Following his attempt to overthrow slavery, most southern states had enacted legislation proscribing or sharply curtailing the activities of black preachers. In that atmosphere, any statement concerning granting authority to them could have been inflammatory.

Yet three years later, M. E. Bishop Elijah Hedding, assisted by at least five white ministers, ordained a black elder, Beverly R. Wilson, before a large congregation in New York City in a ceremony that was described as "peculiarly solemn and impressive." To the blacks whose petition had been rebuffed, Wilson's ordination must have seemed strangely inconsistent. Four years earlier, Wilson had been a local preacher in Virginia. In 1832, he went to Liberia to help establish the denomination's mission there. He returned to the United States in 1835 to be ordained, after which he continued his work in West Africa.

Did Wilson's ordination indicate that the limits of white racial tolerance had been extended, or did it somehow fall within the already existing framework of race relations? His intention to serve in an area that was physically removed from the racial mores of the United States was in his favor, as was the fact that his example met with the approval of those who saw colonization as the ultimate solution to racial problems. He was also an exemplar of the evangelical missionary spirit. However, there was a more compelling reason why black preachers were encouraged to exercise the authority of the ministry in Africa.

During the year preceding Wilson's ordination, the "debilitating influence of the African fever" killed three of the six whites who had been stationed in Liberia and necessitated the repatriation of two others. At the end of the year, the ministerial staff consisted of one white superintendent and thirteen preachers, all of whom were "colored men." White Methodists had the options of either using black ministers or defaulting on their overriding responsibility to spread the word of the Gospel. Wilson's ordination, when contrasted to

19Ibid., p. 415.
21M. E. Church, Sixteenth Annual Report, pp. 6-8. The report made no comment about the health of the black missionaries, or about the survival rates for blacks.
the disposition of the requests of the petitioners, indicated that blacks could be invested with the full authority of the ministry, in order to exercise it at times when, or at places where, it was impractical for white ministers to function.

After 1832, there was a sixteen year lapse before blacks petitioned the General Conference again. Perhaps a new generation of activists had to replace those who had left the denomination, but dissatisfaction probably continued to be registered in local churches and at the annual conference level. In February 1844, representatives of black churches in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland, met in Zoar Church in Philadelphia. One product of the meeting was a petition in which they asked the Philadelphia Conference to put their case for separate annual conferences before the delegates to the General Conference when it met in New York the following May.\textsuperscript{22}

The petitioners pointed out that the issue of their lack of standing in the denomination had been so energetically wielded against them by African Methodists that both the membership and morale of black M. E. churches had undergone rapid decline. They urged their white brethren to take the action that would still "the clamours" against them.\textsuperscript{23} If a representative of the Philadelphia Conference did in fact serve as a conduit for the proposal, there is no record of it in the General Conference Journal. In any event, no action was taken.

The General Conference of 1844 was dominated by a tumultuous debate on slaveholding that resulted in the withdrawal of Southerners from the denomination. Their secession may have served as a catalyst for a resurgence of protest, since it seemed to indicate that thenceforward efforts to increase black ministerial authority might meet less resistance. When the next General Conference convened, petitions came from Sharp Street and Asbury Churches in Baltimore and from "various colored societies" in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. All of them requested the assignment of black preachers to black congregations.\textsuperscript{24}

In one sense, the submission of those petitions to what had become essentially a northern, antislavery denomination, represented a new beginning, but continuity with past efforts was clearly evident. The petition from Baltimore differed from the ill-fated documents of

\textsuperscript{22}Daniel Carter et al., "Resolution and Petition to the Philadelphia Annual Conference," February 13, 1844, Philadelphia Conference Papers, 1840-45, Methodist Historical Society, St. George's United Methodist Church, Philadelphia. The other signers of this document were George Junior, Cyrus B. Miller, Daniel Thomas, and Henry Tlighman.

\textsuperscript{23}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{24}After a bitter, emotional debate at the General Conference of 1844, during which antislavery radicals had challenged whether there were any circumstances that could justify slaveholding on the part of an active bishop, southern Methodists withdrew from the
1832 and 1844 in that much of its organization and phrasing was patterned very closely after the original petition that black Methodists had submitted to the Philadelphia and New York Conferences over a quarter of a century before.25

In making their case for black supervision, the petitioners charged that white pastors had chronically neglected the members of Sharp Street and Asbury, even though those substantial congregations were "paying sometimes a thousand dollars per year" for ministerial services. They had anticipated that their request could have been rejected on the ground that there was a greater need for black preachers to serve in Liberia. So, they contended that if blacks were allowed to serve at home, "it would awaken and beget in them a missionary spirit and zeal" and thus enable them to provide "more effective service abroad."26

To accomplish their end, the petitioners proposed the creation of a "Colored Annual Conference" to be supervised by the bishops, according to the laws that governed other conferences. All the petitions were considered by a five-member "Committee on Petitions of Coloured Preachers." The committee prefaced its report by expressing an "earnest desire to do all that can be done to promote the spiritual interests of our coloured people," but it concluded that it was "inexpedient at present" to establish a black conference. It did recommend that bishops be given the option of employing black preachers as pastors on an ad hoc basis, with the approval of a quarterly conference.27 The adoption of the committee's report indicated that input from the slaveholding South had not been a critical factor in maintaining the basic structure of race relations within the denomination. The church still could not accommodate the assignment of black ministers to black churches as regular itinerant elders.


26Brown, "Memorial." In 1848, Sharp Street and Asbury circuit reported a membership of 3,320. M. E. Church, Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Year 1848 (New York, 1848), p. 192.

27M. E. Church, Journals, 1848, p. 130.
different tack by proposing the establishment of a mission conference, rather than an annual conference. In most other respects their petition was similar to the one that blacks from Baltimore had submitted in 1848; in fact, the new proposal was a further development of an argument that originally had been made that year. If the denomination could have been persuaded to regard black conferences as spawning grounds for missionaries, or if it would have even regarded black churches in the United States as a mission field, the limitation on black upward mobility might have been relaxed.

That approach seemed plausible enough to the presiding officer to justify referring the petition to the standing committee on missions, rather than to a special ad hoc committee as had been the practice in the past. However, the limits on the official advancement of black preachers remained rigid, although they did demonstrate considerable de facto flexibility. In 1824 and 1848, the denomination had taken steps to make it less difficult for black preachers to be employed as pastors, although officially they were considered as only acting in the absence of an elder. As a concession to the petitioners of 1852, it took the next logical step by authorizing the organization of a conference that could perform some of the functions of a regular annual conference, but which lacked any legal standing or actual authority.

The original authorization applied only to Philadelphia and New Jersey. However, in response to petitions submitted four years later, the General Conference ruled that such quasi-conferences could be established anywhere in the denomination upon the recommendations of a bishop and a regular annual conference. The denomination had the capacity to tolerate blacks functioning in the role of itinerant elders. It could even accommodate their ordination on an ad hoc basis. However, it balked at the idea of allowing blacks to achieve the official status of regular itinerant elders.

The General Conference of 1856 also gave presiding elders the

28Daniell Carter et al., “Memorial to the Bishops and Members of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church,” [c. May 1852] General Conference Papers, Drew University. The other signers of the memorial were Richard Crawford, Ebben Howard, Robbert Howard, Henry Nellson, David Tilghman, and Peter Wise.

29M. E. Church, Journals, 1852, p. 65. The committee on missions was composed of one representative from each of the twenty-nine annual conferences of the church. Typically, “to be supplied” appeared in church records instead of the names of black pastors, because they were not regular itinerant elders.

30M. E. Church, Journals, 1856, p. 183. In 1861, the Colored Annual Conference for the Philadelphia, Delaware, and South Jersey areas, reported a total of six ordained local elders. M. E. Church, Minutes of the Fifth Colored Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church (Philadelphia, 1861), p. 7. According to Donald G. Mathews, at least fifteen black ministers were ordained by the Baltimore Conference between 1818 and 1841, although he does not specify whether they were deacons or elders. Mathews, p. 65.
authority to employ black preachers as pastors.\textsuperscript{31} Presiding elders, who ranked just above regular pastors, had come to occupy a pivotal position. As the number of black-led congregations increased, presiding elders became the white officials most directly responsible for the supervision of black Methodists.

In 1858, Francis Burns, a black minister, was ordained a bishop.\textsuperscript{32} Even more than the ordination of Beverly Wilson twenty-three years before, the elevation of Burns to the highest position that the denomination had to offer appeared to be a radical departure from the norm. It was, in fact, one of the dazzling aberrations that occasionally illuminated some of the implicit principles of race relations within Methodism.

In a petition that they had sent to the General Conference of 1852, black missionaries in Liberia informed the home church that it was becoming increasingly difficult for them to conduct their work without “the superintendence of a bishop, or someone endowed with the same authority.” They pointed out that no bishop had ever visited their mission and that they needed to have access to someone who could confer ordinations. The General Conference debated three approaches to solving the problem: assigning a white bishop to Liberia; investing the authority of the episcopacy in a black minister and then allowing the mission to become independent; and ordaining a black bishop, specifically for service in Liberia.\textsuperscript{33}

The delegates could not agree on a solution in 1852, but they did send newly-elected Bishop Levi Scott to investigate the situation. Scott reported to the next General Conference that it was his conclusion that, unless a white bishop was assigned, the mission would be in a disadvantageous position to compete with those of other denominations that had white leadership because of the “degree of deference shown to white men that is not and cannot be shown to colored men, at least in the present state of affairs.” Nevertheless, the belief that the West African climate was dangerously inhospitable for Euro-Americans ruled out that option.\textsuperscript{34}

According to the bishop, the majority of the missionaries thought that independence was the best alternative, and there was some support for that solution among the delegates. On the other hand, Scott also reported that some missionaries doubted whether their band

\textsuperscript{31}M. E. Church, \textit{Journals}, 1856, p. 183.
\textsuperscript{32}M. E. Church, \textit{Journals}, 1860, p. 313.
\textsuperscript{33}Amos Herring \textit{et al.}, “Petition to the Bishops and General Conference of the M. E. Church,” January 26, 1852, General Conference Papers, Drew University; \textit{New York Christian Advocate and Journal}, May 27, 1852. The other signers of the petition were J. S. Payne, J. W. Roberts, A. D. Williams, and Beverly R. Wilson.
\textsuperscript{34}Ibid.; \textit{New York Christian Advocate and Journal}, May 29, 1856, June 5, 1856.
of evangelicals could “manage their affairs if left alone,” and that a major proponent of that view was Francis Burns. In any event, the denomination could not have fulfilled its evangelical responsibility in that part of the world if its ties with the mission were broken off, so that option was also unsatisfactory.  

But electing a black bishop also posed serious problems. Both church law and the precedent that had been set by the founding fathers of Methodism required the periodic reassignment of all bishops to different conferences. Unless precautions were taken, not only would the proposed bishop have an influence on the formation of church policy, but he also would eventually wind up supervising white conferences. A southern Methodist correspondent for the *Nashville and Louisville Christian Advocate* clearly derived satisfaction from being able to report that his northern brethren were faced with “quite a dilemma.” He quipped that allowing a black bishop to “claim an equal part” in church government would have made “abolitionism a little too practical, even for them, though consistency would make them swallow the pill.”

Given the beliefs that the delegates held, the ideal solution was to ordain a black bishop to supervise mission work in West Africa for the M. E. Church, with the stipulation that he could not exercise the authority of his office anywhere else. In arguing on behalf of that unprecedented proposal, the Secretary of Missions, John P. Durbin, complained that its opponents had evoked the names of the founding fathers so often that he almost wished that they could “rise from the dead” and speak for themselves. He pointed out that many changes had taken place over the years and he doubted whether the fathers would have wanted their precedents to prevent the church from taking progressive measures. Durbin also pointed out that it was possible to amend the law concerning the assignment of bishops. In sum, the Secretary urged the General Conference to “lay aside its tight lacing and yield a little.”

Arguments like those won approval and set in motion the events that culminated in Burns’ ordination. In addition to restricting the new bishop’s jurisdiction, the denomination took the added precautions of stipulating that mission conferences could not send delegates to General Conferences or have a vote on fundamental changes in church law. The effort to find an acceptable solution to the Liberian problem indicated that blacks were not permitted to exercise authority over

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35Ibid.  
36*Nashville and Louisville Christian Advocate*, June 3, 1852.  
37*New York Christian Advocate and Journal*, June 5, 1856.  
whites, or even be put in positions where that might have become a possibility.

A paternalistic mindset had formed during the early years of American Methodism. During the 1760s, 1770s, and early 1780s, representatives of John Wesley, who were strongly opposed to slavery, welcomed blacks into the fold and took care to instruct them in the ways of the new faith. The petitioners of 1821 had looked back on those years as the period when members of their race were in their "infant state" in relation to denomination. As the framework of race relations took shape, the association between blacks and the need for white tutelage became a fixed part of its structure.

Decades later, it continued to define the normative relation between white Methodists and all blacks — even those who had been born into the church and could trace back their Methodist heritage for several generations. The situation was particularly aggravating to preachers in urban areas like Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York, who had organized large congregations, built churches, and were actively involved in evangelical work, but who still found themselves regarded as probationers, of sorts. The framework simply had no other category for them, although it did make significant de facto allowances for changing conditions, as has been shown.

In effect, all blacks were members of a denominational Sunday School, from which none of them could ever graduate. It was acceptable and even advisable to permit some students to supervise others in the absence of a regular teacher, but the idea of putting one in a position where he might take charge of adult members of the church was just too disconcertingly incongruous to be taken seriously. It might even have been seen as a failure to live up to adult evangelical responsibilities.

The framework seemed appropriate, whether it was viewed from the perspective of benevolent whites, or from that of those who harbored visceral racial antipathies. Both attitudes contributed to the dynamic that created and maintained it, as did indirect inputs from the society at large concerning how the races should relate to each other. The mindset that restricted the exercise of authority by blacks offers an explanation for the church's sedulous refusal even to consider admitting them to already existing annual conferences. One of the major reasons for holding annual conferences was to provide the bishops with forums for the periodic reassignment of all itinerant elders. If black

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preachers had been admitted, and church law adhered to, they would have been in position to be assigned to supervise white congregations at some point.

The unfolding of events has shown the influence that the framework of race relations exerted on the functioning of the denomination. It required the exclusion of blacks from annual conferences and the limitation on their advancement, even though such policies were not contained in or condoned by the Discipline. Further, during the Liberian debate, it made it necessary for a Methodist tradition to be ignored and for a fundamental tenet of church law to be altered.

In 1860 the petitioning process resumed. Four different proposals to expand the powers of the colored conferences were referred to the "Committee on Colored Membership." Two of them were rejected on the ground that they would have violated church law; the others were dismissed as unnecessary. A proposal also had been made to admit black preachers to white conferences, but the need to make a recommendation was averted when it was "withdrawn by the representatives of the petitioners."40

During the last session of the last day of the General Conference, the committee's chairman, Samuel Y. Monroe, insisted on presenting his report so that the petitioners would know that their requests had been considered, even though by that time there were not enough delegates still in attendance to constitute a quorum, and despite the fact that the committee's final recommendation was only that "the whole subject be dismissed."41

The limitation on black advancement continued to be held in place firmly, but without passion. Its opponents did not have enough power to pose a significant threat, nor had they been successful in mobilizing other forces on their behalf. Indifference and inertia played a large part in insulating the framework from challenge. Although the ability to exercise the full authority of the ministry had a vital impact on the effectiveness with which black preachers could fulfill their evangelical responsibilities, the issue had never aroused much excitement among their white brethren, except during the debate over the ordination of a black bishop.

That is where matters stood until the General Conference of 1864,

40M. E. Church, Journals, 1860, pp. 40, 47, 308-9. The requests that were dismissed as unnecessary were to extend the bounds of the Colored Conferences and to grant them the power to try and expel their own members. The requests that were considered illegal were to give the conferences authority to elect deacons and elders and to give them the other powers of regular annual conferences.
41'Buffalo Daily Christian Advocate, June 5, 1860; M. E. Church, Journals, 1860, p. 309.
but the intervening four years had been eventful. The South had seceded, the Civil War had been raging for three years, and the Emancipation Proclamation had been issued. It was a time of extreme sacrifice, emotion, and commitment. In its report to the delegates, the Committee on the State of the Country observed: "No previous General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church has met in a period so important as the present. It is crowded with thrilling events that must affect the highest interests of the Church, of our country, and of the world." The ethos of the war effort and the imperatives of the new opportunities that it produced, made it impossible for the framework to continue to operate homeostatically.

The denomination stood on the threshold of an unprecedented opportunity to expand its mission work. In their address to the Conference, the bishops reported: "The progress of the Federal arms has thrown open to the loyal Churches of the Union large and inviting fields of Christian enterprise and labor. In the cultivation of these fields it is natural and reasonable to expect that the Methodist Episcopal Church should occupy a prominent position." Not only did the church foresee gaining access to freedmen who had never been converted, but it also anticipated that those who were Christians would leave the churches that had been associated with slavery as soon as they were presented with an alternative.

The cultivation of a large new mission field was an imperious obligation, but it was not that alone that focused attention on the South. Denominational pride was also at stake. The bishops envisioned the recovery of lost territory with the fervor of irredentists: "She [the M. E. Church] occupied these fields once. Her network of conferences, districts and pastoral charges spread over them all: all indeed, both within and beyond the Federal lines. For nineteen years they have been in the occupancy of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, to the wrongful exclusion of the Methodist Episcopal Church. But her days of exclusive occupancy are ended."

Achieving success in its mission to the freedmen was important to the denomination for at least three reasons. First, it would be a measure of the degree to which it lived up to its evangelical responsibilities. Second, it was the only way that the church could reestablish itself in an area where it was expected that most native whites would be hostile. Finally, gaining the allegiance of former slaves would constitute an affirmation of the denomination's antislavery position.

The confluence of those interests carried blacks to the forefront of

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42M. E. Church, Journals, 1864, p. 390.
44M. E. Church, Journals, 1864, p. 278.
Methodist concern and heightened the significance of any issue that appeared to have some bearing on the effectiveness of the southern mission. Light reflected from the South even made it possible for some delegates to see a new mission field at home. Daniel Curry, who was presiding elder of the Long Island District and a leader of the Anti-Slavery Society of the New York East Conference, observed: “There is a further matter connected with this subject, not much talked of. It is this, there are a half-million of free colored people scattered through the free states, with no man to care for their souls. . . . The time has now come when we should act in this matter and make provision for these.”

It finally had become possible to link the long-standing interests of black preachers to an immediate and pressing concern of their white brethren. In its report, the “Committee on the State of the Work among the People of Color” reasoned: “If it be a principle patent to Christian enterprise that the missionary field itself must produce the most efficient missionaries, our colored local preachers are peculiarly important to us at this time. With these properly marshaled, what hindereth that we go down and possess the land?”

The bishops questioned whether the denomination’s policies concerning blacks were adequate and they informed the delegates that “the time has now come, in our judgement, when the General Conference should carefully consider what measures can be adopted to give increased efficiency to our Church among them.” As a result, the routine petitions from black churches and the requests that were made in person by “intelligent and trustworthy local preachers” were treated with an urgency that would have been incomprehensible four years earlier.

Changes in the external environment mandated a change in the structure of the framework. Years of petitioning had laid the groundwork for change. The delegates were to determine the shape that the change would take. The debate revolved around whether blacks should be organized into mission conferences or into separate annual conferences. Continued use of black preachers on an ad hoc basis was rejected because it would not have been an advance over the status quo. On the other hand, the Committee on Colored People reported that admitting blacks to white conferences would be “attended with

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46M. E. Church, Journals, 1864, p. 486.
47Ibid., pp. 279, 486.
difficulties too formidable every way to be readily disposed of."\(^48\)

The old framework had been an expression of monolithic, normative paternalism. The delegates who advocated the establishment of mission conferences espoused a differentiated, transitional paternalism. They believed that white supervision would be appropriate for most blacks for an indeterminate period,\(^49\) but they also perceived some differences in the levels of black ability and experience. Daniel Curry stated:

> But in some portions of our work, especially in the territory embraced in the New Jersey, Philadelphia and two Baltimore Conferences, there appears to be a state of things which calls for special regulations. Our colored members in those parts are numerous, and somewhat advanced in intelligence and position, and they demand recognition as an integral portion of the Methodist Episcopal Church.\(^50\)

Although mission conferences were not fully equal to regular annual conferences in standing or authority, they were a means by which the church could officially recognize black ministerial ability, and make wider use of it. However, their primary function was to facilitate the transition from the old monolithic framework to a new differentiated one. It was understood that they were to be elevated to the status of regular annual conferences after blacks and whites had adjusted to the "new order of things."\(^51\)

The delegates who opposed mission conferences were normative fraternalists. Their goal was the inclusion of blacks as full-fledged members of the denomination, and they objected to any subordinate classifications that might have fostered paternalism. Their position was expressed by Samuel Monroe, who was presiding elder of the Camden District of the New Jersey Conference:

> If you tell a man he is incompetent to do this, that, and the other, you take the inspiration out of him; but if you say to a man, "God has made you to stand up beside me," that man is inspired. Just let us say to these people, "God has made you to stand up with us." If they are ignorant, we ought to instruct them; if they are poor,


\(^{49}\)Joseph Trimble of the Ohio Conference argued: "If we do not do something to care for our coloured people, they will take care of themselves, and a separate organization will follow. They prefer, however, to have us attend to and provide for their wants. . . . They will receive with pleasure and gratitude any plan upon which we may fix." Daniel Curry maintained that the black race was beginning a process of development that had taken whites three hundred years to accomplish. Philadelphia *Daily Christian Advocate*, May 5, 1864.

\(^{50}\)Ibid., May 28, 1864.

\(^{51}\)Ibid.
we ought to help them; but to [sic] do it to them as men, and not as colored men.\textsuperscript{52}

After a vigorous debate, a majority of the delegates voted in favor of mission conferences. Subsequently, the Delaware Mission Conference was organized in Philadelphia for preachers in Delaware and states to the north; and the Washington Mission Conference was organized in Baltimore for preachers in Maryland and states to the south. Four years later, the General Conference made them full-fledged annual conferences, although they remained segregated.\textsuperscript{53} Full status and authority for black ministers had emerged from a vortex of differing interests, values, perceptions, misperceptions, and principles. One phase of a struggle that was almost as old as the denomination itself had come to an end.

\textsuperscript{52}Ibid.