THE DEBATES OVER RACE AND WOMEN'S ORDINATION IN THE 1939 METHODIST MERGER

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Will the feature of racial segregation tend to be permanent, or is it possible to keep ourselves so aware of its ethical imperfections on the basis of Christian brotherhood that we will desire to reconsider this aspect of church organization from time to time, working ever toward a more brotherly union?

Twenty-seventh Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council, 1937, 142

In the 1930s the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS) was engaged in plans for a merger with the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) and the Methodist Protestant Church. Most difficult of all the negotiations for the merger was the question of race. In 1844 the Methodist Episcopal Church and Methodist Episcopal Church, South had divided over the issue of slavery. Now the MECS refused to reunite if church union meant accepting black church members. If the denominations merged, what would happen to the nearly 326,000 black members, and their churches, annual conferences, and bishops who belonged to the Methodist Episcopal Church? The white members of the Joint Committee on Unification framed the question as if black members were not full participants in either the church or the negotiations, accurately indicating racial practices of the participating churches.

In 1936 Methodist women began to plan for the unification of these three branches of Methodism. Louise Young, Professor of Sociology at Scarritt College for Christian Workers, director of field work placing students in black communities in Nashville, and a member of the Woman's Missionary Council (WMC) of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, alerted the Woman's Missionary Council to the response of the black community to the merger discussion. Young listened to dissatisfied black Methodist leaders and their concerns for representation, leadership, fair treatment, and witness to the inclusiveness of the gospel in the structures of the proposed new church. Since most of the black membership of the Methodist Episcopal Church lived in the south, the impact of merger on the black membership would be felt most strongly in the south.

1 Twenty-seventh Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council, 1937, 141
In 1936 the Woman’s Missionary Council’s Committee on Interracial Co-operation, chaired by Young, studied the “effect of the proposed plan of Methodist unification on the Negro membership” in the Methodist Episcopal Church, gathering data from the church press and the black press.\(^2\) Louise Young also chaired the Study Group on Unification and Race Relations, a sub-group of the Committee on Interracial Co-operation of the Woman’s Missionary Council formed in 1937.

By 1937 the Joint Commission on Unification of the three Methodist branches had agreed on a plan based on the formation of five geographical jurisdictions and one racial jurisdiction for black churches. The few black members scattered among many northern churches, thirteen black churches distributed across the western states, and a handful of New York and New England black churches, all comprising about 3% of the total black population participating in the merger, were not perceived as a threat and were not included in the proposed Central Jurisdiction.\(^3\)

Prominent southern bishops and laymen put pressure on the southern branch of Methodism to hold the line on segregation. Among most southern Methodists the primary objection was not to the plan’s provision for segregation but for its arrangement to include black Methodists in the same denomination. They were afraid that the segregation might be eroded at some future date by a majority vote of moderates aligned with northerners. The leaders of southern opposition to the merger included Bishop Collins Denny and Bishop Warren A. Candler, who helped form the Layman’s Organization for the Preservation of the Southern Methodist Church to petition the Judicial Council to declare the merger illegal.\(^4\)

In 1937 Bishop Collins Denny of the MECS and Collins Denny, Jr., formerly Assistant Attorney General of Virginia, personally published a pamphlet entitled *An Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion Concerning Methodist Unification* for the purpose of arguing against the proposed merger.\(^5\) The *Appeal*‘s complaint was that within a united church any member in good standing could transfer his or her membership to any other local congregation. It would be the obligation of the pastor to accept that transfer. By simply organizing a group of membership transfers, black members would be able to take over the control of a white congregation, drive out the white members, and in some states, gain ownership of church or parsonage property.

\(^{2}\) Twenty-sixth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council, 1936, 150.

\(^{3}\) Dwight W. Culver, *Negro Segregation in The Methodist Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 83. Culver listed the membership of the Central Jurisdiction of The Methodist Church at 346,945. Outside the Central Jurisdiction, 640 black members belonged to biracial congregations and approximately 14,000 black members belonged to scattered black congregations. Historically they had not been part of any of the black annual conferences organized in the years following 1876 which were part of the Methodist Episcopal Church.
The *Appeal* reported that some southerners had supported the plan of union because it provided for a segregated Central Jurisdiction. However, any provision of the plan of union could be changed by a two-thirds vote of those present and voting at General Conference with the ratification of two-thirds of the annual conferences. The northern states would have that majority and overnight could overturn the provision for a separate jurisdiction for black churches. This possibility was to be feared because people and organizations who advocated racial equality had supported the admission of black students into southern universities and financed court challenges “to force an intermingling of the races,” and they might apply the same pressure to Methodist congregations.6 The *Appeal* proceeded to clarify that the demands of black persons were not a justice issue because the central issue was preservation of racial integrity.7 Refusal to deal with black persons in social relationships was to be interpreted as an issue of survival, not a matter of justice or moral law.

Some other Methodist leaders argued for the plan for the Central Jurisdiction both denying that it was a form of segregation and claiming that it guaranteed the constitutional rights of black members. Bishop James H. Straughn, senior representative of the Methodist Protestant Church on the Commission on Unification, underscored that the plan ensured the ability of black Methodists to elect black bishops, be represented on church boards, and send delegates to General Conference. “This is not segregation, and people who say it is cannot be acquainted with all the facts.”8

When the plan of union was debated in 1936 Ernest Fremon Tittle spoke against the plan:

> [A]ll our jurisdictions are geographic. This is racial. If that is not a concession to race prejudice, what is it? To be sure, by segregating Negroes in a Negro Conference we give them political opportunities which they would not possess within our white conferences; but we take away from them the experience of Christian brotherhood which, in my judgment, is far more important than is political opportunity.

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6Ibid., 77. The proposed merger was declared constitutional.
8Ibid., 23.
9Ibid., 24. The authors wrote, “We hold and we believe the South holds, that no question of justice or ‘conscience’ of others is involved when a negro demands social relationship with a white person. We hold, and we believe the South holds, that it is destructive of the Anglo-Saxon race, to which race Southerners primarily belong, to accord to the negro the privilege of social equality. The question, therefore, whether we should have negroid Church congregations in the South is not a question of rights or justice, nor a question for the “conscience” of others, it is a question of the preservation of our racial integrity.”
Matthew S. Davage, president of Clark College, Atlanta, presented the position of black people who favored the plan. “We shall not lose anything, but we shall gain much.” The advantages he saw for black members included greater opportunities for self-determination, correspondingly greater responsibilities, the opportunity to choose and develop their own leadership, and the possibility of placing a larger number of capable black men in positions of leadership and responsibility.¹⁰

Many black Methodists found the plan of merger to be morally untenable.¹¹ Nine of the nineteen black annual conferences voted against the proposed merger.¹² They found support from the Christian Century which published an editorial commenting on the “terrifying responsibility” assumed if the white majority of Methodists were to vote to overrule the wishes of a minority forcing them “into what that minority considers a morally untenable position.”¹³

Leaders of the black opposition to the merger included Bishops Robert E. Jones and Matthew W. Clair who called together 250 black leaders of the MEC to protest the plan which has been all but adopted. They considered possibilities of forming a new denomination or uniting with the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (CME).¹⁴ Forty-four black delegates to the General Conference met again and thirty-three decided to protest the Plan of Unification. David D. Jones, president of Bennett College, Greensboro, N.C., spoke for them, calling the plan segregation in its ugliest form “because it is couched in such pious terms.” He opposed segregation because it “sets them [blacks] aside, it labels them, it says that they are not fit to be treated as other people are treated.” He said that although his white friends had the privilege of saying this to their black brothers and sisters, they should expect black church members to be mature enough to reject the same point of view.¹⁵ Mary McLeod Bethune opposed the merger on the grounds that it penalized black members by segregating them.¹⁶

Perhaps the most elaborate theological defense of the plan came from Albert C. Knudson of Boston University School of Theology, who argued that God intentionally created different races, and since “each race has its contribution to make” that plans for racial mixing, which by implication would lead to racial amalgamation, were counter to God’s plan. The proper approach would be to engage in racial education and self-

¹⁰Ibid., 72.
¹¹Ibid., 75.
¹²Ibid., 75.
¹⁴Culver, Negro Segregation in The Methodist Church, 76.
¹⁵Ibid., 72.
¹⁶Ibid., 73.
development to facilitate the realization of the divine purpose.\textsuperscript{17} Knudson said that people who opposed the Plan of Unification were prejudiced. Their opposition was based on misinformation about the present status of church law, a non-Christian philosophy of race relations, and non-Christian prejudice.\textsuperscript{18}

The Woman's Missionary Council Study Group report called upon the church to be a reconciling agency and by example to preach a universal gospel. Of all the white groups in the Methodist Episcopal Church and Methodist Episcopal Church, South, speaking on the subject of unification, the Woman's Missionary Council most nearly reflected the views of the black Methodists. The report refused to surrender the claims of Jesus to the comfort of traditional patterns and asserted that Methodist women's experience of cooperation with CME women in leadership schools provided a model for enabling pastors and congregations, committees and annual conferences to relate across racial boundaries on the common tasks of Christian mission. "We believe that such a Methodist connectionalism transcending race and nation and economic class will be better able to create in us the mind which was in Christ Jesus who taught us of one God who is the Father of all and in whom we are all brothers one of another."\textsuperscript{19}

As official church bodies struggled to define structures for union which served as a workable compromise and searched for a middle ground to discourage the threat of further division, the Woman's Missionary Council attempted to articulate a vision of society dominated by Christian teachings of human equality under God and to move the church to model these values for the larger society. With heartfelt conviction, the leaders of southern Methodist women knew that structural segregation within the new denomination would deprive them and other Methodists of a dimension of religious experience which had come to them from working with black Methodist women. The southern Methodist women had gleaned from Jesus' teachings a set of relational values which, in 1937, the Committee on Research and Study of Status of Women identified: "(1) The supreme worth of the individual; (2) his direct responsibility to God; (3) the obligation of unselfish service laid on all irrespective of sex; (4) human brotherhood; and (5) Divine fatherhood."\textsuperscript{20} The value of the divine fatherhood of God was its claim that all people were equally children of God regardless of race.

Portions of the statement from the Woman's Missionary Council were picked up by the religious press. Perhaps surprised by the openness of

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{19}Twenty-seventh Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council, 1937, 142-143. The full text of this report is provided in Appendix A.
such a large organization of southern women to the possibility of an inter racial church without a racially segregated jurisdictional system, the Christian Century considered the possibility that had other representatives formed the Commission on Unification, the southern Methodist church might have accepted some other plan of union. The WMC Study Group raised doubts as to whether the plan of unification was the best possible plan and wondered whether its “ethical imperfections” would become permanent or if people would be able, within its framework, to continue “working ever toward a more brotherly union.” With the uniting conference close at hand the WMC had urged women to make an earnest effort to elect women delegates to General Conference from each annual conference. The Committee on Status of Women reported the successful election of fifty-four women delegates who would be able to vote their conscience and speak to the issue of the Central Jurisdiction.

In spite of careful preparation of their report, the position of the Woman’s Missionary Council was rejected by the General Conference. Methodist women, whose feelings were discredited and points of view denied by this action, expressed concern about the status of women.

In reading biblical texts about racial equality, Methodist women had found scriptural grounding for gender equality as well. The WMC found support for an inclusive gospel in Jesus’ attitude shown toward women. Among scriptural citations the Methodist women drew strength from the story of the Samaritan woman at the well which spoke to them of both gender and racial inclusiveness. In this encounter, “one of the earliest declarations of the wideness of the gospel message,” Jesus spoke “to a woman of bad reputation and of a despised race, thus giving great emphasis to the idea of the universal fatherhood of God and the universal sisterhood of women.”

Methodist women had struggled hard for full ordination rights. Once laity rights were won (in 1922 in the MECS), organized Methodist women increased pressure for women’s clergy rights. The fact that women in the Methodist Episcopal Church won the right to be ordained as local pastors in 1924 and that women in the Methodist Protestant Church could be ordained as local pastors in 192425 and that women in the Methodist Protestant Church could be ordained as local pastors in 1924

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21 “The Southern church—whatever its representatives on the commission may have thought—would probably have been ready to approve unification without the racial segregation feature.” Culver, 76, citing “Southern Methodist Women Ask Searching Questions,” Christian Century 54 (April 21, 1937), 509. The Woman’s Missionary Council’s statement was adopted in March, 1937, and was quoted in Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, Department of Research and Education, “The Race Issue in Methodist Unification,” Information Service, 16 (April 3, 1937), 2. Cited by Dwight Culver, Negro Segregation in The Methodist Church, 71. The surprise of Dwight Culver at the discovery that the Woman’s Missionary Council opposed the formation of the Central Jurisdiction spoke of the omission of their work in race relations from Methodist accounts of the 1920s and 1930s.


ordained encouraged the southern Methodist women.²⁶ Starting in 1926 and continuing at every succeeding General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the Woman’s Missionary Council submitted a memorial calling for women clergy to be granted full ordination and conference membership. The margin of defeat was narrow enough that in 1931 hopes were high that at the next conference authority would be given for full ordination and conference membership for women.²⁷ However, one bargaining chip for the 1939 merger was an agreement reached by church leaders that women would not be eligible for full clergy rights in the new denomination.²⁸

The WMC closed its third decade with a constituency of 312,000 women,²⁹ a figure approximately equal to the 323,347 black members of the MEC³⁰ whose presence had been the subject of extended unification talks. If the white women compared their political strength with that of their black brothers and sisters they might have noticed that there were two black bishops—Bishop Robert E. Jones and Bishop Matthew W. Clair—who entered the united church and not one woman minister with full credentials. There were guarantees for representation of black men in high offices of the church, but no constitutional rights ensured for women. The Woman’s Missionary Council protested the church’s discrimination against women who made up approximately two-thirds of the church membership, “yet have very limited representation on Conference Boards and Commissions. . . .”³¹ The Council’s memorial to the 1940 General Conference argued, “We believe . . . the Church . . . [needs] to conserve to the Church the genius, power and inspiration of faithful called and prepared women. . . .”³² The memorial asking General Conference to enable women to be full members of annual conferences and thus have full clergy rights in The Methodist Church was defeated on the grounds that the church had enough to do regarding the merger. Women’s rights would have to wait.

²⁵Women in the Methodist Episcopal Church who were ordained as local pastors could baptize and serve Holy Communion in their own church only. They did not hold membership and could not vote in the annual conference, nor were they members of conference boards, agencies, or committees.


²⁸Full clergy rights for women, although the subject of appeal by Methodist women at every succeeding General Conference, were not granted until 1956.

²⁹Cited in a letter from the Woman’s Missionary Council (“Mrs. W. M. Alexander, Chairman; Mrs. Ida R. Groover, Secretary.”) to President F. D. Roosevelt, March 10, 1940. Thirtieth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council, 1940, 32.


³¹Thirtieth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council, 1940, 180. With the exception of a few women who held ex officio positions by virtue of their position in the Woman’s Society of Christian Service, church officers at the national, jurisdictional, annual conference, and local church levels were men.

³²Ibid., 33.