

THE CENTRAL JURISDICTION

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Nearly seven decades after the Methodist Episcopal Church divided into autonomous northern and southern branches in 1844, discussions for reunification began in earnest. Early on, the concept of formally segregating the church's African-American membership into a separate administrative unit was raised. It emerged as the Central Jurisdiction. And although it was abolished by 1969, it remains a source of controversy and contention to this day—if only as evidenced by the curious take on the issue in Robert W. Sledge's "A Step Back or A Step Forward?: The Creation of the Central Jurisdiction."¹

The Central Jurisdiction became denominational law as The Methodist Church was formed in 1939, the culmination of decades of negotiation between the northern Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church. The merger of the Methodist Church with the United Evangelical Brethren Church in 1969 marked the end of the Central Jurisdiction, as African-American churches, conferences and bishops became fully integrated into the church's existing geographic units.

How should we remember the Central Jurisdiction as we approach 2019—the 80th Anniversary of its formation and the 50th Anniversary of its dissolution? Should we view the formal racial division of the church as a shameful abandonment of Christian principles of equality and fairness? After all, Jesus did pray that his followers "may all be one" (John 17:21). Or, in prevalent church practices, was constitutional racial segregation a minor adjustment that actually accomplished much good for the church?

No one doubts that formalized racial segregation accommodated southern Methodists and their northern white allies who favored Jim Crow, thus enabling the ecclesiastical marriage that in 1939 made the Methodist Church the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. Apparently, however, there is a question in the minds of some as to whether the compromise that created the Central Jurisdiction was a detestable capitulation to the racism embedded in a good number of white Methodists or was instead a reasonable step that brought more positives than negatives to the unified church. For Robert Sledge, it is not a question as he fully supports the latter view: the Central Jurisdiction was a positive, progressive step in the evolution of the Methodist Church, and those who persist in arguing otherwise are ignoring

¹ Robert W. Sledge, "A Step Back or a Step Forward? The Creation of the Central Jurisdiction," *Methodist History* 54.1 (October, 2015): 5-36.

pertinent facts while being driven by emotion. (One can just about hear him decry the “political correctness” underlying the opposing position.)

It can be helpful from time to time to revisit historic events and the interpretations around them, and fifty years after the end of the Central Jurisdiction is as good a time as any. But “revisit” does not necessarily require “revision.” Sledge claims to reluctantly don the hat of a revisionist historian, but does so to correct what he claims to be the prevailing “revisionist history” that regrets the church’s racial compromise. By challenging what he notes as the predominant understanding of the Central Jurisdiction he maintains that “the original interpretation is shown to be not so bad after all.”² He presents the balance he tries to provide as a regular process in American historiography.

This is not the place for a full discussion of the revisionist impulse in American historiography, but it can be noted here that not all revisions are further revised so as to vindicate earlier or even “original” interpretations. The “original” triumphal tales of American conquest and westward expansion have been revised so as to not ignore the oppression and racism that brought devastation to the Native American peoples and civilizations; “corrective” revisions of that revision have not been forthcoming. In a similar manner, postbellum southern interpretations of the Civil War cited “states’ rights” as the cause of the war, and not the maintenance and expansion of slavery; contemporary white supremacist screeds notwithstanding, prevailing historical interpretations of the war locate slavery at the center of the bloody conflict.

As society’s values evolve and change, so will its views of history evolve and change. Truly “objective” history, though ideal, is ultimately unattainable; facts can be objective but interpretations of those facts will always be colored by the experiences and values of the interpreter. Historians do more than just report facts. We examine them in their appropriate contexts and offer interpretations. If our work is informed and fair, our interpretations may be accepted and can, over time, become the prevailing view among later historians and readers of history. If racial attitudes in the United States and the Methodist Church have changed over the last century, perhaps understandings of the Central Jurisdiction should change as well. But any understanding must be informed and fair, and so must not assume that there was an original acceptance of the Central Jurisdiction as being good for all involved.

Sledge is to be commended for the breadth of the sources he calls on to support his views on the Central Jurisdiction. Indeed, his bibliography offers to subsequent investigators a fairly thorough introduction to the history and historiography of the Central Jurisdiction. Had he used those sources in a fair manner, however, he would need to significantly temper or altogether abandon his revisionist views. In addition to his peculiar selection of facts, his thesis relies on a number of false assumptions. To drive home his argument, he concludes by articulating a number of charges made about

² Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 22.

the Central Jurisdiction that he then systematically attempts to refute. The remainder of this article will address the implied assumptions and articulated “charges” presented by Sledge so that readers of both works will have a balanced basis for assessing the value and role of the Central Jurisdiction.

Essential to Sledge’s argument is the existence of segregation in the Methodist Episcopal Church prior to the formation of the Central Jurisdiction. Sledge promulgates that as a result, the segregation mandated by the creation of the Central Jurisdiction was not new, and should not have been—and should not be—a cause of distress or offense. As he states:

The problem here is that racial segregation did *not* begin in 1939 with the Central Jurisdiction and the CJ was in no way inferior to the other five jurisdictions. Racial segregation was already *fully* in place in the MECS from 1870 and in the MEC from 1895. Yet it is somehow taken to be fact that the Central Jurisdiction *introduced* racial segregation.³

It is certainly true that racial segregation within Methodism did not begin in 1939. On the local church level it can be traced back to the eighteenth century and incidents like the one at St. George’s that contributed to the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination.⁴ But not all instances of segregation, not all episodes of racial separation are equal. Segregation in the Methodist Episcopal Church, both north and south, had different causes and effects at different times and places. Sledge mistakenly assumes that segregation in the 1850s was the same as segregation in 1865 or 1870, 1895, 1919, and 1936, etc.

The 1844 division that resulted in the northern Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS), had the effect of opening up the southern slave population as a mission field for Methodist missionaries since the MECS, was not tainted with the anti-slavery stance embedded (though often ignored) in the 1784 founding documents of the MEC. African Americans were targeted for membership, and by 1858 the MECS counted 404,430 of them as members. Though accepted as members, African Americans did not share equal rights with whites. As preachers, they were local and appointed to locations by quarterly conferences and denied annual conference membership; assignment to a circuit was rare, and the positions of presiding elder and bishop were out of the question.⁵ Of course, literacy for African Americans was proscribed by law,

³ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 11.

⁴ In 1792, segregation at St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia along with its accompanying insult spurred on the departure of the church’s African members. Some of them under the leadership of Richard Allen became the nucleus that went on to form the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816. For Allen’s first hand account, see Richard Allen, *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1960) 25-26. For a more recent account with the correct date of the incident, see Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800: The Making of Evangelical America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000), 146.

⁵ Katherine Dvorak, *An African-American Exodus: The Segregation of the Southern Churches* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1991), 46-48.

and so there were not great numbers who could meet minimal standards for elder's orders.⁶ Other laws prevented the church from protecting slave unions or the integrity of slave families. Nevertheless, along with segregated local worship (often, but not always under white preaching) there were opportunities for integrated revivals and camp meetings.⁷

The Civil War ushered in great changes for all aspects of southern life, including religion. At its start the Mobile, Alabama, conference estimated that MECS African-American membership had dropped to 200,000.⁸ By 1866 that number had dropped to 78,742, with the most precipitous decline taking place in the sixteen months following the end of the war.⁹ December of 1870, marked the departure of the last African-American members from the MECS, and interracial interaction and cooperation among southern Methodists effectively ended for the next century. The story of that decline and departure of African-American members is where the discussion of segregation and the Central Jurisdiction begins.

In 1861, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, began to decry the loss of some of its African-American members. How the loss took place during the tumultuous years of the war and its aftermath was complex, varying according to location and time. Katherine Dvorak has analyzed that process in depth in her book, *An African-American Exodus: The Segregation of the Southern Churches*, and those interested in the details need to consult her work.¹⁰ It is clear that at their first opportunity, African Americans left the MECS (and other southern denominations) in order to organize and run their own religious affairs. Throughout the antebellum period, African Americans in the south had developed a distinctive style of worship. Contemporary observers invariably noted the high levels of energy and emotion that were features of African-American worship. A distinctive music tradition and biblical hermeneutic also evolved, and with the prospects of freedom, African Americans were anxious to take charge of their own religious affairs. African-American Methodists, however, were generally proud of their denominational roots and they sought to remain Methodist, but with higher levels of autonomy. In leaving the MECS, many found homes in the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ), and the Methodist Episcopal Church. The competition among these denominations to harvest the members who had been careful-

⁶ Jay S. Stowell, *Methodist Adventures In Negro Education* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1922), 34-35.

⁷ A. M. Chreitzberg, *Methodism in the Carolinas* ([1897] Spartanburg, SC: The Reprint Company, 1972), 158-160. Though African Americans might attend services and revivals with whites, seating was usually segregated. At Holy Communion whites were invariably served first.

⁸ Dvorak, *An African-American Exodus*, 61.

⁹ Dvorak, *An African-American Exodus*, 87, 69.

¹⁰ In the ten years between 1861 and 1870, conditions for African-American Methodists changed several times, from the onset of war, to liberation in some areas as the Union army seized control, to the end of the war and "Radical" Reconstruction when the military maintained order in the South, and to Redemption, when under new state constitutions white southerners once more governed their own affairs. Dvorak illuminates the differences.

ly cultivated for years by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, was a source of contention between them and the MECS. At times and places the MECS, agreed to release control of congregations and property to AME and AMEZ representatives, but the practice was neither widespread nor long lived. MECS's resentment of northern Methodist Episcopal encroachments into the southern mission field ran high and hot.

So, the initial segregation of southern Methodism during the war era was prompted by African-American action. At the 1864 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, formal sanction was given to the formation of African-American pastorates, and the first two African-American annual conferences were organized. These actions were taken after being recommended by the "Committee on the State of the Work Among the Colored People," which had delegated representation from African-American churches in Maryland, Delaware, and the District of Columbia, and saw these steps as the best way to expand the church's work among African Americans.¹¹ Statements about that work from the conference are worth noting here verbatim:

As a church we have never sought, do not now seek, to ignore our duty to the colored population . . . Justice to those who have been enslaved requires that in all the privileges of citizenship, as well as in all the other rights of common manhood, there shall be no distinction founded on color.¹²

Resolved, by the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Conference assembled, That it is the duty of our church to encourage *colored pastorates* for *colored people* wherever practicable, and to contribute to their efficiency by every means in our power.

Resolved, that the efficiency of said pastorates can be best promoted by distinct conference organizations, and that therefore the bishops be, and they are hereby, authorized to organize among our colored ministers, for the benefit of our colored members and population, mission conferences—one or more—where, in their godly judgment, the exigencies of the work may demand it, and, should more than one be organized, to determine their boundaries until the meeting of the next General Conference, said conference or conferences to possess all the powers usual to mission annual conferences: *Provided*, that nothing in this resolution be so construed as to impair the existing constitutional rights of our colored members on the one hand, or to forbid, on the other, the transfer of white ministers to said conference or conferences where it may be practicable and deemed necessary.¹³

It is likely that not every lay and clergy member of the northern church worked diligently to ensure that African-American members and churches enjoyed unobstructed constitutional rights within either the church or society. But considering that these words were sanctioned by the General Conference while the Civil War raged and slavery still reigned in parts of the south, the Methodist Episcopal Church appeared to many—and especially to its African-American constituents—as being solidly progressive. True

¹¹ L. M. Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Cincinnati: Cranston and Stowe, 1890), 138, 139, 142-143.

¹² Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 137.

¹³ Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 140.

and full equality for all, irrespective of color, was the expressed ideal, and progressives of all colors in the church looked to the future for its fulfillment.

Southern Methodists may have paternalistically lamented the loss of their African-American members early on, but they were not prepared to issue similar statements or to put in place programs designed to help freed persons take full advantage of their new status.¹⁴

In fact, this northern ideal was a key recruitment tool for attracting African-Americans to the northern church. In his history of that church's efforts in the Reconstruction era, Ralph Morrow noted the words of Methodist missionaries working in the south:

Timothy W. Lewis, negotiating in Charleston with freedmen who had assembled to decide on their future church relations countered the pleas of Southern Methodist clergymen "to stay with us in your old places in the galleries" with the declaration that "there will be no galleries in heaven [and] those who are willing to go with a church that makes no distinction as to race or color, follow me." Lewis's valiant effort won him the field. The most effective device for the ingathering of the colored population, many Methodists maintained, was the announcement "that there was no distinction in Methodist Episcopal churches; that colored people have the same privileges as whites." "The equality of relations enjoyed by black and white was the rallying cry which gathered the people to us," reminisced one missionary veteran of the Southwest. Freedmen who had apostatized to the "Mother Methodism" periodically confirmed the observations of whites. The Methodist Episcopal Church was the "only church for black men," averred one prominent Negro convert, because "it . . . welcomes all Americans, white or colored . . . to the equal enjoyment of its privileges."¹⁵

By 1867, a district within an African-American missionary conference in Kentucky was overseen by a presiding elder of color.¹⁶ The MEC General Conference in 1868 built on the foundation it laid in 1864. At the suggestion of the bishops, the conference seated James Davis and Benjamin Brown as delegates with full rights; they had been duly elected as representatives by

¹⁴ Lewis Hagood, an African-American elder in the MEC published a history of African-Americans in the American Methodist movement in 1890. He characterized the southern Methodist attitude towards African Americans during and after slavery as follows: "Amid the religious training received from that part of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, that trained them at all, did not appear anything different from the system of slavery in vogue, save the promise of an eternal Sabbath. It is true a colored membership was reported by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South; but this did not mean that the colored people within that Church were permitted to worship God in their own congregations, or that there were any colored pastors or class-leaders among that membership. If slavery had continued, the condition of the colored man religiously could never have become better. Just how—unless force of circumstances played a part in the drama—a brotherly feeling could have arisen or existed in the bosom of the poor colored man under that régime, we can not, for the life of us, surmise. But all that was ended with the war, and still there was but little, if any, change. The withdrawals at first opportunity of colored people from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, meant something. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, was then, at any rate, unwilling to educate the colored man," Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 150-151.

¹⁵ Ralph E. Morrow, *Northern Methodism and Reconstruction* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State UP, 1956), 130.

¹⁶ Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 155.

their respective African-American annual conferences.¹⁷ Bishops in Kentucky were authorized to organize additional African-American conferences under the same provisos as the 1864 mission conferences “if said [colored] ministers request it; and if, in the judgment of the bishops, the interest of the work requires it.”¹⁸

As time progressed, more conferences were requested and organized, and as the bulk of the African-American population was in the south, the boundary dividing the southern church from the northern existed on paper only—to the chagrin of the MECS. Some white congregations were also organized in the south by the northern church, presumably among carpetbaggers and others drawn to Methodism but not to the southern Methodist church. For a period after the war, there was a significant disparity between the education and training of white church leaders (exhorters, class leaders, ordained preachers, etc.) and those emerging out of African-American congregations. It is clear that African-Americans at that time could not rise in the church hierarchy if weighed on the same scale as whites. Prevailing social practices in the post-war South also made certain levels of interracial interaction difficult even for sympathetic whites. It ought not be surprising that separate conferences were requested and, given the results in increasing African-American membership, granted.

Unpolished as many African-American preachers were, they proved to be capable of conveying the truth of the Christian faith and the essentials of Methodist belief and practice. Dr. John Walden of the Freedman’s Aid Society of the MEC reported:

Two courses were open—one to delay employing colored preachers until they could be educated, the other to put these untutored men to work at once. No people ever needed the gospel more than did the freed people. Standing in the midst of new relations, the possessors of a new-found freedom for which they had never been trained, they needed both the restraints and the inspiration of the gospel. The Wesleyan prescience of our Church recognized this need, and at the same time the fact that these unlearned preachers, if divinely called, could so tell the story of the Cross as to benefit their people. The lives of many of these men had been an unbroken period of slave-toil; but the sequel proves that they knew enough of the saving power of Christ and the fullness of his love to instruct their hearers in the way of life, and we now see that their relation to this work was not unlike to that of the first of Wesley’s lay preachers to their work among their own classes in England.¹⁹

Writing in retrospect in 1883, Walden was impressed with the strides African-American preachers had made in education through study, observation and experience.²⁰ If the initial racial segregation of conferences in the South was due in part because of racial differences in education and training, it might be expected that as the gap in skills between African Americans and whites closed, the need or desire for separate conferences would diminish as

¹⁷ Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 154-155.

¹⁸ Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 156.

¹⁹ Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 158.

²⁰ Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 160-161. Walden was later elected bishop.

well—at least from the African-American perspective.

Not all Methodists shared the same views on the reasons for segregated conferences. Dr. Atticus Greene Haygood (elected bishop in 1890) was reportedly not alone when he attributed “race instinct” as the reason why African Americans desired separate conferences, stating, “Instinct never surrendered to arguments; it is their race instinct, deep and strong and inexpugnable.”²¹ At least one African-American Methodist disagreed. Lewis Hagood countered Haygood, stating:

“Is it race instinct” that tends to segregate the colored man? We answer, No. His desire to segregate is only a self-defensive measure. The colored man in this country is *desperately* in earnest in his effort to remove every vestige of the prejudice against him arising from his previous condition of servitude.²²

Though Hagood had earlier praised the results attributable to that segregation, he apparently viewed it as a temporary measure, an interval step on the way to full inclusion and equality.

With no surveys at the time, it is impossible to know how many African-American Methodists shared Hagood’s optimistic perspective. When the 1884 General Conference elected African Americans as a secretary of the conference, Secretary of the Committee on the State of the Church, and editor-in-chief of one of the church newspapers, Hagood saw good progress being made toward full acceptance.

In reading Hagood’s history one gets the sense that the enthusiasm for ministry among African Americans and the extension to them of full rights within Methodist Episcopal Church proclaimed during and just after the Civil War had begun to wane among some whites in the church as the new century approached. As he reported General Conference actions and other church developments, he carefully included stated oppositions to the full inclusion of African Americans in the church on equal terms with whites. Problems became evident in the South among MEC members, and all northern voices were not unified in support of African Americans.²³ After praising earlier General Conferences, he described the actions regarding race of the 1884 General Conference as being “enigmatical.”²⁴ Hagood for one did not expect segregated southern conferences to extend into other areas of church life, devoting an entire chapter to the disparity between “theory” and “practice” concerning racial equality in the Methodist Episcopal Church.²⁵

²¹ Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 198.

²² Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 199.

²³ Hagood particularly features three issues. Voices were raised to insist that MEC Freedman’s Aid Society funds be used to support white educational institutions as well as African-American. Shortly after the MEC founded Chattanooga University, a new professor refused to shake the hand of an African-American pastor and made disparaging remarks about the race. The school also refused to enroll six African-American applicants. Despite protests from the Freedman’s Aid Society and others, the school’s trustees refused to dismiss the professor and persisted in segregating the school, generating much discussion in print from which Hagood quotes liberally. See Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, chapters XI, XII and XIII.

²⁴ Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 230.

²⁵ Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 259-291.

Racial attitudes are not static, they are open to fluctuation and change. Katherine Dvorak traces changes in the racial attitudes within the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, from the years preceding the Civil War to the years immediately following. That church lamented the loss of its African-American members at the start of the war. The concern was no doubt genuine, but was nevertheless profoundly paternalistic and in no way considered full equality with African Americans as a possibility in either the church or society. When the comparatively few African Americans remaining in MECS in 1870 were formed into the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church with the full blessing of the MECS, the southern church comfortably settled into its new life as a completely white church.²⁶ Similarly, Lewis Hagood traced changes in racial attitudes within the Methodist Episcopal Church, as strident declarations of equality and full rights for all in 1864 were less than stridently enforced by 1884.

Shifts in racial attitudes necessarily created shifts in the understanding of segregation in the church on the part of both whites and African Americans. The backdrop that framed the formation of segregated MEC conferences in the 1860s had begun to change by the 1880s. This was the period in which the rich promises of emancipation and Radical Reconstruction dissolved with Redemption when the class that governed the South before the war regained control and thrust out of office African Americans who had been elected to civic offices. The backdrop changed more dramatically through the 1890s, when African Americans were lynched at a rate of one every three days and, despite constitutional amendments to the contrary, Jim Crow reigned over the South when the Plessy vs. Ferguson decision of the Supreme Court in 1896 sanctioned “separate but equal” as properly American.

Further deterioration of race relations were ushered in with the twentieth century. White mobs attacked African Americans in both the North and the South in the wake of Jack Johnson’s seizure of the World Heavyweight Championship in 1910. African Americans were lured north by the promise of factory jobs, with the migration spurred on by the production demands of World War I; competition for jobs, housing, etc., erupted in racial violence in northern cities. The summer of 1919 became known as Red Summer as about twenty-five race riots broke out all over United States. African Americans were massacred in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921, and in Rosewood, Florida in 1923.²⁷ Though rarely mentioned in denominational histories that cover these years, these events were certainly known by all Methodists and experienced by many.

The decades-long process of unifying the Methodist Church took place amidst the nation’s violent racial environment. By the time unification talks began around 1911 the legal segregation of Jim Crow was firmly in place

²⁶ Dvorak, *An African-American Exodus*.

²⁷ These incidents have been documented, described, discussed and analyzed in numerous works. For example, see John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans, 6th Edition* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1988).

in the former confederate states. The church segregation that was seen by African Americans as a temporary accommodation due to the inequities in place at the time of emancipation had become an accepted, even preferred way of life for most white Methodists in the South. The racial climate of the nation notwithstanding, African Americans in the Methodist Episcopal Church clung to the words of the church promising equal treatment and full inclusion. With the coming of the new century, African-American calls for the election of an African-American bishop for the Methodist Episcopal Church became more insistent.

Calls for such a bishop had begun as early as the General Conference of 1872. An African-American bishop assigned for work in the United States (and not restricted to work overseas in Liberia, as was the case as early as 1858 with Francis Burns) was seen by African Americans as an important marker of inclusion and progress. It was also seen as essential for countering charges made by African Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal Zion missionaries in the South that full equality in the MEC for persons of color was impossible. On this issue Lewis Hagood, in 1890, remained hopeful that bishops of color would be elected on an equal basis with whites, believing that the time would come and that 1872 had not been that time.

Election to the office of bishop from among candidates who are mutually equal cannot be determined on the ground of color or any other special consideration. It can only be by fair and honorable competition among the friends of the respective candidates. And yet the presentation of a well-qualified man of African descent would, doubtless, secure very general support in view of the great interests of the Church, which would thereby be more abundantly promoted. No such opportunity, however, has been afforded at this [1872] General Conference.²⁸

Hagood persisted in assigning the best motives to the Methodist Episcopal Church leadership, writing that “In many instances the church did not do what we asked, in others it did not do what others thought it should have done; but time and experience have taught us it did generally what was best.”²⁹ Writing some twenty years later another African American in the MEC, John Bowen, affirmed love for his church with less patience for the lack of bishops of color.

We know that we were not prepared for a different treatment forty years ago, but we know that we are prepared for it today. The truth is we have outgrown our baby clothes, but our great, good, and loving mother—God bless her! and may not a hair of her good gray head be touched—insists that we are still children and persists in treating her overgrown children as though they were still babes in her lap to be crooned over.³⁰

By Bowen’s day, a significant number of African Americans had acquired

²⁸ Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 171.

²⁹ Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 172.

³⁰ J. W. E. Bowen, *An Appeal for Negro Bishops But No Separation* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1912), 27.

education and training to be considered for the episcopacy on the same terms as whites, but the number of African-American delegates at General Conference was not sufficient to achieve election on terms equal with whites. When in 1920, the first African-American bishops were elected for service in the United States, they were elected on a special ballot that was only open to African-American candidates. African-American Methodists settled for what was possible, postponing again their hopes for the ideal.

As Hagood noted in the late nineteenth century, some calls had begun for African Americans in the Methodist Episcopal Church to leave and join with the AME, AMEZ and CME denominations to form one mega African-American Methodist church that would have fraternal relations with the MEC along the lines that the CME church had established with the MECS. He quotes extensively from a book written by John Wright—a layman from Philadelphia—in which such an arrangement is advocated. Wright doubted that “the colored ministers can be so educated as to continue in the Methodist Episcopal Church without any serious danger to its interests.” If they can be so educated, would they not be of better service tied to the African-American denominations? Wright had clear ideas about the future of segregation in the MEC.

The idea of separation for better work is not new among us There is a law of association that is the best regulator of such questions. That a separation into conferences on the color-line will become general is inevitable.³¹

Though he saw the church segregation of his day increasing and eventually leading to separate churches, Hagood strongly disagreed:

In a word, the white and colored membership within the Church is, according to the enactments of the General Conference, equal in all that pertains to Church membership and privileges. Hence there is now no cause for the colored membership seeking separation from the Church. “We know not what a day may bring forth;” but, judging the future by the past, there will never come a time when it will be *absolutely necessary* for the Church to put away its colored membership, nor an *absolute necessity* for the colored membership to withdraw from the Church. The question of the inferiority of the colored man within the Church to the average white member within the Church, is fast disappearing, whether we speak of this in General or annual conferences. The Methodist Episcopal Church is turning out enough young colored men from her universities, colleges, and schools, from Boston to Austin, Texas, each year *to form an annual conference*. The graduates from her schools are everywhere joining the Church and conferences, and, to a certain extent, coping with those whose chances have been more favorable. No absolute necessity for separation exists, and, for that matter, may never exist.³²

Hagood clearly saw the existing church segregation as a result of disparities in training and ability, disparities that he saw as rapidly diminishing and presumably with it the segregation. For some reason he remained hopeful about the future of African Americans within the Methodist Episcopal Church, trusting the clear pronouncements that had been made throughout the de-

³¹ Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 299.

³² Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 294-295.

cares following the Civil War. Those pronouncements were accompanied by major efforts to establish educational opportunities and institutions to serve the newly freed population. As time progressed and the commitment of white Methodists to the development and full inclusion of African Americans began to wane, African Americans continued to profess their devotion to the MEC and their hopes for fair and equal treatment.

So, racial segregation evolved in the Methodist Episcopal Church during and after the Civil War. Over time, the church gained white members in the South along with African Americans, and the segregation that was established by mutual consent due to differences in worship styles and leadership development was viewed from two different perspectives. Racial attitudes in the South soured into violence and Jim Crow, and as African-American migration to the North increased in the twentieth century, racial violence in the North increased also. More whites viewed segregation in the church as inevitable, desirable and permanent. On the other hand, African Americans in the church continued to believe that with education and training, the need for segregation would diminish. Despite incidents that spread segregation in the church beyond separate annual conferences, they held out hope that full equality and inclusion would come. How could a church that proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ do any less? African Americans dared to believe that the church, though far from perfect, would move on towards perfection.

Given this background, the segregation represented by the Central Jurisdiction proposed in the Plan of Union was not the same as the segregation initially authorized in the Methodist Episcopal Church by the actions of its 1864 General Conference. The original reason for annual conferences that were, by mutual consent, divided along racial lines was an accommodation for differences in worship styles and sensibilities as well as an acknowledgment of the deficit in education and training among the newly freed population. The creation of the Central Jurisdiction was, by contrast, not by mutual consent, and was solely an accommodation to the racial prejudices that had been nurtured in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, through its post-1870 life as an all-white church and its residence in a nation with continuing racial conflict. That the new arrangement would be embedded in the church's constitution was another indication that "the new plan" was, contrary to Sledge's contention, in no way just "barely different from the existing structure."³³ African Americans in the MEC had viewed the segregated conferences as a temporary step on the road to full inclusion. Those hopes were dashed by the Central Jurisdiction.

Sledge outlines a number of "charges" concerning the Central Jurisdiction that he purports to address. Clarity demands that these charges and his responses to them be addressed.

Charge #1: The Central Jurisdiction was a racist plan imposed by the ME Church, South as a condition for union in 1939. It was immoral, un-Christian, and unnecessary.

³³ Sledge, "A Step Back or a Step Forward?", 9.

Sledge is certain that the Central Jurisdiction was “racial,” but is less certain that its creation was “racist.” He does admit that it was a prerequisite for Methodist reunion “given the attitudes of the South.” It is not clear what definition of “racist” Sledge uses in order to doubt the racist dimensions of the Central Jurisdiction, especially while acknowledging the particular “attitudes of the South.”³⁴ To be charitable, at the time there were conceptions of Christianity and morality—particularly southern conceptions—that saw the Central Jurisdiction as fully moral and therefore in no conflict with Christianity. But it is not at all clear what he means by calling it “unnecessary.” He presents no evidence that anyone at any time has suggested that reunion could have taken place to include African-American members without the Central Jurisdiction. The alternative to it from the southern church perspective was the complete expulsion of all African-American members of the Methodist Episcopal Church. If reunion were to occur with African Americans as members of the new church, the Central Jurisdiction was certainly necessary. Implied in this view, however, is that reunion itself was somehow *necessary* or *required*. Was the goal of reunion so vital that it was worth the compromise of ethics and brotherhood represented by the Central Jurisdiction? Sledge apparently assumes that everyone—then and now—agrees that Methodist reunion was an ultimate good. Beyond giving Methodists temporary bragging rights as the nation’s largest Protestant denomination, what was the inherent good in reunion? Perhaps racism is acceptable if it is essential for “the art of the possible!”

It may well be correct that “the MEC membership generally approved of segregation.”³⁵ With the bulk of the MEC’s African-American members in the South and the bulk of its white members in the North, the new arrangement would present few changes in the experience of the majority of its white members. African-American members saw it differently. Seeing the existing segregation in the church as a mutually agreed, temporary, even self-defensive step on the road to full church inclusion, enshrining segregation in the constitution of the church was motion in the opposite direction. As George Lewis, an African-American delegate from the Tennessee Conference stated during the 1936 General Conference debate over the Plan of Union, “What we have now is from choice, but what you are about to give us is from law, and there is a tremendous difference between choice and force.”³⁶

A constitutional mandate is, by definition, not “temporary.” Though we can now look back and realize that it only lasted some thirty years, that was never clear at the outset. Procedures for altering the church constitution are purposely burdensome in order to prevent major shifts in church structure from being made on a whim or as a passing fad. There was no guarantee

³⁴ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 23.

³⁵ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 23.

³⁶ Quoted in Dwight W. Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953), 72.

that the Central Jurisdiction would not last, and we can safely assume that members of the MECS, saw the solution as being as permanent as the option for total expulsion would have been. African-American Methodists who had increasingly endured Jim Crow segregation in their civic lives expected more from their church.

Charge #2: The MEC blacks were “sacrificial lambs.”

Sledge claims that to call African Americans “sacrificial lambs” in the reunification process is “unwarranted hyperbole.”³⁷ After all, in any compromise, no side gets everything it wants, and according to Sledge, in the new church African Americans gained more than they lost.

The basic outline of the final Plan of Union had been proposed as early as 1911.³⁸ The most contentious aspect of the plan was the issue of the Central Jurisdiction. Even Bishop Moore, no fan of church integration, noted that with the northern and southern churches “the Negro was made the chief obstacle to union by both groups.”³⁹ The south opposed the Central Jurisdiction because it allowed African Americans to remain in the united church, and it took some decades for the urge towards reunion to convince southerners to tolerate African Americans at the General Conference level. Some progressive white northern church members joined with their African-American siblings to resist the racial insult the plan required, but by 1936 the momentum for reunion had won over enough of them to allow the constitutional change. All agree that the status of African Americans in the united church was the main point of contention.

“Compromise” as a concept presupposes equality between the compromising parties; if not actual equality in numbers and power, an equal ability to prevent the compromise is understood. Without this equality, compromise is *not possible*, only domination and submission. African Americans were not equal partners in the process of ratifying the Plan of Union. Had it been so, the northern church would have polled its African-American members and made acceptance of the plan contingent upon a favorable African-American consensus. That clearly did not happen, and an examination of the votes on the Plan of Union and the annual conference ratification process makes this evident.

So how did African-American delegates to the 1936 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church vote on the Plan of Union? Accounts differ, but Sledge contends that an error made by James P. Brawley in 1967 concerning that vote has been repeated over and over again, feeding subsequent incorrect negative notions about the Central Jurisdiction. According to Sledge, Brawley notes “that eleven black delegates abstained rather than cast

³⁷ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 24.

³⁸ See for example, “The Report of the Joint Commissions and of the Action Thereon of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South,” as reproduced in the appendix of *Breaking Down the Walls: A Contribution to Methodist Unification*, by Earl Cranston (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1915), 177-182. The joint commission met in May, 1911.

³⁹ Moore, *The Long Road to Methodist Union*, 198.

a vote for the pending Plan of Union while the rest voted no.”⁴⁰ Sledge then praises Paul A. Carter (writing in 1952) for noting correctly that the eleven actually voted in favor. It is helpful here to examine exactly what Carter had to say about the vote:

Of the 47 Negro delegates present and voting, 11 cast their ballots for, 36 against. “When the vote was announced,” the correspondent of the *Christian Century* reported, “the conference arose and broke forth into singing, ‘We’re marching to Zion.’ Many people of the colored race did not rise and did not sing”⁴¹

The positive votes in no way erase the fact that 77% of the African-American delegates rejected the Plan of Union, making the idea of eleven abstentions rather trivial. In no one’s account do the African-American votes in favor of union come close to the number against.

Probably the best indication of African-American sentiment within the Methodist Episcopal Church for union is to be found in the votes among the various African-American conferences in the process of ratification. Peter Murray is the historian who has most recently examined that issue, and his analysis is instructive:

Most annual conferences voted overwhelmingly to approve, but African American annual conferences largely voted against, although not by the often-cited margin of seventeen of nineteen conferences disapproving. Five conferences presided over by the same white bishop voted for the plan. In no other African American annual conferences did ministers and laity vote for the plan, although in six conferences ministers and lay representatives split. Eight African American annual conferences voted solidly against it. Overall, both ministers and lay delegates voted against the plan, with ministers opposing it by an 823 to 583 count and the laity opposed, 437 to 250.⁴²

Is it just coincidental that the five conferences presided over by the same white bishop just happened to accept the plan? It can easily be imagined that the bishop was under some degree of scrutiny—if not outright pressure—to deliver his conferences as supporters of the plan lest he and his leadership receive blame for a failure to achieve union. It can also be imagined that a degree of deference to the office of bishop (perhaps along with a concern among pastors about how they might be viewed by the bishop during the appointment process) might have influenced the outcome in those conferences. Regardless, Murray’s accounting had African-American clergy overall reject the plan by 59% over 41%, and African-American laity rejecting it by the wider margin of 64% over 36%. From at least 1936, African-Americans were far from happy with the notion of a Central Jurisdiction, and actual vote counts, though helpful, are unable to fully convey the precise level of anger or satisfaction associated with the plans for formal segregation. It would be foolish to assume that all, or even most, of those who voted in favor were en-

⁴⁰ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 10.

⁴¹ Carter, “The Negro and Methodist Union,” 63.

⁴² Peter C. Murray, *Methodists and the Crucible of Race, 1930-1975* (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 2004), 42. Culver reported that nine out of nineteen African-American conferences “voted against the proposed merger” (Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, 75).

thusiastic in their support, as they may have held their noses to vote for what they determined to be the less malodorous of evils. But the record is clear: at both the 1936 General Conference and the subsequent ratification process among the annual conferences, African Americans were decidedly against reunion on constitutionally segregated terms, and The Methodist Episcopal Church proceeded nonetheless.

Earl Cranston, a bishop in the northern church, was an early and energetic advocate of reunion. He noted the importance of respecting African-American views in the unification process.

Will the Church South agree to any plan that includes Negro membership and Negro representation in the General Conference? For the moment deferring direct answer, we suggest that the question could be appropriately amended by adding the words, "provided the Negro desires such a relation to the proposed organization." Both the negotiating bodies, having long ago recognized the Negro as a redeemed man, therefore eligible to full citizenship in the kingdom of Christ, and to all the benefits of saving grace on the same conditions as other men, have thereby jointly invested him with *manhood-consciousness*, and *freedom of choice* in matters affecting his own destiny. Nothing has happened to him in our church to take away this liberty. . . . To be sure, we have befriended him, but to befriend a man in need does not give the benefactor the right to dictate his career. The very assumption of such a right would rob benevolence of its fine essential quality.⁴³

His death in 1932 kept him from having a voice in the final steps towards unification, and so it will never be known how loudly he might have been an advocate for granting African Americans veto power over the final resolution of "the Negro problem." The choice given to African Americans was to accept the Central Jurisdiction or leave the united church, a choice not given to any of the "compromising" parties and a radical departure from the mutual agreement required when segregated conferences were being established after the Civil War. African Americans were simply outvoted at the 1936 General Conference and during the subsequent process of annual conference ratification. Did that in fact make African Americans "sacrificial lambs"? It is a matter of semantics that fails to alter the facts.

Charge #4: The CJ institutionalized racial segregation in the Methodist Church for the first time. In the process, black members and preachers were thereby set apart into a separate unit.

As argued above, all segregation is not equal; segregation did exist in the Methodist Episcopal Church before 1939, but the segregation mandated by the Central Jurisdiction and enshrined in the constitution of The Methodist Church was substantially different in kind from what preceded it. The statement by William McClain cited by Sledge certainly conveys the sense of the change it introduced, and, as noted above, in 1936 most African Americans throughout the Methodist Episcopal Church agreed with McClain's characterization. Writing segregation into the church's constitution is, by any

⁴³ Earl Cranston, *Breaking Down the Walls: A Contribution to Methodist Unification* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 11915), 142-143.

standard, a mark of formal institutionalization.

Though perhaps a bit tangential to this focus on the Central Jurisdiction, it may be useful to distinguish between “racism,” “race consciousness” and so-called “black racism”⁴⁴ as raised by Sledge. Leaving aside more sophisticated academic discussions of racism and inherent power relations and oppression, reviewing a basic dictionary definition of the term will suffice here:

racism. . . . 1. The belief that race accounts for differences in human character or ability and that a particular race is superior to others. 2. Discrimination or prejudice based on race.⁴⁵

The existence of the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* (an African-American Methodist publication), Gulfside Assembly (the African-American Methodist camp ground), and other African-American Methodist initiatives and programs, cannot be referred to as instances of “black racism.” Established prior to the Central Jurisdiction and designed to specifically meet the needs of African-American Methodists, they were in no way predicated upon a view that African Americans are superior to whites or any other race, nor were they instances of “prejudice based on race.” The same cannot be said about a number of white Methodist programs that specifically excluded African Americans for reasons properly defined as racist. The “self-segregation” of African-American Methodists for mutual support or to strategize in the midst of less than hospitable church and society environments may be instances of “race consciousness,” but in no way does it count as “racism” or “black racism.”

Charge #4: The CJ made segregation permanent in law.

As already stated above, the process of amending a constitution is made onerous precisely because such changes are expected to be rare. Sledge is correct in stating that in 1936 members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, expected the Central Jurisdiction to be permanent, just like those who promoted the passage of the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution expected Prohibition to be permanent. Great—and possibly naive—optimism (or was it faith?) on the part of some African-American Methodists in 1936 allowed them to hope that the onerous amendment process might be marshaled again before long to eliminate the Central Jurisdiction. It is hindsight that allows us to look back now and note the relatively short life of the Central Jurisdiction. It is interesting that Sledge acknowledges that, despite the advantages he says the Central Jurisdiction offered African Americans, members of it worked to change it from the moment of its inception.

Charge #5: It was a step backward in race relations.

Sledge claims unequivocally that the Central Jurisdiction was a *forward* step in race relations. Many in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, who

⁴⁴ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 25.

⁴⁵ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 1489.

resisted reunion because of the presence of African Americans at any level in the church, saw the Central Jurisdiction as a step backwards. As already noted above, a number of African Americans had viewed the segregation that existed in the Methodist Episcopal Church as a temporary step along the road to full inclusion in the church on an equal basis with whites. For them, the Central Jurisdiction was most definitely a step *backward*.

From 1870 to 1939, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, had successfully eliminated all African Americans from its membership. There were those who saw the limited contact former MECS members would have with African Americans at the General Conference level of the united church as a step forward. It remains a matter of perspective as to whether one celebrates that step as a major leap forward, a minimal inching forward, or something between the two. As in many issues of race in the United States, African-American and white views differed. Sledge argues that the Central Jurisdiction was indeed a step forward for African Americans because of advantages it offered, like the autonomy to elect African-American bishops. Though electing bishops on a segregated basis increased the number of African-American bishops and afforded African-American conferences African-American episcopal oversight, it is hard to see how this segregated arrangement improved race relations. Sledge states “No law said the CJ had to elect only black bishops or the others only white bishops”; with little opportunity under the formalized segregated arrangements for white conferences to know, respect and trust African-American clergy who could be elevated to the episcopacy, and for African-American conferences to know, respect and trust white clergy who could be elevated to the episcopacy, this assertion by Sledge, though technically true, is preposterous in practice.⁴⁶ To this day it is extremely rare for a bishop to be elected in a jurisdiction in which she or he has not served. As will be noted later, this was an intentional feature of the jurisdictional system introduced and required by the southern church.

Charge #6: “The basic negative feature of the system was the fact that it was a highly visible and indefensible symbol of a ‘separate and unequal’ relationship between black and white members of the same denomination.”

In countering this “charge,” Sledge maintains “that the ‘separate’ aspect of the structure was based principally, though not exclusively, on a white attitude of superiority,” and that “in any other sense, nothing could be less true.”⁴⁷ In other words, if one ignores the white supremacist motivations that imposed the Central Jurisdiction on the church’s African-American members, the separateness it mandated does not constitute unequal racial treatment!

Sledge goes on to mention that, according to the design of the Central Jurisdiction, African Americans were guaranteed equal proportional rep-

⁴⁶ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 27.

⁴⁷ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 28.

resentation on the boards and agencies of The Methodist Church, and that African-American bishops “were no more limited in TMC than white bishops.”⁴⁸ He cites and takes issue with statements by Haywood and Collier that challenge these points, and ignores the important work of Dwight Culver that he elsewhere praises as being “a factual account which covered all aspects of the [birth of the Central Jurisdiction] and remains perhaps the most clear-headed and dispassionate account in this whole bibliography.”⁴⁹ As the guaranteed representation of African Americans on church boards and agencies and at General Conference was, according to Sledge, a redeeming feature of the Central Jurisdiction, it requires some scrutiny with attention to a segment of Culver’s work that Sledge conveniently overlooks.

Dwight W. Culver was an elder in The Methodist Church whose doctoral dissertation in Sociology at Yale was expanded and refined into a book-length study entitled *Negro Segregation in The Methodist Church*. He had a distinguished career in higher education, and in his important study of The Methodist Church made during the time of the Central Jurisdiction, he examined in detail the policies and practices of the church concerning segregation.⁵⁰ In the book’s Preface he states:

The largest Protestant denomination in the United States is seen to have developed its own peculiar adaptations to segregationist demands. Its patterns of segregation are as complex and its rationalizations as interesting as those of the secular society in which it operates.⁵¹

Culver’s methodology included administering eight questionnaires to “a total of 785 Methodists,” and conducting “two hundred interviews” in nine cities with both white and African-American ministers.⁵² His work gives critical insight into the racial attitudes and actions of The Methodist Church in middle of the twentieth century.

Culver’s study examined the level of African-American representation at General Conference under the Central Jurisdiction. That representation was based on the number of effective African-American clergy. Since their congregations were, on average, half as large as white congregations, and the proportion of African-American clergy to laity was twice that of whites, it could be argued that African-American General Conference representation under the Central Jurisdiction was significantly greater than perhaps warranted by the total African-American membership. Culver acknowledges this feature of the Central Jurisdiction, but with an important caveat:

The present basis of selection of General Conference delegates definitely favors the

⁴⁸ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 28.

⁴⁹ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 13.

⁵⁰ An obituary for Dwight Culver can be found on page 7 of the January, 1985, edition (vol. 13, no. 1) of *Footnotes*, the monthly newsletter of the American Sociological Association, accessible online as a pdf file at http://www.asanet.org/journals/fin_1985.cfm#january, accessed 8/28/15.

⁵¹ Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, ix.

⁵² Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, viii.

Negro because of the relative size of his ministry. There are some defenders of the Central Jurisdiction who claim that his adequate representation is somehow secured by the jurisdictional plan. This claim is valid only in the sense that some other plan of union might have denied Negroes the representation their conferences had before unification and continue to have since—a representation based on annual conference membership and unaffected by the Central Jurisdiction.⁵³

Culver is clear: regarding General Conference representation, the Central Jurisdiction offered no advantages to African Americans beyond what was available to them already in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Culver also addressed the “guaranteed” proportional representation on church boards and agencies, which was apparently a point of contention for some members of the Central Jurisdiction.

In debate on the latter matter David D. Jones, president of Bennett College, speaking for the Central Jurisdiction, was applauded for his statement that “the facts are that . . . we have not had adequate representation on certain boards of the church.” In some boards the jurisdictional representation is in proportion to membership. In others provisions are made for the appointment of members “at large” by the Council of Bishops, so that the proportion of representation from the Central Jurisdiction is not always constant. Since the proportion of Negro board members is as frequently higher as lower in terms of the opportunity valuation the representation on a jurisdictional basis leaves little to be desired.⁵⁴

Sledge maintains that, “if there was not black-white parity in the denominational structure, that was because blacks constituted such a small proportion of the whole.”⁵⁵ Culver points out that problems in realizing that ideal proportionately were not simply due to inferior African-American numbers.

Culver’s analysis of Methodist segregation included a comparison of white and African-American bishops. On this point Culver’s conclusion sides with Collier over Sledge: “Theoretically all the bishops of the Central Jurisdiction are equal in rank and power to the white bishops. In practice they are not.”⁵⁶ To be persuasive, Sledge would need to confront directly and to refute conclusively Culver’s analysis; but he fails to do so. (Amazingly, after praising Culver’s work as being “factual,” “clear-headed and dispassionate,”⁵⁷ Sledge ignores Culver, only citing him once to claim that Methodist Church segregation predates unification.)

Culver makes clear that on issues of church representation and the role of bishops, the promises of equality due to separation within The Methodist Church were paper promises. The separation stipulated in the paper of the church was real; the equality promised on paper, but denied in fact, was not equality at all.

Charge #7: The Central Jurisdiction introduced a limited episcopacy, in contravention of the Third Restrictive Rule, the one that guaranteed

⁵³ Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, 84.

⁵⁴ Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, 84-85.

⁵⁵ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 28.

⁵⁶ Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, 95.

⁵⁷ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 13.

itinerant general superintendency.

Culver's conclusion above about how the episcopacy functioned differently for African-American bishops than for white bishops needs to be considered here. Again, Sledge puts forth his views regarding this "charge" with no reference to Culver, who goes beyond the letter of church regulations to assess the actual results rendered by those regulations.

A new issue introduced in Sledge's attempt to refute this "charge" concerns the nature of the difficulties introduced by the *geographically-based* jurisdictional system as being distinct from those introduced by the *racially-based* jurisdictional system. Unfortunately for his argument, the distinction he seeks to draw is far from being as neat as he portrays. He says, "It was not the CJ itself that (maybe) limited episcopacy, but the jurisdictional concept as a whole."⁵⁸ This comment presupposes that the "jurisdictional system" was racially neutral when organized geographically. It was not.

The geographically based jurisdictional system allowed areas of the country to maintain their distinctive character. Since the election and assignment of bishops and clergy would normally take place within a fixed geographic region, prevailing ideas and practices within the region could be nurtured and reinforced, free from external challenge. In other words, racial mores and racist practices could continue unchallenged in the south. John Moore, a bishop in the MECS, who served on the Joint Commission phrased it more gently this way:

There is still a North and a South in this country, and there is an East and a West, and they are not merely geographical. They are social, economic, ethnic, cultural, civilizational, ideological. To be sure, they are not so extremely so as to be divisional, but they are sufficiently distinct to create varied human characteristics and values. Each of these great sections has produced values that should be conserved and promoted.⁵⁹

African-American Methodists in the South were certainly aware of a number of values many southern Methodists hoped to conserve and promote. As has been observed, "the jurisdictional structure undoubtedly served as a safeguard for regional interests, especially in the South."⁶⁰ Guaranteed proportional representation on denominational boards and agencies, southern Methodists had a reduced fear of being dominated by a powerful General Conference or being run over by non-southern jurisdictions that collectively had superior numbers. Peculiarly southern "characteristics and values" would have a voice throughout the church.⁶¹ With a geographic jurisdictional system in place, southern jurisdictions had no fear of receiving the appointment of a northern bishop who did not share or appreciate prevailing southern mores on race. As the Central Jurisdiction protected southern jurisdictions from the presence or appointment of African-American bishops and

⁵⁸ Sledge, "A Step Back or a Step Forward?", 30.

⁵⁹ Moore, *The Long Road to Methodist Union*, 226.

⁶⁰ Emory Stevens Bucke, ed., *History of Methodism, Volume III* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964), 481.

⁶¹ Bucke, *History of Methodism*, 425-426.

other clergy, the jurisdictional system overall protected the south from white progressive bishops and clergy with troublesome ideas about racial equality and social justice. The geographical system of jurisdictions “tended to give support to sectional or regional divisions within the denomination.”⁶²

Prior to the implementation of a jurisdictional system, Methodist bishops could be assigned to any episcopal area within the church (with the exception of a mission area like Liberia, where bishops were limited to service in only one episcopal area). The jurisdictional system did indeed impose limits on the Methodist episcopacy. It would be rather naive to think that in over two decades of unification discussions, Methodist Episcopal Church, South, members were unaware that the new structure offered them “protection” in more ways than one. Sledge claims that no objections were raised in the MECS, about a limited episcopacy “because they knew it simply was not so”;⁶³ in actuality, the objection was not raised because it was something they desired. A “limited episcopacy” was a key feature of preserving regional characteristics and values, and therefore it was as much a part of the jurisdictional system as a whole as it was a part of the Central Jurisdiction; as the motivations for geographic segregation overlapped significantly with the motivations for racial segregation, the limited episcopacy defies Sledge’s attempt to ascribe it solely to the overall jurisdictional system.

Charge #8: The ME Church, in its desire to consummate union, sold out its Negro membership by compromising to accept the plan.

Sledge responds to this charge by claiming that, in negotiating a compromise, no party gets everything it wants, each has to make a sacrifice. The positioning of African Americans in regards to the compromise made by their church for the sake of unification has been addressed above (Charge #2). The majority of the white members of the MEC got a compromise with which they could be comfortable; the majority of the African-American members of the MEC (as noted above) did not. The MEC signed on to the Plan of Union knowing that its African-American members were not in agreement. Were African-American members “sold out,” or just run over?

Charge #9: The jurisdiction system complicated communication between Methodist churches in the same town.

In response to this claim, Sledge argues that “at least [they were] in the same denomination.”⁶⁴ Yes, for the first time African-American Methodist churches in the same town—and possibly even on the same street—as white Methodist churches were in the same denomination, but had no mechanism through the denomination for them to have any contact with one another. A lack of contact between two churches is easier to understand when they are in different denominations, but less so when they share a denomination. The segregation of the Central Jurisdiction actually encouraged the same lack of

⁶² Bucke, *History of Methodism*, 481.

⁶³ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 30.

⁶⁴ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 31.

contact that existed prior to unification. Though it offered no change over the previous arrangement, for some observers it did call into question the nature of denominational fellowship.

Charge #10: It was “a cause to sit and weep.”

For this final charge Sledge admits that African-American disappointment, dissatisfaction and anger over the creation of the Central Jurisdiction “should be heard.” He acknowledges as well that many of them had hoped that unification would require forward steps to their full inclusion in their church. Despite these admissions, he says the Central Jurisdiction “could just as easily have been a cause to rejoice”; after all, “it was eminently practical and a step in the right direction.”⁶⁵ In the right direction for whom?

Whether or not the creation of the Central Jurisdiction was a cause for weeping may forever be a matter of perspective. For white northern and southern Methodists who valued unification at all costs, including the cost of African-American equality and self-respect, the Central Jurisdiction was worth it. For white and African-American Methodists who believed that the church should model for the world new possibilities of human fellowship and Christian harmony, a capitulation to racist intransigence was—and still is—a cause for weeping. When the final vote on the Plan of Union at the 1936 General Conference was announced, there was actual weeping reported among the African-American delegates—a fact noted in sources cited by Sledge.⁶⁶

After completing his treatment of the ten charges, Sledge examines the options available in 1936 to the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church. Each of the six options he offers holds the unification of the three churches as the highest good. If unification was indeed the highest good, and it was understood by a majority that African Americans would not be forced out of the unified church, then the Central Jurisdiction or something quite like it was necessary. It is not the main focus of Sledge’s article or this one, but the question must be asked: Why was unification in 1939 so important? What harm would have occurred to either the church or the world had unification taken place a little later, a lot later, or not at all?⁶⁷ The Baptist Church in America also split over the issue of slavery in the 1840s, and today the Southern Baptist Convention and the American Baptist Churches USA remain as separate

⁶⁵ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 32.

⁶⁶ Murray, *Methodists and the Crucible of Race*, 42. Thomas, relying on other sources, also reports weeping; James S. Thomas, *Methodism’s Racial Dilemma: The Story of the Central Jurisdiction* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 43.

⁶⁷ Sledge asserts that a failure to resolve the status of African Americans in a way that allowed for reunion to take place “would have left the Methodist Protestants in the lurch,” Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?": 34. At any time the Methodist Protestants could have made a choice: if they preferred an all-white church, they could have merged with the MECS; if they didn’t mind having African Americans as a part of their church, joining with the MEC was possible. It would not have been inevitable that the Methodist Protestant Church would have had to remain alone.

institutions with no “fraternal relations.” Yet the sun continues to rise in the east and set in the west. Baptist Churches of all types continue to exist, continue to baptize, bury and marry people despite the continuing divisions in the Baptist communion. The Southern Baptist Convention has overtaken The United Methodist Church as the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, so it is a fair guess that it does not feel harmed by failing to effect union with other American Baptist denominations.

It is, of course, impossible to know what would have happened to the Methodist movement or the world had unification not been achieved in 1939; the best speculation would be a mere guess of dubious usefulness. What is less doubtful is a sober assessment of any actual success the Central Jurisdiction had and the impact of the jurisdiction, both on The Methodist Church and beyond. Sledge makes the extraordinary claim that “the CJ was in no way inferior to the other five jurisdictions.”⁶⁸ He does not claim that, on paper, it had the same rights, privileges and opportunities as the other jurisdictions; rather, he states unequivocally that it was “in no way inferior.” This is patently false. The record is worth examination.

The Central Jurisdiction did have all the responsibilities of the geographic jurisdictions. All of the boards, committees and other infrastructure required by the geographic jurisdictions were required by the Central Jurisdiction. Being defined by race and not by geography inevitably made it a sprawling jurisdiction, its conferences and districts covering vast distances. Culver noted a number of examples, including this one:

The St. Louis Area of the Central Jurisdiction overlaps all seven of the episcopal areas of the North Central Jurisdiction and at least part of eight other areas in three different jurisdictions.⁶⁹

As a result, Central Jurisdiction district superintendents had much greater distances to cover than their white counterparts, and district meetings of clergy and laity were often replaced with sub-district meetings that were deprived of the involvement of the most able members of the district.

Though less visible in a footnote, at least one instance where members of the Central Jurisdiction were deprived of broader interdenominational contact is reported by Culver. The Indiana Council of Churches included “twelve representatives from each of the major Protestant denominations in the state.”⁷⁰ Each of the three white Methodist conferences in the state elected four representatives, effectively rendering invisible to this significant ecumenical agency the Indiana-based African-American Methodists of the Central Jurisdiction.

Though Culver does not mention this, it has been Methodist practice that conference and jurisdictional expenses for needed infrastructure like district superintendent salaries and benefits, travel expenses, communication, etc.,

⁶⁸ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 11.

⁶⁹ Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, 93.

⁷⁰ Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, 94.

are covered by conference-wide apportionments. As apportionments are essentially a tax on local churches to support the work of the denomination beyond the local church, the financial health and strength of the conference is directly dependent upon the financial health and strength of its local churches. One of the geniuses of the Methodist system is that this arrangement can allow for resources from thriving areas of ministry to be used to assist areas where ministry is struggling. But if most churches in a conference are small and struggling, the overall financial resources available to the conference, and beyond it to the jurisdiction, will be small as well. Geographic jurisdictions with churches that varied more in size and strength had access to greater financial resources, and a sprawling jurisdiction like the racial one inevitably had greater expenses for travel, etc. As noted above, the churches of the Central Jurisdiction were on average half as big as the churches of the other jurisdictions, leaving the Central Jurisdiction with increased pressure on its budget, as it had to meet greater expenses on less income.

During the thirty year life of the Central Jurisdiction, the population of the United States grew and, along with it, the total membership of The Methodist Church. As has been mentioned, in the wake of the Civil War the proclamations of racial equality made by the Methodist Episcopal Church were effective tools in recruiting African Americans to the denomination. A concern raised by African Americans as the Plan of Union made its way to acceptance was that constitutionalized church segregation would retard efforts to expand African-American membership. Curious about the truth of this concern, The Methodist Church had an analysis done.

On the basis of a study made for the 1960 General Conference the Central Jurisdiction showed a total membership of 308,577 in 1940; 346,945 in 1950; 346,388 in 1957—a gain of 17.1% for the period 1940-1957, as over against a gain of 30.4% for the whole church.⁷¹

The record appears to validate the concerns expressed by African-American critics of the Central Jurisdiction back in 1936.

To be fair, a number of factors cloud the numerical picture. The Great Migration of African Americans away from the south was underway during the period of the Central Jurisdiction. It is quite possible that members of the Central Jurisdiction moved west and north to areas of the country not covered by the Central Jurisdiction and joined African-American or integrated Methodist churches in their new locations. Their shift would count as a loss for the Central Jurisdiction and a gain for the geographic jurisdictions. In addition, in 1952 changes in church legislation allowed for churches in the Central Jurisdiction to be transferred into their corresponding geographic jurisdictions. This did not affect the vast majority of Central Jurisdiction churches, but did encourage a further hemorrhage of members. (That at least some churches were willing to leave the Central Jurisdiction and, in doing

⁷¹ Bucke, *History of Methodism, Volume III*, 490. These numbers could be somewhat inflated since the Liberia conference was added to the episcopal oversight of the Central Jurisdiction in 1944; *ibid.*, 491.

so, further weaken it by depriving it of members and money, is additional evidence that not all African Americans were happy in their separate and much-less-than-equal jurisdiction.) Despite all appropriate caveats, there is no indication that the Central Jurisdiction was a particularly efficient or effective evangelistic structure; in attracting and retaining members it was “in no way” equal to its geographic counterparts.⁷²

In the midst of entrenched Jim Crow policies in the South, the segregation of the Central Jurisdiction did nothing to break down racial barriers. It can be argued to the contrary that it strengthened and justified the divisions in place. At times these divisions had life and death consequences.

In his thoughtful study of Methodist segregation, Dwight Culver compiled detailed information on the “policies and practices of sixty-five white Methodist hospitals [on the] care and employment of Negroes.”⁷³ The table he presents is worthy of more detailed scrutiny than will be done here, but even a cursory glance yields significant insights. Of the sixty-five hospitals for which he could gain information, at least thirteen did not admit African Americans to its wards. Some of the sixty-five had segregated wards, some refused emergency services to African Americans, and some denied them clinical services. A good number refused to hire African-American nurses or doctors. Admittedly, not all of the thirteen hospitals noted above were in the deep south.⁷⁴ But it is reasonable to suppose that the segregation of the church that kept local white and African-American Methodists from having respectful, organic intercourse with one another helped to support the segregated medical care that literally risked the lives of African Americans. Did some African-American Methodists die by being refused treatment at a nearby white Methodist hospital? The conferences of the Central Jurisdiction did not command the financial resources required to build and maintain “separate but equal” church-related hospital facilities throughout the jurisdiction.

Sledge maintains that the historiography of the last thirty years or so that addresses the Central Jurisdiction has been dominated by “the view of the Northern idealist minority” that the jurisdiction is evidence of an unfortunate moral compromise on the part of The Methodist Church. He asserts that the work of “Southern historians and the earlier Northern interpreters” has embraced the “pragmatic” view that the Central Jurisdiction was a necessary, positive, and presumably moral step.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, the historiography of the Central Jurisdiction is not as neat as Sledge alleges.

As noted throughout the above discussion, African-American dissatisfac-

⁷² Dwight Culver confirmed that African American Methodists felt that their evangelism efforts were hindered by the Central Jurisdiction, noting, “Asked whether *The separate jurisdiction weakens the influence of the church with Negroes*, 76% of the Negroes agree with the statement, while only 32% of whites agree,” Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, 97.

⁷³ Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, 184-189.

⁷⁴ The states involved were Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Montana, Missouri, Ohio, Texas and the District of Columbia.

⁷⁵ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 10.

tion with the Central Jurisdiction is much older than the past thirty years—it dates back at least as far as the discussions on the Plan of Union early in the twentieth century. African-American efforts to weaken or repeal the Central Jurisdiction began at its inception, and attempts were made to do so at every General Conference between 1936 and 1968. A good deal of the energy of the “Northern idealist minority” came from African-American church members. To note only the histories of the past thirty years in assessing opposition to or criticism of the Central Jurisdiction is to ignore the well-documented voices of African-American Methodists over the past eighty years.

But useful histories by non-African Americans going back sixty years have been critical of the Central Jurisdiction. Sledge makes note of the careful work of Paul Carter (1952) and the meticulous book length study of church segregation by Dwight Culver (1953), so he is certainly aware that critiques of the Central Jurisdiction are neither new nor revisionist. A strength that Carter and Culver share is that they take seriously the views and experiences of African Americans. Culver’s summary of the advantages of the Central Jurisdiction is less than a page, and his summary of its disadvantages is almost three pages.⁷⁶ The interviews and surveys he conducted allowed him to detect significant differences between how white and African-American Methodists viewed church segregation and, hence, the Central Jurisdiction:

Only 6% of the Negroes who responded to the questionnaire think that the Central Jurisdiction is not an example of segregation and 92% believe that it is. This large Negro majority is joined by the 55.5% of the whites who are willing to apply the term “segregation” to the Central Jurisdiction, whether or not they approve the present organization of The Methodist Church along jurisdictional lines.⁷⁷

The difference in perception between the two groups is important and not at all surprising since segregation minimized contact and prevented any robust sharing of views across racial lines. Rubbing shoulders at General Conference every four years proved to be woefully inadequate in allowing Methodists of different races to understand one another. By Culver’s day, African-American opposition to the Central Jurisdiction may well have increased, but, again, those views were unknown by white Methodists:

Over 40% of the whites who responded to the opinion questionnaire do not answer on the statement *The Central Jurisdiction was wanted by Negroes in The Methodist Church*. They mention for the most part that they do not know Negro opinions; those who do respond are about evenly divided in their answers to the question. Negroes are more certain that they did not want the Central Jurisdiction. Of the 81% responding to the statement, 79% disagree and 21% agree . . . [O]nly 3.5% of the total group of Negroes say they wanted the Central Jurisdiction and think other Negroes wanted it.⁷⁸

African Americans in The Methodist Church were consistent in their

⁷⁶ Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, 92-95.

⁷⁷ Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, 96.

⁷⁸ Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, 96.

opposition to the Central Jurisdiction, and that opposition appears to have grown over the life of the jurisdiction. Any discussion of the jurisdiction that ignores or minimizes the African-American perspective will prove to be misleading while perpetuating the perceptual divide that has existed between white and African-American Methodists.

Like Culver, Carter was sensitive to the views of African-American Methodists. He declared:

The sacrifice in the principle and practice of racial toleration at the North was considerable, as charged by Negroes and confirmed by Southern whites in the debates. This is the prime fact which has been glossed over in accounts of Unification and which is hereby put on the record.⁷⁹

Carter even seems to have anticipated Sledge's contribution to Central Jurisdiction historiography by concluding:

Even if the Central Jurisdiction should prove ultimately to be no barrier to the integration of the Negro into the Methodist Church—even if it should prove, in the long run, to be the best means to such integration—the fact that an important minority considered that it was wronged, and was so emphatically overridden by the majority, would still be relevant in a critique of Unification.⁸⁰

So, ultimately, how ought the consistent African-American opposition to the Central Jurisdiction be understood? Sledge sees the debate over the Central Jurisdiction as “a confrontation between idealism and *realpolitik*, between emotion and reason, between the perfect and the possible, between the theoretical and the practical.”⁸¹ In his analysis, those who view or have viewed the Central Jurisdiction as an unfortunate or even inexcusable abandonment of Christian principles are idealist, emotional perfectionists, enamored more with what might or should be rather than with what could be. On the other side, those who accept the Central Jurisdiction as perhaps less than ideal, but nevertheless a necessary and useful step in Methodist Church evolution, are pragmatic, reasonable, practical realists. It is unfortunate that, according to Sledge's scheme, for the past century the African-American members of the Methodist Episcopal Church and its successors have been impractical emotional perfectionists. But as already noted above, the divide between the “idealist approach” and the “pragmatic approach” often has not been stark.

The African-American members of the Joint Commission on Union signed off on the final plan, and therefore did not view the Central Jurisdiction as an impediment to union. In doing so, did they forsake idealism in order to wholeheartedly endorse pragmatism? Not viewing the Central

⁷⁹ Carter, “The Negro and the Methodist Union,” 67.

⁸⁰ Carter, “The Negro and the Methodist Union,” 68. Sledge cites this passage from Carter, claiming “This set the tone for subsequent critical accounts—the recognition of two sides to the question, followed by a conclusion which dismissed or ignored the other interpretation” (Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 17). African-American accounts of the Central Jurisdiction before Carter were critical of it. Is Sledge himself guilty of recognizing both sides of the question, with a conclusion that “dismissed or ignored the other interpretation?”

⁸¹ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 12.

Jurisdiction as a reason to halt the reunion process does not mean that they preferred or desired it. Robert Jones, who had been elected as bishop in 1920 on a special ballot reserved for African-American candidates, was on the commission and voted for the final plan. He did not do so enthusiastically. Present at the 1936 General Conference, he remained silent during the debate on the Plan of Union. In a private letter to Claude A. Barnett, an African-American newspaperman, he explained his silence:

All my public life . . . I have opposed segregation in every form . . . I realize very much, after the principles that you and I have stood for all these years, that we cannot get everything we want, but I am thoroughly disgusted with our men running to the front begging for the segregated Judicial [jurisdictional] Conference for Negroes. When it seems to me what we should have done was to accept it when it was proposed, and let the white man take responsibility for the scheme as it stands. Because of this position of mine, I have not given out any statement and I do not care to give out one now.⁸²

One of his men with whom Jones was disgusted was Willis King, whom Sledge notes is the person who authored the entry in the *Encyclopedia of Methodism* entitled “Negro Methodism in the United States” as well as the chapter on the Central Jurisdiction in Volume III of Bucke’s *History of Methodism*. King did attempt to rally support for the Central Jurisdiction among African-American delegates at the 1936 General Conference, and Sledge correctly notes that King wrote about the advantages the segregated structure offered to Methodists of color. What Sledge omits is this observation from King about the Central Jurisdiction, published in 1974: “The obvious racial distinction was never popular among the vast majority of Negroes in the church, and ultimately had to end.”⁸³

The African-American members of the Joint Commission on Union were in a difficult position. They shouldered the heavy burden of representing the race, and their thoughts and actions would likely influence the attitudes white Methodists would have toward their darker siblings for some time to come. With eagerness mounting among whites for a unified Methodist church, would African Americans be blamed for preventing unification? Jones’ comment above suggests his awareness of this problem, and other sources reportedly support the contention that both Jones and King approved the plan in order to shield African-American Methodists from incrimination.⁸⁴ For Jones, at least, and possibly also for King, “pragmatism” may have been more about protecting African Americans from blame and backlash than about consummating union at all costs.⁸⁵

Most of the African Americans who voted for the Plan of Union in either

⁸² Quoted in Peter C. Murray, *Methodists and the Crucible of Race, 1930-1975* (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 2004), 40.

⁸³ King, “Negro Methodism in the United States,” Harmon, Nolan, ed., *Encyclopedia of World Methodism* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), 1712. It was also King who reported the lackluster growth statistics of the Central Jurisdiction in the article on the jurisdiction in Bucke, *History of American Methodism, Vol. III*.

⁸⁴ Murray, *Methodists and the Crucible of Race*, 39.

⁸⁵ Murray, *Methodists and the Crucible of Race*, 41.

the 1936 General Conference or in the subsequent annual conference ratification process, may well have done so in the same spirit as Jones and, as suggested earlier, those under a white bishop may have had “pragmatic” reasons to support the plan that had little to do with union. But the vast majority who chose to forgo the surrender of their self-respect for the dubious value of reunion, and to insist instead on full equality and inclusion some seventy years after Emancipation, no doubt saw their choice as reasonable and practical.

In the 1840s, the Baptists and Presbyterians joined the Methodists in dividing over the issue of slavery. At the time, a number of observers predicted that the division of the nation’s major denominations presaged the division of the nation over the same issue. Modern scholars examining the role of churches in encouraging the sectionalism that culminated in the Civil War have affirmed the concerns of the early observers.⁸⁶ The choices of the churches on slavery were not done in a vacuum and were not made in secret. In a similar manner, the choice for constitutional segregation in The Methodist Church was a matter of note and concern far beyond the pews and stained glass of what was briefly the nation’s largest Protestant church. Prominent African-American publications like *The Crisis*, *The Pittsburgh Courier* and *The Philadelphia Tribune* carried news of the reunion results.⁸⁷ If the good Christians of The Methodist Church were willing to baptize Jim Crow by putting their imprimatur on the Central Jurisdiction, southern segregationists could continue being racist and feeling racist with no dissonance. Many African Americans lost their lives to violent expressions of white supremacy in the twentieth century, and choosing to not have their church encourage such expressions must have seemed eminently pragmatic.

The cataclysm over full integration that the Central Jurisdiction was supposed to prevent was merely delayed. The Central Jurisdiction proved to be totally ineffective in preparing southern Methodists to eventually accept African Americans as equals.⁸⁸ Sledge would do well to examine the record of what happened in parts of the south when the Central Jurisdiction ended and the full integration of African Americans became mandatory. In his book,

⁸⁶ See for example, C. C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the Civil War* (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 1985).

⁸⁷ Carter reports: “The headline on the front page of *The Pittsburgh Courier*, then the most widely-circulated Negro newspaper, in its issue published next after the Northern Methodist vote on Unification, was characteristic: ‘RACE PROTEST IGNORED AS OHIO METHODISTS VOTE FOR MERGER.’ *The Crisis*, official organ of the NAACP—then considered a comparatively conservative organization—ran an editorial entitled ‘Jim Crow for Jesus.’ *The Philadelphia Tribune* was even more caustic: ‘God watched and followed the proceedings with keen interest; when the conference insulted His intelligence by approving segregation of Negroes in His name, He took a walk’ (Carter, “The Negro and Methodist Union,” 60). The black press covered the entire process with interest, and “roundly condemned” the positions taken by Jones and King (Murray, *Methodists and the Crucible of Race*, 39).

⁸⁸ Sledge repeats twice the assertion made twice by Willis King that “the Central Jurisdiction made possible the beginning of the full-fledged brotherhood which is now evolving.” Sledge does not cite any of King’s evidence for this claim. Despite King’s fervent optimism, saying so doth not make it so.

When the Church Bell Rang Racist: The Methodist Church and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, Donald Collins recounts the great costs paid when a handful of clergy attempted to fight the white supremacist element in the church, and a majority of clergy, district superintendents, laity and even bishops clung to the prevailing segregationist practices.

The Alabama-West Florida Conference of The Methodist Church did everything it could to prevent the integration of the church. In the 1950s, while the modern Civil Rights Movement was getting underway, the conference continually affirmed the segregation mandated by the Central Jurisdiction. It went on record during the famed Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956 to oppose Amendment IX, which was designed to make it easier for entire conferences to transfer from the Central Jurisdiction to their respective geographic jurisdictions. The Methodist Laymen's Union was formed in Alabama and functioned as a "white citizen's council" of the church; it succeeded in passing legislation that would have allowed churches to circumvent the denomination's trust clause and secede from it while retaining title to local church property (the "Dumas Act" was later declared unconstitutional by the Alabama supreme court). At every opportunity it appealed to the General Conference to maintain the status quo, and affirmed on the conference level its opposition to all integration efforts. When The Methodist Church was poised to merge with the Evangelical United Brethren Church, the elimination of all race-based church structures became a condition of union. Alabama Methodists elected one of their own, the defiant staunch segregationist, former Gov. George Wallace, to represent them in Dallas at the Uniting Conference in 1968.⁸⁹

Collins details the abuse a handful of clergy endured in trying to lead their congregations out of a segregationist mindset, and the number who left the conference or parish ministry altogether as a result of the incessant pressure placed upon them during the Civil Rights Movement. He states:

For these ministers the continued pastoral ministry in the Methodist Church of the Alabama-West Florida Conference was no longer a positive, constructive option in their personal and professional lives. The personal disruption, the economic insecurity, and the family dislocation involved made these decisions exceedingly difficult. However, all these factors personally were more manageable than the continuation of a ministry that for them had reached a point of crisis and diminishing returns.⁹⁰

After experiencing increased membership each year between 1955 and 1964, membership declined in each of the next three years at an average of 617 members each year.⁹¹ The introduction of clergy and twenty-one churches of the former Central Jurisdiction into the Alabama-West Florida Conference was complicated by the fact that the salaries and pension benefits

⁸⁹ Donald E. Collins, *When the Church Bell Rang Racist: The Methodist Church and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama* (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 1998).

⁹⁰ Collins, *When the Church Bell Rang Racist*, 145.

⁹¹ Collins, *When the Church Bell Rang Racist*, 140. Did defections from the integrated United Methodist Church help swell the ranks of the Southern Baptist Convention?

of the African-American clergy were significantly lower than those of the white clergy, and balance had to be achieved.⁹² As time progressed, qualified African-American clergy transferred out of the conference; excluded from appointment to white Methodist churches and from serving as district superintendents, they chose better prospects for advancement than were available by being shuffled around the relatively few African-American churches in the conference.

Sledge points with pride to the fact that “the sky didn’t fall” when African-American Bishop Robert Jones assumed the duties of the chair at the 1940 General Conference session. Southerners reacted with appropriate decorum and interacted civilly with Jones, evidence, according to Sledge, that “everybody was learning quickly.”⁹³ The contact Bishop Nolan Harmon had later with his African-American colleagues on the Council of Bishops at council gatherings and at General Conference may have been cordial, but it did nothing to sensitize him to the plight of African Americans in his area, the North Alabama Conference of The Methodist Church. Born in Mississippi and elected to the episcopacy in 1956, Harmon was a prominent bishop, authoring a number of books and editing the *Encyclopedia of World Methodism*. He was also one of two Methodist bishops who joined six other Alabama clergymen in 1963 to publicly criticize the civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham and to praise local law enforcement officers (which included the notorious Bull Connor). It was that statement that prompted Martin Luther King, Jr., to respond with his famous “Letter From a Birmingham Jail.” The existence of the Central Jurisdiction had done nothing to ease the path to integration in either the church or society.⁹⁴

The Methodist Church and the nation would have been changed for the good had the Central Jurisdiction really proved to be a positive intermediate step towards full integration. The pain and heartache that accompanied the death of Jim Crow would have been greatly ameliorated had the Central Jurisdiction been capable of leading the way. Of course, had the church successfully endured the difficulties of integration back in the 1930s and avoided the Central Jurisdiction entirely, a positive example would have been set for world. Instead, after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954, after the year-long Montgomery Bus Boycott, after the bloody Birmingham campaign, after the deadly Selma campaign, after the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, The Methodist Church took definitive steps to end its constitutional system of racial segregation. A portion of the words Martin Luther King addressed to Bishop Harmon and his colleagues from his

⁹² Collins, *When the Church Bell Rang Racist*, 148. There were 366 white pastoral charges (153).

⁹³ Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 27.

⁹⁴ Not only did it not help, the jurisdictional process encouraged narrow parochialism among white Methodist bishops: “A concomitant of the jurisdictional system was that since bishops were elected and assigned to their episcopal areas by Jurisdictional Conferences, they became, in spite of efforts of the Council of Bishops, identified more and more with their respective jurisdictions” (Bucke, *History of Methodism, Volume III*, 482).

jail cell in 1963 are important to hear again:

So here we are moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are.⁹⁵

The words that he used to describe the generic Christian churches of the United States over fifty years ago especially described The Methodist Church of his day—and some would say also The United Methodist Church of today in regards to equal rights and full inclusion for homosexual persons.

Ultimately, The Methodist Church was able to consummate a tenuous reunion of its northern and southern factions through the constitutional embrace of racial segregation, and in doing so it temporarily claimed the title of the nation's largest Protestant communion. If a positive point is to be claimed, it may be that, despite the nation's continuing racial divide in which African Americans and white Americans view issues of race through completely different lenses, observers of the Central Jurisdiction over the last thirty years (with the notable exception of Sledge), have managed to do so without ignoring or marginalizing the African-American perspective or the objective facts.⁹⁶ Morris Davis, whose excellent work analyzing the 1930s rhetoric of the Joint Commission on Union, has expressed well the compromise the Central Jurisdiction represented and the perceived gain the white advocates of reunion at any cost believed they had attained:

The failure of the Joint Commission—its inability to solve the problem of racial membership—shows us clearly the relationship between racial membership and concerns about political and national influence. The fear that white Americans outside Methodism would perceive the church to be endorsing inappropriate racial equality was greater than the opportunities inherent in becoming the largest and first mainline church in America to embrace full racial equality But even those who might have believed, in an idealistic sense, that the new Methodist church would better reflect Christian values if it were integrated, were willing to forgo the spiritual ideal for one they wanted more—that of a large, powerful, internationally-influential church that would lead the world's greatest Christian civilization.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ James M. Washington, ed., *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 96, 97.

⁹⁶ Sledge takes Bishop James S. Thomas to task for confusing elements of the 1936 MEC General Conference and the 1939 Uniting Conference, but counts him as coming “down firmly on the side of the pragmatic interpretation” (Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 15). It is not immediately evident what makes Sledge believe that Thomas was accepting of the Central Jurisdiction's segregation, but Thomas most certainly was clear that most African Americans in the MEC were displeased with the so-called compromise.

⁹⁷ Morris L. Davis, *The Methodist Unification: Christianity and the Politics of Race in the Jim Crow Era* (New York: New York UP, 2008), 129. Sledge accuses Davis of “judgmentalism” and “debateable interpretations,” but without offering details (Sledge, “A Step Back or a Step Forward?”, 19). It is far from clear that Sledge understands that Davis's project was to analyze carefully the rhetoric used in discussions of the Joint Commission on Union.

As the anniversaries of the formation and the dissolution of the Central Jurisdiction approach, United Methodists would do well to examine thoughtfully and prayerfully how inclusive they would like their church to be, keeping in mind an accurate view of its history and the many ways in which its tolerance within its ranks of racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc., continues to damage the church, its members, and society. Will the church commit to the hard task of moving forward, shining a headlight as it teaches and leads society to higher levels of justice, or will it repeat its record of being a tail-light, making the tough calls long after society has moved on? The compromise that allowed for the creation of the Central Jurisdiction traded basic Christian principles and the respect of the church's African-American members for a fleeting bid for status and influence in the world beyond the church. Whether that compromise was properly pragmatic or a foolish renunciation of religious idealism, a failure to learn its lessons will ensure that the future will be no improvement over the past.