

**BLACK PEOPLE IN THE METHODIST CHURCH:
A FIERCE FIDELITY TO A CHURCH
FOR WHOM GRACE IS CENTRAL**

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From the beginning of Methodism in what is now The United States of America, until this very tick of the clock, African Americans have made this church of the British John and Charles Wesley their spiritual home. In fact, the local African American Methodist Episcopal Church of my family and their ancestors was founded only seven years after the end of slavery in the nation was lovingly and defiantly named “Sweet Home” in Gadsden, Alabama. It was to be a spiritual and physical home for recently-freed slaves, offering protection from the few continuing roaming white racists of the South who had not accepted the defeat of the Confederacy as well as from the skilled and conniving Carpetbaggers of the North who would exploit their new-found freedom. Yes, it was “Sweet Home,” and it was a Methodist Episcopal Church, connected to the northern branch, the one that believed that slavery was wrong, the one that taught that grace was free and open and available to all, even to those who were in legal bondage. Sweet Home Methodist Episcopal Church would later reach back to those theological and biblical roots and declare as its definition of itself, its presence, its word to the world: “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors.”

Starting with a handful of ex-slaves in Flatwoods in rural and farming Etowah County, just a short way from the neighborhood and the house in which I was born, they took seriously the preaching of the earlier circuit riders to the plantations about God’s grace in Jesus Christ—the prevenient, justifying, sanctifying grace (of course, they never heard those words) that Methodism proclaimed. They became a church with a fierce loyalty to Methodism and its central message of grace and hope that included all, even black former slaves like them.

Obviously, they still believe it; for they still gather as the faithful in the city church to which they later moved. Sunday after Sunday, some of the descendants of the founding ancestors of their church gather, including some of my own relatives, one of whom is the present lay leader and delegate to the North Alabama Conference of The United Methodist Church, Billy James Harris, a former member of the City Council of Gadsden, Alabama. What fierce loyalty and utter commitment to a church that has had a checkered career in racial history and social justice, and which so often on major and critical theological and social issues has disappointed these fiercely loyal advocates with compromise to culture, convention, and marketplace convenience, such as the Machiavellian contrivance of the segregated Central Jurisdiction in 1939, created to appease the southern church and to answer

the question raised by one of their prominent leaders—a question which was probably on the minds of most of the southern Methodists he represented: “. . . and what shall we do with the Negroes?” No doubt my ancestors and their descendants feel justified for remaining in a church even though it has found numerous ways of compromise on race relations and justice, starting with slavery, continuing through the establishment of the separate missionary conferences of the South 150 years ago next year, the founding of the racially segregated Central Jurisdiction, and the Jim Crow years of Methodist institutions (churches, schools, colleges, hospitals, retirement centers, and other institutions). My friend and our celebrated colleague, Dr. Gilbert Haven Caldwell, recalls so vividly being turned down when he applied for admission in the 1950s to Duke University—a Methodist university—because he was Black. Gil’s father was an outstanding ordained elder in the Methodist Church and the former teacher of religion and chaplain at Claflin College of Orangeburg, South Carolina, a Black United Methodist College. Yet, he and I and our ancestors and descendants of our ancestors—now millions of them if you count the years—have remained Methodist with a fierce loyalty even when there was only a mere gossamer thread of hope that the promise made in the “Amazing Grace” said and sung in our church would actually be realized on earth. What fierce loyalty in the face of inestimable odds! What faith in “things hoped for, and not yet seen . . .” And, as the son of a Methodist preacher of Harlem’s Salem Methodist Episcopal Church of New York, the great poet Countee Cullen, once wrote:

*And yet, I marvel, at such a curious thing,
To make a poet black, and bid him sing . . .*

Now it would be totally unfair to assign this relationship of African Americans and Methodism, and its emphasis on freeing and amazing grace, to suggest that all is loss and that there were no gains from this evil, theologically indefensible posture of the church. Often in history we see victory snatched out of defeat, good coming out of evil, and what was never expected, finding a way of being something every soul who realizes he or she has a soul says: “Yes!” And that is still, for me, the power of a Gospel of Love, a grace that has a cross, a celebration of Easter every Sunday, because it comes after a Good Friday. That is probably why the hymns of Charles Wesley have more meaning for me in worship than the “7-11 Praise Songs” (seven words repeated eleven times!). I am so glad that the whole Christian world still joins us Methodists on that one special Sunday in singing Methodism’s Wesley’s Easter anthem: “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today!” and most not even aware of whose hymn they are singing. Nor would many know that Christmas is made more joyful as we sing his “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!” Some of us Black Methodists still point with a small degree of sanctified (maybe not always totally righteous) pride that “this came from our church!”

Maybe then, that leads to and asks the question, What has led to this attraction of Black people to Methodism and the Methodist Church, this “pride about our church” and this fierce loyalty to what was then and is still

now called by so many a “white church?” Even my mentor, my colleague and very close friend, the late Professor C. Eric Lincoln, revered and rightly respected scholar of sociology of religion, last at Duke University and a fellow-Methodist from Alabama, insisted on it. I argued with him then, and in my later writings that, that was a limited sociological distinction and not a theological one. He and I finally agreed that we were both right. One of these days I will deal with that more fully. The questions before us now are: Why were the Black people fiercely and devotedly (and sometimes defiantly) Methodists? Why have they remained Methodists? What of the future of African Americans and Methodism?

Why Did Black Americans Become Methodists?

I have discussed at length the answers to this question in my earlier book, *Black People in The Methodist Church: Whither Thou Goest?* I had hoped that the question in the sub-title, “*Whither Thou Goest?*” subtly hinted at the answer. But sometimes the obvious cannot be assumed. The continued presence of African Americans in Methodism in the twenty-first century, and particularly in The United Methodist Church, is still an anomaly. How could African Americans remain in a church throughout its checkered career in matters of faith and practice, its acts of courage and cowardice in matters of race and justice, and its schisms and mergers as a Christian Protestant denominational body?

In another place and time I have said that “African American Methodists are both a remnant of hope and a reminder of the ideal for their church to match its practice with its proclamation.”¹ In a later writing I concluded that “this hope was probably based more on pride than reason, more on eager expectations than anything reality suggested, but it was nevertheless a hope, a faith, a gossamer anticipation that sometime, somewhere, somehow, their presence in the church would cease to be the great anomaly that it was.”²

From the earliest days of the advent of Methodism, with its peculiar and promising proclamation of the prevenience of grace, to the present, the descendants of Africa in this country have embraced Christianity as preached by the Methodists. The “magnolia missions” class meetings, societies, and camp meetings all worked as slaves heard about a grace in one called Jesus Christ that included them in the work of salvation. These disinherited ones said, “Yes!” to the invitation offered to them by the circuit riders, accepting that they had been accepted through God’s amazing grace in Jesus Christ and the scandal of the cross of Calvary. It was for them, as the writer of the Gospel of John put it, “grace upon grace” (John 1:16).

In summary: we can say that Black people, beginning with the slaves, were attracted to Methodism for at least the following reasons: (1) its early

¹ William B. McClain, “African American Methodists: A Remnant and a Reminder,” in Russell Richey, et.al., eds., *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission and Identity*, volume I (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 77.

² See one of my chapters in Grant S. Shockley, William B. McClain, Karen Collier, eds., *Heritage and Hope: The African American Presence in United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991).

strong opposition to slavery, including its historic position at the organizing Christmas Conference in 1784; (2) a sincere and simple evangelistic message of free grace that was available to all people, including Black slaves; (3) the Wesleyan style of worship, which included extemporaneous prayer and preaching, as differentiated from catechism and printed sermons and prayers; (4) the ability of slaves to serve as lay preachers and to exercise influence with Black people as well as whites (as we recall Henry Evans and John Stewart, among others), despite restrictions on their movement and limited opportunities for leadership; and (5) Methodism's adaptability to fit the slaves' unique situations so they could make the faith their own. The question now is not why we came, but rather:

Why Have African Americans Remained in The Methodist Church?

Why did they remain when, in a pernicious plan more Machiavellian than Machiavelli, concocted at Kansas City in 1939, they were officially segregated into a separate "church-within-a-church" for the first time in their almost 175-year long history associated with Methodism? Why did African Americans endure the demeaning institutional machinery set in motion to affect this humiliating "church-within-a-church" contrivance? Why have African Americans remained Methodists when the church they love so often puts convention above conscience, is so often more concerned about unity than about uniqueness, and is more willing to conform than to create? Why have they remained faithful to a church, when what they perceived as a genuinely decorous romance has so often been made into a sordid affair, unrequited and contemptible? What have African Americans contributed to this romance and to this church-as-church whose history is so filled with missed opportunities to be uniquely Christian, a world church in America, and whose failures in one period have so often negated its success in another? And what of United Methodism's future, as we have closed a century that Methodism began with the rather correct, if dubiously-based, claim to be the largest and "most American Church?"³ What can that possibly mean now and for the future?

First, it needs to be said that The United Methodist Church is not alone in the problems it currently faces. The predominantly white, organized, connectional Protestant Christian bodies in the western world are in the same predicament.⁴ They all face aging and declining memberships and a loss of enthusiasm about their unique claims and identity. They listen to straying,

³ For example see Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists in the United States of America* (1810), William Warren Sweet *Methodism in American History* (1953) and numerous others.

⁴ The many works of Martin E. Marty, *A Nation of Believers: Mapping the Religions in the United States* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976), *The Public Church* (New York: Crossroads, 1981), and (with R. S. Appleby) *The Glory and the Power: The Fundamentalist Challenge to the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), are good places for starters. See also Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993); William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584-2069* (New York: William Morrow, 1991); and Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

struggling, and competing apologists, a call for a more interiorized and privatized form of religion with an attending self-fulfillment ethic, and conflicting and confusing messages about what salvation means—salvation from what and to what. As they produce fewer zealous youths, the lack of loyalty and support, both from so many who are their mainstay and from those who are their natural heirs, threaten their very existence.

Present Methodism: Perils of the Past, Hope for the Future

Part of the positive difference for Methodism and the promise for its future may lie in the very perils of its past and its present. Its hope for vision and fulfillment may be inherent in the solutions found to one of its most pressing present problems: its perspective on and its practice of inclusiveness and diversity. I state this not as poetry but as a solid prophetic reality: Methodism is still, by grace, the most multicultural church in the nation. It is pluralistic; democratic; and with the means, within its particular and diverse theological, historical, homiletical, liturgical, and ecclesial tradition, and with the human resources, to forge a new and creative history. But, oh, the will to face the dilemma! It was the desire to find that will that the late Bishop James S. Thomas, the highly respected and beloved Black general superintendent, closed the bicentennial United Methodist General Conference on May 12, 1984, at 12:32 a.m. He prayed passionately: “Lead us now to make new history.”⁵

For that to happen, we will need to drink fresh water from old springs, and purify those streams from the left and the right that have been polluted and poisoned by a non-yielding, intolerant, contemporary fundamentalism (that is, focusing on nonessential issues of faith with efforts to dominate and control the symbols of legitimacy, while offering non-dialogical, iron-clad theological absolutes). Even liberals and progressives can be fundamentalists, too: being guilty of focusing on non-essentials, attempting to dominate and control the symbols of legitimacy, and so on. But what threatens the future of the multicultural church and impedes its efforts at being the church of “open hearts, open minds, and open doors” is a fundamentalism linked to a very conservative political and free market ideology in which the political ideology is taken and interpreted to be synonymous with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is not that there is no understanding of the moral vision and spiritual imperatives of the biblical tradition so much as it is the trivialization of the Gospel.

The sad and startling fact for so many of our mainline churches is, that the ethical and spiritual demands of the Gospel have been transformed into an inoffensive prudential morality. The grammar of grace has become the

⁵ See McClain, “A Vision of Hope,” in Shockley et al., eds., *Heritage and Hope*, 299. This reference is not far off from the vision of John Wesley in his instructions for his preachers: “. . . To Reform the nation, and especially the church, and to spread scriptural holiness over the land,” from “Minutes of Several Conversations” Q3, in *The Works of John Wesley Vol. 8*, T. Jackson, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), 299.

language of the market place. It is even with great difficulty that so many are not able to admit with the Apostle Paul that “we see through a glass darkly,” only certain of who Jesus is and what He has done, and what love accomplished in him, and continues to accomplish in his name. That Love is resurrected at Easter and is alive and available to all. That love lives and is shown abroad when the church reaches across to take the hand of those who are reaching for tomorrow, whatever color that hand may be.

African American Methodists as “Evangelical Essentialists”

The theological debate is not our primary concern and consideration in this discussion. And yet, to be the totally inclusive community which Methodism espouses, in obedience to its Lord, and to be that church which African Americans have so long dreamed of, hoped for, worked for, and constantly called the church back to, we must be aware of the impediments. To be biblically centered is one thing. To be fundamentalist is quite another. Black Methodists have not historically viewed Scripture as the fundamentalists do. Rather, they have seen the Bible as the story of divine redemption of the natural and the human realms, a story of God’s constant overture to reclaim straying and lost creation, and the expression of God’s willingness to get to us by getting with us. The Bible is not a textbook for science, not the chest of rigid moral codes upon which we can structure a society, not the repository of proof-texts, but rather the story of human experiences with God in which they can identify. One need only look at the Negro spirituals, for example, to see this epitomized. They also are the quintessence of the important role hermeneutics, reading strategies, and imagination play in appropriating Scripture.

I think that one can safely say that African American Methodists have not too very closely identified theologically with the liberal left or the conservative right, nor with the literalists and the fundamentalists. If a label could be placed on them at all, it would probably be that of “evangelical essentialists.” That is to say, they have separated out of the faith that which is essential and substantial from that which is accidental and peripheral. They have dwelt with and accented that which is at the center or the essentials of the faith, and not what is at the edges and the boundaries. For them, Jesus, the Liberating Word, the one who brings freedom and justice, the one who identifies with the poor and the disinherited, the one who gives a perspective on facts and makes them truth, is essential. For them, Jesus, himself, is always the necessary and sufficient Word. That Word made flesh in Jesus the Christ who becomes “grace upon grace” was the necessary and sufficient Word then, and is now, and shall ever be for all times.

To Affirm and Live Out a Belief in the Gospel They Heard

So, we can say first of all, the African Americans have stayed because they believe that God is for real in Jesus Christ as revealed both in Scripture and in their experience. They believe that the gospel of grace, the glad tidings

of Jesus of love, redemption, and release that they heard from the Methodist preacher, was not merely an enticement to increase numbers or to make them more serviceable, obedient, and subservient to an earthly master, but was instead the very grand and royal invitation of the Word of God to come and accept their God-offered place as valuable creatures, created by a loving God who has made them “a little lower than the angels and a little less than God” (Psalm 139). Their dignity, worth, freedom, and identity were bestowed upon them at birth and could be claimed through the complete transaction of God through Christ at Calvary. That was at once humbling and gratifying, freeing and joy-producing, but also obliging and disciplining. But more than anything, it was for certain, “good news, the kingdom’s comin.”

Further, they understood that the action of the gospel of grace broke down every barrier that separated, made distinctions, or divided those who recognize and receive that grace. Those first Black women at Bristol in England believed it. Annie Sweitzer at Sam’s Creek in Maryland believed it. Bettye at the John Street society in New York believed it. Harry Hoosier at Mother Zoar in Philadelphia believed it, sang it, prayed and eloquently preached it with faith, power, and passion from the flowering hills of North Carolina to the teeming northeastern shores of the Atlantic in Massachusetts. Millions of African Americans have been in Methodist meetings and continue to come to Methodist churches and offer their fierce loyalty to the church because they heard and believed the promise that the love of God in a crucified and risen Lord welcomes, pardons, cleanses, and relieves. And many now, and many thousands gone, witness to their own experience that those whom Christ frees are free, indeed! As they say so often in words heard in churches and chapels from one coast to the other: “The world didn’t give it to me, and the world can’t take it away.”

To Claim Their Own History and Heritage

Second, African Americans have remained in The United Methodist Church because they feel that the church is as much theirs as anybody else’s. The history of John Wesley and African Americans began in South Carolina in 1737 when Wesley sought to instruct the Africans he met when he crossed over from Savannah to the colony of South Carolina in the Christian faith. This pre-dates the first Methodist Society meeting in Frederick County, Maryland, by almost thirty years. But, as I have indicated earlier, when that society was formed with Robert Strawbridge at Sam’s Creek in 1764, Annie Sweitzer, referred to as “Aunt Annie,” a slave of the Sweitzer family, was entered as a charter member. That was true of Bettye, an African, at the John Street Society in New York in 1776 when they met at Barbara Heck’s house. By 1789, seventy of the 360 members of the New York group of Methodists were African Americans. The African Americans, slaves and free, who joined the movement not only participated in the services, gave to the building funds, and attended and led the class meetings, but these new African American Methodists also preached and evangelized. Slaves, ex-slaves, and free and indentured servants preached and converted wherever

and whenever possible.

Henry Evans, a free African American and an early preacher, established Methodism in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and served that mixed church until he died. Bishop William Capers points out that Evans “was confessedly the father of the Methodist Church, white and Black, in Fayetteville, and the best preacher of his time in that quarter.”⁶ He sustained beatings for preaching to Whites until they defended him and urged him to stay and serve them. In his last sermon and his farewell to his congregation, the old man appeared from his quarters. Capers, who had come as his replacement, tells the story in reverent detail:

The little door between his humble shed and the chancel where I stood was opened and the dying man entered for a last farewell to his people. He was almost too feeble to stand at all, but supporting himself by the railing of the chancel, he said: “I have come to say my last word to you. It is this: “None but Christ.” Three times I have had my life in jeopardy for preaching the Gospel to you. Three times have I broken the ice on the edge of the water and swam across Cape Fear to preach the Gospel to you. And now, if in my last hour I could trust to that or to anything else but to Christ crucified, for my salvation, all should be lost and my soul perish forever.”⁷

With such faith and passion, African Americans witnessed to their bonding to Christ and the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Grant Shockley pointed out that “the thousands of Black converts who accepted Christianity as their religion and Methodism as their denomination represented one of the largest non-white accessions to the Christian church in North America.”⁸ These African American Methodists claimed the Methodist Church as their church and their home and they refused to be “defined out” of Methodism on racial grounds. It is their church. Its failures as well as its achievements are part of their history as well. The choice to stay is as much an exercise of freedom as the choice to leave. And for those African Americans who have stayed, the choice to stay is a more viable option of their freedom. It is their church, their spiritual home. They will witness where they are. And they have chosen to stay and weather the enticements and the embarrassing criticisms, insults, humiliation, taunts, and jibes from other African Americans—sometimes even from those well-meaning brothers and sisters, the African and colored Methodists, who chose to depart. But as for those who chose to stay, The United Methodist Church is as much their church as anybody else’s. They are prepared to defend, to define, and to stand on their history and their relationship. It may require reform and renewal. It may require organizing for causes and establishing caucuses. Black Methodists say they are in the church to stay, for its history and its heritage, its doctrine and its didactics, its hymnody and its humanity, its struggles and its accomplishments, its challenges and its opportunities

⁶ William Capers was his successor at Fayetteville, and later bishop of the southern Methodist church. Cf. William M. Wightman, *William Capers, Including an Autobiography* (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1858), 124.

⁷ Wightman, *William Capers*, 139.

⁸ Shockley, *Heritage and Hope*, 40.

are all also theirs and part of the history and the relationship between Black people who are Americans and Methodism.

The question was, and still is: when will the rest of the church and Methodist historians and scholars accept and claim it, that all of this is a common history, a shared history? When will they stop writing and speaking of the history of Methodism without including all Methodists in that history? Other ethnic people of the rainbow of Methodism are asking the same question.⁹ Our required Methodist history textbooks will look and read differently when we do so.

To Be a Missional Presence

Third, the African Americans have remained because they have felt their presence is required. Their understanding of the Bible and the meaning of the Christian community is that it is made up of people from every nation and station, just as it was at Pentecost. It is not coincidental that African American United Methodists *initiated*, and joined with other ethnic-minority theologians (Asian, Hispanic-Latino, and Native Americans) and certain invited Euro-Americans, for two quadrennia in the Roundtable of Ethnic Theologians and issued their report in a publication edited by Justo Gonzalez and read by far too few, entitled *Out of Every Tribe and Nation*.¹⁰

In order to experience each other's native settings, these ethnic theologians have met in a sweat lodge in Arizona, to the accompaniment of mariachis in San Antonio, in a Korean church in Chicago, and to the beat of ancient spirituals on Black St. Helena Island in South Carolina. For them to leave would deprive Methodism of this authenticity as the Church of Jesus Christ where people of God of every tribe and nation, every hue and language, from the East and from the West, occidental and oriental, gather together around the Word and the Sacraments. To leave would mean an empty seat at the roundtable. To leave would deprive the church of that peculiar voice that is theirs in the conversation about what God's grace means and in making known what God is doing in the world, the reading of the "signs of the times," as seen through their eyes and experienced in their hearts and souls. Would that such a group of ethnic theologians could resolve to continue to meet, and perhaps expand to other religious groups who search for wholeness and peace, who dare to call God's name. It was the decided wisdom of the Roundtable that such voices must be heard from every tribe and nation.

⁹ See the works of ethnic theologians such as Roy Sano, Justo Gonzalez, Ignacio Castuera and others. See especially Ignacio Castuera, William B. McClain and Roy Sano, "Biblical and Theological Foundations for Racial and Ethnic Minority Persons in Ministry" in William B. McClain, *Black People in the Methodist Church: Whither Thou Goest?* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1984), 110-121. See also Justo Gonzalez, ed., *Out of Every Tribe and Nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992); also the documents, proceedings and publications of The Roundtable of Ethnic Theologians sponsored for two quadrennia by the Board of Higher Education and Ministry a quadrennium or so ago; as well as documents from the various ethnic minority caucuses.

¹⁰ Justo L. Gonzalez, ed., *Out of Every Tribe and Nation*.

But even while African American United Methodists existed in separate congregations, they have been not only a protest but also a testimony that neither segregation, nor racism, mistreatment, discrimination, a Central Jurisdiction, nor anything else can dissuade them from, as Shockley puts it: “their bonding to Christ” and the church through Wesleyan, as well as Episcopal, Methodism. This attitude was not a fleeting one or limited to any one generation. It has persisted since the late 1700s to the present.”¹¹ For they believe that “the redeemed of the Lord ought to say so ‘by joining with others’ who are being saved” for the upbuilding of the church, and as a sign of the presence of the reign of God, and the coming of the “beloved community” of God. Their presence is necessary so that “all flesh shall see it together.” They believe that it is a part of their mission and a part of their ability to help the church keep before it what are priorities and what is essential for the church to be the church, lest it allow itself to forge an unholy and unhealthy union with the culture and betray its Lord.

To Be the Primordial Conscience of Methodism

Fourth, African Americans have remained to be the conscience of United Methodism. From the very beginning, African Americans have believed that the church would somehow rise above the accidents of race, the ephemeral reckoning of station, the changing and shifting political ideologies of the nation, and be the church. When that has not been the case, as has happened so often in Methodism’s more than two and one-half centuries, African Americans have again and again raised the cry: “Let the church be the church!”

We hear that cry from Richard Allen and those who left with him at Philadelphia. We hear that cry as the church splits into North and South over the issue of slavery. We hear that cry at Kansas City while the white members of the church stand to celebrate its victory of an ultimate compromise to segregation (the Central Jurisdiction) and the Black members of that General Conference sit and weep. We hear that cry now as the church hedges and hesitates to practice its own principled policy of inclusiveness and true open itinerancy and recognize and receive all persons without regard to race, ethnicity, gender identification, place of birth, and who they love. If that is the reality, and it is, then where do we stand on the issue of the physically challenged? (I was prepared to surrender my orders some years ago when I heard about a blind colleague being rendered “unappointable.” He was a fine preacher, and one I would have given high marks in my preaching classes!) And that cry is stuck in the back of the throats of the rainbow-colored Methodists each Sunday morning at 11 o’clock as local churches gather in the most segregated hour of the week, unlike the jobs they go to, the schools where they study, or the sports or entertainment events they have attended during the week.

¹¹ Shockley, *Heritage and Hope*, 41.

African American United Methodists have seen many changes take place as a result of their persistent prodding and pushing of the church. Their presence in the church has indelibly influenced every decade and development of the church, its life in America, and its ability to effect change in the larger society: Black bishops elected to serve the whole church; Black superintendents to administer districts that include all United Methodists in their region (which in turn brought about the appointment of female superintendents), Black members of national boards, and Black agency executives; and Black annual conference staff personnel (often to avoid appointing well-qualified African Americans to majority-white membership churches); a few African American pastors serving predominantly white local churches; and a hymnal that includes many songs from the African American tradition that are being sung in churches all over the nation and the world. All of these bespeak relationship, a sense of belonging and claiming The United Methodist Church as their own and taking responsibility in the relationship for loving accountability, conscience, justice, prophetic imagination, and a call for responsible grace. That is a part of what evangelical essentialists must do: focus on what is central and essential and not on the trivial and unnecessary; witness in word and deed to the saving power of the grace of Jesus Christ; love and to serve those whom he loved and served, to the end that the kingdoms of this world may become the kingdoms of our Lord and of our Christ. In the words of the ancient African American spiritual, in so doing, we keep so busy serving our Jesus that “we ain’t got time to die”:

When we’re serving the poor . . . we’re serving our Jesus;
When we’re feeding the hungry . . . were serving our Jesus;
When we’re seeking justice . . . we’re serving our Jesus;
When we visit the sick . . . we’re serving our Jesus;
When we visit the jails . . . we’re serving our Jesus;
Lord, we keep so busy serving our Jesus, we ain’t got time to die.
So, get out of our way . . . Get out of our way,
If we don’t serve him, the rocks will cry out:
“Glory and Honor! Glory and Honor!” Ain’t got time to die.

What About a Future?

So, can we now see reflected in the local United Methodist churches the hues of all of the “people who are called Methodists” who reside in those towns and cities and neighborhoods, and truthfully speak of us as a church with “open hearts, open minds, open doors”? A church where Jesus Christ is Lord and every human creature is affirmed as special in God’s creation?

Who is at the Lord’s table? With whom do we eat? Who are we willing to welcome to the table to join us in communion? Or shall a people who thought they had a seat have to sing again, as my devout Alabama Methodist grandmother used to sing so sweetly and joyfully and hopefully:

I’m gonna sit at the welcome table, one of these days

But she would add, as if she was (*were* is correct, but old-fashioned these days) certain about it not happening soon, and that reality being beyond this place of wrath and tears, but to be seated at the table at the eschatological feast in glory where the streets are paved with gold and every meal was like her prepared Sunday's dinner:

I'm gonna tell God how you treated me, one of these days.
[sometimes this last phrase was changed to: "when I get home."]

As United Methodists, can we reach out to the separated African Americans who call themselves Methodists, too? Quiet as it is kept: Emmanuel African Methodist Church of Charleston, South Carolina started as a Methodist Episcopal Church. Can we restructure The United Methodist Church, alter its attitudes and practices, and say: "Please come back! We are ready to *be* the church!" Will we? Can we? Do we have room at the table?

Will those separated African Americans, those who still claim Wesleyan roots and John and Charles and Susannah Wesley as their essential ecclesial ancestors, find "fruits of repentance" after an emotional and agonizing and soul-baring confession of racism and bigotry at the 2000 General Conference, and so many other subsequent Annual Conferences and other such gatherings across the country? Will the "fruit inspectors" find the fruits and have anything good to report? Can this church, so Wesleyan, so American, so willing to change organizational structure and move furniture around, do that?

What shall we do about the "reconciling churches" and the reconciling movement and the consistent efforts to seek justice, inclusion, respect, equality, and dignity for the LGBTQ community? Surely a church so defined by grace, so repeatedly claiming "open hearts, open minds, open doors" and boasting of our diversity, has room for all of God's children and whomever they love and marry!

If we cannot do that, what word do we have for other African Americans or the many other persons who people our cities, populate our towns, and live in our rural communities, who are unchurched and languish in doubt, despair, disorder, and unfreedom? What hope can we offer for reconciliation, a restored people, a redeemed world, the beloved community? What word do we have for the brothers and sisters who have no faith, no confidence, and no interest in the church or the Christ it represents? Millennials are asking that question, too! That is the challenge to Methodism as we try to be the church in this millennium. That reaching out, restoring, reclaiming, and proclaiming may be the real future of Methodism in America. The growth, the survival, and even the justification for the very *raison d'être* of "United" Methodism (certainly a misnomer!) may well depend on it.