

The Historic Handclasp

by Lucia Myers

The picture which symbolizes the unification of Methodism in America—three men in a triple handclasp—has now become a part of the church's history. It has been reprinted countless times, and has been translated into a metal plaque.

However, since an incorrect date is sometimes attached to it, Methodist friends have urged me to tell the story back of the picture. I was the newspaper reporter who arranged for the photograph to be made.

Bishop John M. Moore, senior bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South; Dr. James H. Straughn, president of the General Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church (later to become bishop), and Bishop Edwin Holt Hughes, senior bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, formed that handclasp on April 30, 1938 during the last General Conference of the Southern church in Birmingham, Alabama.

The picture appeared for the first time on the front page of *The Birmingham Post* on that date. Some of the reprints have erroneously implied that it was photographed at the Uniting Conference in Kansas City, a year later.

On the contrary, it was a prophetic handclasp!

At the Conference in Birmingham the great debate on unification rose to a climax in the closing days of April 1938. The other two bodies—the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Protestant Church—had already voted for it. The fate of the long effort for reunion was, at last, depending only on the vote of the Southern delegates, gathered in Municipal Auditorium in Birmingham.

Although the action of the annual conferences had pointed overwhelmingly toward affirmation, the "cons" matched eloquence with the "pros" for two long exciting sessions. On the afternoon of April 29 came the vote—434 to 26 in favor of unification. At once the matter was referred to the Judicial Council, to determine whether there was any constitutional impediment.

But the hope and faith of the delegates did not wait on official deliberations. That day of high emotion was followed by an evening session at which the fraternal messengers appeared from the other two bodies. In the Auditorium a throng of delegates and other Methodists from all over the South joined in the opening hymn, "Faith of Our Fathers."

Bishop Moore, who had worked long for the great reunion, presided and introduced the two speakers.

Dr. Straughn came first, speaking appealingly of the coming reunion:

"Some years ago . . . when the Methodist Protestant Church decided to make a whole-time office of the presidency of the General Conference, I happened to meet one of the beloved Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church on the train. He whimsically twitted me with the remark: 'I see the great Protestant Church has at last elected a Bishop,' and looked at me with kindly amusement. 'Oh, no,' I replied, 'we have elected the office but not the name.' 'Oh, well,' said he, 'why not come all the way and be done with it?' 'Yes,' I said, 'that's just it. You and the others stand in the doorway of the paternal home and down the road you think you see a dusty prodigal and from the security of that home you call out, "Son, come on home." But if you would but go out and meet him, put your arms and robe about him and say, "Son, don't you think it's about time we were going home," there would be a different story.' And now the time has come. It is a different story . . . For now there are three of us in each other's embrace, and we are on our way not to the house of any one of us but to the new home adequate to the needs and well being of us all, wherein at last we may live together a reunited and happy people, in glad waiting for that other house not made with hands, eternal in the Heavens."

Bishop Hughes used vivid figures of speech to express the destined event. He compared Methodism to a great river, divided by islands into different channels for a time but now merging into a vast stream for the blessing of many peoples on many shores.

He spoke of Aldersgate Street as "our perpetual rendezvous" and added that "two surveyors, named Mason and Dixon, were not as powerful as two horsemen, named Coke and Asbury."

Bishop Hughes pointed out: "If a Northern skeptic may say, 'Union cannot succeed, human nature being what it is,' we make confident reply, 'Union can succeed, the divine nature being what it is.'"

He referred tenderly to his two Methodist grandmothers—one a Northerner, the other a Southerner.

"They both make me think of Heaven when I think of them . . . When some day I unloose my sandals at the end of my earthly journey . . . I shall find them waiting for me on the inner side of joy; two hands clasped in reconciliation, and their other two hands stretched out in welcome, as they call me by some celestial diminutive and love me more for all my endeavors to bring their Churches to the unified life which they themselves have long since reached."

At the conclusion Bishop Moore called for the hymn, "Blest Be

The Tie That Binds." The three men moved toward each other, and with an instant spontaneous unanimity clasped hands!

While they and the crowd sang, the three men held the circle of the great brotherhood-to-be. And, still clasping hands, they repeated in unison the Apostolic Benediction.

There was an instant of awe and tense silence. Tears shone in eyes and on cheeks here and there in the crowd. Then many persons reached out to clasp hands with those around them. Everybody seemed to want to shake hands with everybody else—all at once—in a vast multiplication of the historic handclasp.

The photographer who had come with me from *The Birmingham Post* had made a few routine pictures on the platform before the program began, and had long since disappeared. The great moment had gone unrecorded by a camera.

Harry Denman, business manager of Birmingham's First Methodist Church at the time (later to become secretary of Methodism's Board of Evangelism), came down the aisle past the press table and said to me: "Where's your photographer? He's missed the great picture of the Conference!"

At seven o'clock the next morning I was at my office, telling the city editor that we must get the three leaders together for a reproduction of the scene. "Go to it!" he said.

Three telephones in a downtown hotel began ringing with the request. The three men agreed to meet the photographer, Bill Bennett, and me within an hour. They stood together near the east side-entrance of the Auditorium. The earnestness of the evening before was still evident as they assumed the same positions. The photograph, waist-high, showed clearly their facial expressions and the strong grip of their hands, under the headline: "Three Clasp Hands In Symbol Of Methodist Unification."

The picture was published for the first time that afternoon, April 30, on the front page of *The Birmingham Post*. The banner line, eight columns wide across the page, stated: "Legal Battle Over Unification Begins." The contiguity of that line and the picture establishes the scene as a forerunner of the legal decision.

Three days later the Judicial Council reported its findings at a Conference session—unification was indeed legally valid.

Thus, man-made law caught up with the deeper impulses of the spirit.

A year later, at the Uniting Conference in Kansas City, the same three men drew together for a photograph which showed them full-length. However the fresh emotion which was focused in the earlier picture has given it a certain luminosity of its own.