

## BLACKS IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH FROM ITS BEGINNING TO 1968

by Julius E. Del Pino

To understand the many political and social variables which have shaped the role of blacks in the United Methodist Church today, it is necessary to provide background information on the status of blacks prior to 1939. One must consider the circumstances surrounding the status of blacks which led to the eventual formation of the Central Jurisdiction.

The first part of this paper focuses primarily upon the early historical development of blacks in the Methodist Church. The second part concerns the jurisdictional system and the formation of the Central Jurisdiction. A brief outline of some arguments for and against the development of the Central Jurisdiction and information concerning the several moves to abolish the Central Jurisdiction prior to its dissolution will be provided.

### Blacks Within and "Without" the Methodist Church

This section will detail the experiences of blacks within the church and will indicate why it was necessary to go outside Methodism to actualize their expectations and hopes.

*Early Black Methodism.* Black people have been a part of the Methodist Church since the late 1700's. In 1769, Richard Boardman wrote a letter to John Wesley which said: "The number of the blacks that attend the preaching affects me much."<sup>1</sup> Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmore were the first of a series of "ministerial pairs" appointed by John Wesley to the American circuit.<sup>2</sup> Like Richard Boardman, Joseph Pilmore kept written records of blacks who were active participants in Methodism. What follows is one of his references to blacks.

*August 1, 1771, New York*

Thursday — Was a busy day indeed . . . In the evening we had our quarterly Love Feast, which was a special season of love to the believers in general — They

<sup>1</sup>Bishop Willis J. King, "The Negro Membership of the (former) Methodist Church in the (new) United Methodist Church," p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 70.

spoke freely of the goodness of God, while a profound awe and divine reverence seemed to sit upon every countenance — One of the poor Negroes declared her heart was so full of divine love that she could not express it and many more of them were exceedingly glad in their minds. If the people who keep them in a state of *slavery* would but take pains to have them instructed in the Religion of Jesus, it would be some compensation for their loss of their Liberty; but this, alas, is too much neglected — Yet there are a goodly number of masters in America who are glad to do all in their power for them.<sup>3</sup>

In the same year Francis Asbury wrote in his journal:

To see the poor Negroes so affected is pleasing, to see their sable countenances in our assemblies and to hear them sing with cheerful melody their dear Redeemer's praise, affected me much, and made me ready to say, "of a truth I perceive God is no respecter of persons."<sup>4</sup>

According to church historians, the first class meeting convened in the home of Philip Embury in New York. There were only a handful of persons at this meeting in 1776, one of them was a black female servant. The presence of blacks was not only evident in New York but also in "the log chapel on Sam's Creek and in Lovely Lane (Baltimore) and at St. George's (Philadelphia)."<sup>5</sup>

In early Methodism the status of most blacks was that of a slave. They were in the lowest economic and social brackets and were neither recognized nor treated as equals. Nor were they permitted to worship and to express their faith freely. Wade Crawford Barclay, in *History of Missions in the Methodist Church*, cites a statement by Joseph Pilmore on August 9, 1772:

As the ground was wet, they persuaded me to try to preach within, and appointed men to stand at the doors to keep all the Negroes out until the white persons were in, but the house would not hold them.<sup>6</sup>

It was the custom for black slaves to receive the gospel from the same ministers and in the same churches as their masters did.<sup>7</sup> This policy became official as early as 1780 when the following resolution was adopted by the church: "Ought not the assistant to meet the coloured persons, and not suffer them to stay late and meet by themselves? Yes."<sup>8</sup> To facilitate the seating of blacks in worship services in some churches, balconies were built to accommodate them.

<sup>3</sup>"Earliest Origins of Black Methodism," (A Composite Sketch produced for a class in American Methodism at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois, 1971).

<sup>4</sup>King, "The Negro Membership of the (former) Methodist Church in the (new) United Methodist Church," p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, p. 166.

<sup>6</sup>Wade C. Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions*, 4 Vols. (New York: Board of Missions and Church Extension of the Methodist Church, 1949-1974), 2:55.

<sup>7</sup>Dwight W. Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1953), p. 43.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

Since the foundation of the Methodist Church, the status and the role of blacks in the church have been issues. As far back as 1780, men and women in the Methodist Episcopal Church were known to debate the pros and cons of slavery. As illustrated above, treatment of blacks and their participation in services of worship were questions affecting the life of the church even before this date. The following is a brief discussion of the impact of this issue on the church as a whole and experiences which led to the efforts of blacks, and some whites, to develop independent movements apart from the parent body of Methodism.

### The African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Historically and chronologically, the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) was the first of three major black denominations to organize itself as a separate denomination apart from the Methodist Episcopal Church. The AME Church had, even prior to its formal development in 1816, a significant influence on the lives of black people. Its rise and progress enabled thousands of quasi-free black people and slaves to join a viable freedom movement, the effect of which is still evident in the United States today.<sup>9</sup>

Richard Allen, the founder of the AME Church, can be credited with providing meaningful leadership which motivated many blacks to develop a new sense of race consciousness and identity. In 1787, Richard Allen became visible within the Methodist structure when he helped to organize the Free African Society. This was the first attempt to coordinate human and political efforts for improving living conditions for blacks. This same period marked the exodus of blacks from St. George's Church in Philadelphia.<sup>10</sup> Indicative of the context in which this exodus took place, is the occasion when two trustees of the church attempted to pull black persons up from their knees as they prayed.<sup>11</sup> It was not until 1794, however, that they began to worship apart from their white brothers and sisters.

While it is not the writer's intention to go into minute detail regarding the early beginnings of the AME Church, two items are considered to be of paramount importance. To the knowledge of the writer, the AME Church in all its history has never advocated a system predicated on racial bigotry. Even though the word "African" was employed in its title, the term was not used to isolate blacks from whites, but was to suggest the importance of cultural mores that are endemic to black people. Secondly, due to Richard Allen and others like him, blacks were able to articulate

---

<sup>9</sup>Crawford Brady, "The A.M.E. and the Black Liberation Movement: 1787-1860," (Master's Thesis, Northwestern University, 1974), p. iii.

<sup>10</sup>Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, p. 170.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

an expression of hope that would enable them, as a people, to experience a quality of life that would build self-conscious communities of faith primarily focused on the resources necessary to meet their human and spiritual needs.

### The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.

The AME Zion Church, founded in 1821, was another black movement which severed its relationship with the Methodist Episcopal Church. The AME Zion Church began the process of withdrawing from the parent body when a group of black Methodists in New York City held a meeting and agreed to petition Bishop Asbury to allow them to have Methodist gatherings separate from the whites.<sup>12</sup> This too, was an attempt to deal with racial discrimination. For example, blacks were seldom allowed to preach to whites, and some experienced a great deal of difficulty trying to gain entry into the Annual Conference as itinerant ministers.

In 1799, the number of blacks meeting independently from their white counterparts had grown to such an extent that they wanted to build a larger structure to accommodate more people and to become an incorporated system. This goal was not accomplished until 1801, when the "African Methodist Episcopal Church in the City of New York" (Zion Chapel) was incorporated "with the property held by a black board of trustees while the ministerial direction remained with the New York Conference."<sup>13</sup>

Such men as William Stillwell, Abraham Thompson, Christopher Rush and James Varick were responsible for developing and implementing the various programs that were needed to generate the AME Zion movement. By 1824, although many problems were unresolved, they had moved towards being an independent church which would allow full participation without regard to race or color. The blacks within this newly organized church attempted (like their AME brothers and sisters) to develop the kind of church that would enhance their likelihood of attaining *spiritual freedom* — a freedom that had heretofore been denied them in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

### The Wesleyan Methodist Church.

There were white groups that challenged and contested the institution of slavery. One such group came into being through the leadership of Orange Scott and LeRoy Sunderland to resist any idea or

<sup>12</sup>Frederick E. Maser and George A. Singleton, "Further Branches of Methodism are Founded," in *History of American Methodism*, gen. ed., Emory S. Bucke, 3 vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 1:609.

<sup>13</sup>Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, p. 173.

system that promoted and justified servitude or slave holding. After witnessing the adoption of resolutions which supported the slavery system at the 1836 and 1840 General Conferences, this group withdrew from the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1842. With a relatively small number of ministers and laity, this group formed the Wesleyan Methodist Church in America.

### The General Conference of 1844.

The 1844 General Conference began on May first in the Greene Street Methodist Episcopal Church, New York City. It was at this conference that both clergy and laity, Northern and Southern, invested much of their emotional and intellectual energy in attempting to deal with an issue that would affect not only the status of blacks, but would influence, if not determine, to no small degree, the course of history for the Methodist Church for at least ninety-five years. The issue was slavery.

The center of attention revolved around two men: Francis Harding, a minister from the Baltimore Annual Conference, and James O. Andrew, of Georgia, who had become a bishop in 1832. Fredrick A. Norwood describes the events concerning Harding:

The first test of strength came with the case of Francis Harding's appeal from the decision of his Baltimore Annual Conference to suspend him for failure to free some slaves he had acquired by marriage. The vote, 117 to 56, to reject the appeal, said much about the new stance of this General Conference. It was clear that the moderates were voting with antislavery forces, not with the Southern delegation. The vote was especially significant in that the issue here was slavery without the constitutional complication which attended the case of Bishop Andrew.<sup>14</sup>

The increasingly volatile issue of slavery had forced both sides to reckon with the inevitable. Bishop James O. Andrew was faced with a similar charge when delegates from the abolitionist conferences of New England threatened to withdraw from the national body unless disciplinary action was taken against him.<sup>15</sup> He held two slaves, both bequeathed to him from his first marriage. Under Georgia state law he could not free them. On June 1, 1844, the question of what should be done concerning the case of Bishop Andrew was answered by a vote of 110 to 68 in support of the final resolution which called for Bishop Andrew to "desist from the exercise of this office so long as this impediment remains."<sup>16</sup>

Due to fundamental disagreements concerning the status of blacks, as indicated by the above events, the Methodist Episcopal Church suffered a major rupture at this conference resulting in a division between

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>15</sup>Webb Garrison, Introduction to *History of American Methodism*, by gen. ed. Emory S. Bucke, 3 vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964) 1:240.

<sup>16</sup>Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, p. 198.

the Northern and Southern churches. These events indicated that, to a large extent, the role of blacks would be defined from outside the Methodist Church.

#### Blacks in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

After the Southern church became the "Methodist Episcopal Church, South" or the "Church South", Southern leaders focused much of their attention and effort on evangelizing the slaves. This was in part due to the fact that they no longer had to relate to Northern abolitionists. Northerners and Southerners had not forgotten the bitter debates and both, therefore, were sensitive about how they would be perceived by the Northern and Southern blacks. For example, some white Northerners encouraged blacks to believe that Southerners wanted them only for servants. Although this was not universally the case, Southern whites were determined to keep the "Negro" in a subordinate and inferior position. Because this attitude was embraced by Southerners (and many Northerners), many blacks left the Church South for other denominations, principally the AME and AME Zion Churches. It is, therefore, not surprising that blacks had to escape the perennial system because the vast majority of whites were unwilling to accept them as equals.

Another factor motivating blacks to leave the Methodist Episcopal Church, South was an issue existent from the inception of the Methodist Episcopal Church; namely, the lack of formal education for black ministers. Blacks were refused the opportunity to prepare themselves for ministry and, in recruiting blacks for the ministry, the number of those who possessed even a modicum of education was virtually nil.<sup>17</sup> In theory, the Southern Church was attempting to make strides toward ameliorating the condition of blacks. It was evident that black leadership could not manifest itself within the Methodist Episcopal Church, South due to the limited and rather myopic view of blacks by white Southern leaders.

#### The Formation of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church.

The black membership in the MECS numbered 146,949 in 1853; by 1866 it had dwindled to 78,000 and by 1869 it was down to 20,000. The rapid rate at which black membership was lost necessitated that something be done.

At the General Conference of 1866, the question of what should be done with the remaining blacks was of paramount importance in the minds of most delegates. The Conference adopted a resolution that "allowed" black members to establish their own ministry independent of

<sup>17</sup>Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions*, 3:310.

the MECS. In 1870, the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (CME) came into existence, with William H. Miles and Richard H. Vanderhorst as the first bishops.

This newly formed church was one effort of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South to retain its black membership in the South. However, the formation of this new church did not prevent the recruitment of members for the AME and AME Zion Churches. Many blacks believed they would still be second-class members in the new church. The CME Church was accused by other black churches of being of white origin and was commonly called the "slave church." The Methodist Episcopal Church also saw the CME Church as a source of its own expansion southward. This interest was predicated on the argument that each church should struggle to build up its own membership as well as promote its individual programs. Therefore, the fledgling CME denomination became the target of the evangelistic efforts of the ME Church.

There were blacks, however, who repudiated such terms as "slave church." By 1874 the CME Church had grown to seventy-five thousand people. In spite of severe constraints, the CME Church was able to sustain its movement with continued growth in membership. Many reasons have been offered by church historians as to why the CME Church grew as quickly as it did. One motive seems certain: because whites did not understand or accept the significance of black culture, black Methodists in the South had no viable alternative other than to seek institutional autonomy. Under these pressures, this church, like the AME and AME Zion, sought independence and made its presence known in the country. In 1954 the CME Church changed its name to the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

#### Methodist Episcopal Church.

The separation of the North and South in 1844 was not accompanied by any significant changes for black people in the North. One would think that with all of the energy and effort expended by white Northerners at the 1844 Conference to define the status of blacks in the Church, somewhere and somehow blacks would have been provided with an opportunity to assess and address their own needs. Bishop Willis King, now retired, had this to say about the effect of the division upon the Northern Church:

Despite their espousal of the freedom of the slaves, local attitudes against the admission of Negroes into the churches changed slowly; and in a number of cases Negroes were encouraged to set up their own local congregations, and even to join the independent Negro denominations.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup>King, "The Negro Membership of the (former) Methodist Church in the (new) United Methodist Church," p. 8.

As early as 1848, requests for black conferences were made. Wade Crawford Barclay described the event:

Memorials from Negroes praying for Annual Conferences of their own had been received and considered as early as 1848 when John P. Durbin "presented two memorials from colored members in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware, asking the General Conference to organize an Annual Conference for colored members, to be presided over by one of our Bishops and by white presiding Elders."<sup>19</sup>

These requests were denied. Blacks were determined, however, that this first rejection would not prevent them from reaching their goal. Blacks within the ME Church believed that if there was to be any hope of developing creative and productive leadership, they would have to move outside the ME Church. In addition,

The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church was making definite inroads on the Negro membership of the Methodist Episcopal Church "because they could point with pride to [black] men [and women] in authority in their church".<sup>20</sup>

This writer concludes that blacks in the ME Church wanted to demonstrate their own effective leadership in their ministry, and to motivate blacks in other denominations to look to them with respect. This aspiration was never acknowledged by the Methodist Episcopal Church.

*The General Conference of 1852.* The General Conference of 1852 was, at least in theory, a new beginning for blacks in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Specifically, the 1852 General Conference

advised that the Negro local preachers within Philadelphia and New Jersey Conferences be assembled annually by the presiding Bishop for the purpose of conferring on them means for promoting their work and for assignment to their work.<sup>21</sup>

This suggests that blacks had been denied recognition and ministerial rights which had been available to whites.

Slowly, progress was being made to deal with the many factors that excluded black people from the Church. The year 1858 was extremely significant in that the ordination of a "Negro" Bishop occurred — Francis Burns was ordained as a missionary bishop. In 1866, John W. Roberts was elected to the episcopacy. Both Roberts and Burns were native African bishops, and *both* were appointed to the Liberian Mission.

*The First "Negro" Conference Organized in the Methodist Episcopal Church.* The first "Negro" conference organized under the provisions adopted at the 1864 General Conference was the Delaware Conference which met on July 29, 1864, in Philadelphia. The Washington Conference had its first session in the City of Baltimore on

<sup>19</sup>Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions*, 3:302.

<sup>20</sup>Nolan B. Harmon, "Structural and Administrative Changes," in *History of American Methodism*, gen. ed., Emory S. Bucke, 3 vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 3:11.

<sup>21</sup>Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions*, 3:303.

October 27, 1864. It was not, however, until 1868 that the General Conference sanctioned bishops to organize new annual conferences in the South, "in territories not included in annual conferences, and on approval of two-thirds of the members, to divide southern conferences already developed."<sup>22</sup>

In 1868, blacks participated for the first time as elected delegates to a General Conference. Black conferences were no longer categorized as "mission" conferences, but were to be accorded most of the rights, privileges, and benefits that had heretofore been accorded only to white conferences. As a result and because of the new sense of race pride and dignity which developed on the part of the black leaders, black conferences would continue to emerge. These conferences, organized in the Methodist Episcopal Church, did not appeal solely to emancipated blacks, nor were they organized to create additional feelings of hostility or alienation within the Southern Church. Blacks were desirous of forming separate conferences, but not with the intention of excluding their white sisters and brothers.

*Racial Division of the Conference.* The General Conference of 1876 gave the bishops the authority to divide Southern conferences along racial lines whenever:

it shall be requested by a majority of white members, and also a majority of the (black) members (of those conferences interested in this plan.)<sup>23</sup>

Whites moved swiftly to divide conferences on the basis of color. For example, at the 1876 Tennessee Conference session, white members proposed to the "Negro" body a plan for division, predicating "their actions on the 'effect of the present condition of the conference on the white work.'"<sup>24</sup> While the majority of the black pastors were in opposition to this plan, the final vote cast was fifty-five for the motion and seven against. Like the Tennessee Conference, other conferences employed the same or similar methods to usurp any potential power blacks might develop.

By 1895, the process of separating the races had been "successfully" completed. This is to say, the "color line" had been defined so well that annual conferences would no longer be composed of both black and white ministers in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Although, in some cases blacks and whites preferred the development of separate conferences, in other instances blacks were adamantly opposed to dividing conferences on racial lines. Because there was little or no black representation on decision making boards, whites devised plans that would determine the status of the "Negro" in the church.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 3:313.

<sup>23</sup>Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, p. 55.

<sup>24</sup>Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions*, 3:318.

### The 1939 Plan of Union.

By 1939 a great deal had been accomplished by the various joint commissions towards uniting the three main bodies of Methodism, the M.E., M.E. South, and M.P. Churches. Between 1911 and 1939, several plans had been created. The decision process was slow. At times it appeared that negotiation would never culminate in action. The plan of union was bitterly opposed by some and graciously accepted by others. In August of 1936, the various commissions had finalized their work and presented their plan of union to the churches for evaluation and ratification. To a large extent, this plan was based on the discussions held between 1916 and 1920 and the jurisdictional idea which had been suggested in 1911. In brief, among other factors, this plan proposed:

1. The General Conference would convene quadrennially.
2. The creation of the sixth jurisdiction, the Central Jurisdiction, which encompassed all "Negro" conferences and missions of the former Methodist Episcopal Church.
3. The "Negro" members not presently in organized "Negro" conferences were to stay within the predominantly white conferences.
4. Each jurisdiction would be entitled to equal representation in the national boards and agencies established by the General Conference.
5. Each jurisdiction would elect its own bishops and establish the boundaries of its Annual Conferences.<sup>25</sup>

After many years of negotiation, on May 10, 1939, the Central Jurisdiction became a reality at the Uniting Conference in Kansas City, Missouri. It was a system which would leave questions unanswered and issues unresolved for at least three more decades.

#### How Blacks Viewed The Jurisdictional Plan

Blacks within the church worked assiduously to find their place in a structure that denied them equal opportunity for development. Like some of the white clergy, they shared mixed feelings over the jurisdictional plan. R.E. Jones, who was one of two black representatives for the Methodist Episcopal Church (and who was later elected to the episcopacy) at the proceedings of the Joint Commission on Unification in 1918, noted:

We will agree that our bishops shall be limited to our jurisdictions. I think that is all. O brothers, let us not think the task is hopeless. Don't make us prevent reunion. Don't put upon me and upon my people any more burdens than we have, don't make us the scapegoat — we cannot stand it. Don't let us go out and have it said that these two churches did not unite because the Negro was not willing to do his share. We are. We don't want to stand in your way.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, p. 69.

<sup>26</sup>A. W. Harris and Frank M. Thomas, comps., *Joint Commission on Unification*, 3 vols. (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1918-1920), 1:73.

Mr. Jones clearly expressed the commitment of blacks to work for church unity. But, while black people were cognizant of how they were treated, this did not keep them from the kind of fellowship that would, in fact, include all persons without regard to race or color. They believed that their presence in the Methodist Church would enhance the cause of world unity.<sup>27</sup> They were willing to compromise their position to facilitate moves toward unification. Believing that both their professional opportunities and their fellowship with whites within the church would be jeopardized under the jurisdictional system, it was still the most, indeed the only viable and workable system at the time.

As the years passed, the position of blacks changed. The glimpse of hope they had for a unified church within had not and was not to become a reality. Blacks wanted equal opportunity and acceptance by whites, but as time progressed, they learned that neither goal seemed attainable.

By 1938, blacks contended the plan of union was "a morally untenable position."<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, blacks became so adamantly opposed to the proposed plan of union that seventeen of the nineteen "Negro" conferences voted not to support the proposed merger. Lorenzo H. King, who served as pastor of Saint Mark's Church in New York City, opposed the plan to the extent that he:

asked the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to take legal steps to prevent the proposed unification.<sup>29</sup>

In 1938, a group of black leaders, including Bishops Robert E. Jones and Matthew W. Clair, Sr., communicated a need to convene in order to discuss the repercussions of adopting the merger plan. Specifically, their course of action was to design a strategy to counter the proposed plan of merger. Black leaders had taken a definitive stance against a system that had and would perpetuate their oppression as a people. It, therefore, was not surprising that more than 250 pastors responded to this request in 1938.

### The Composition of the Central Jurisdiction.

In developing the jurisdictional system, the Uniting Conference divided the United States into six regions, five of which were geographic and one racial. They were Western, North Central, Northeastern, Southeastern, South Central, and the Central Jurisdiction. These jurisdictions were subdivided into episcopal areas. The episcopal areas were further divided into annual conferences.

*Geographical Boundaries of the Central Jurisdiction.* The following

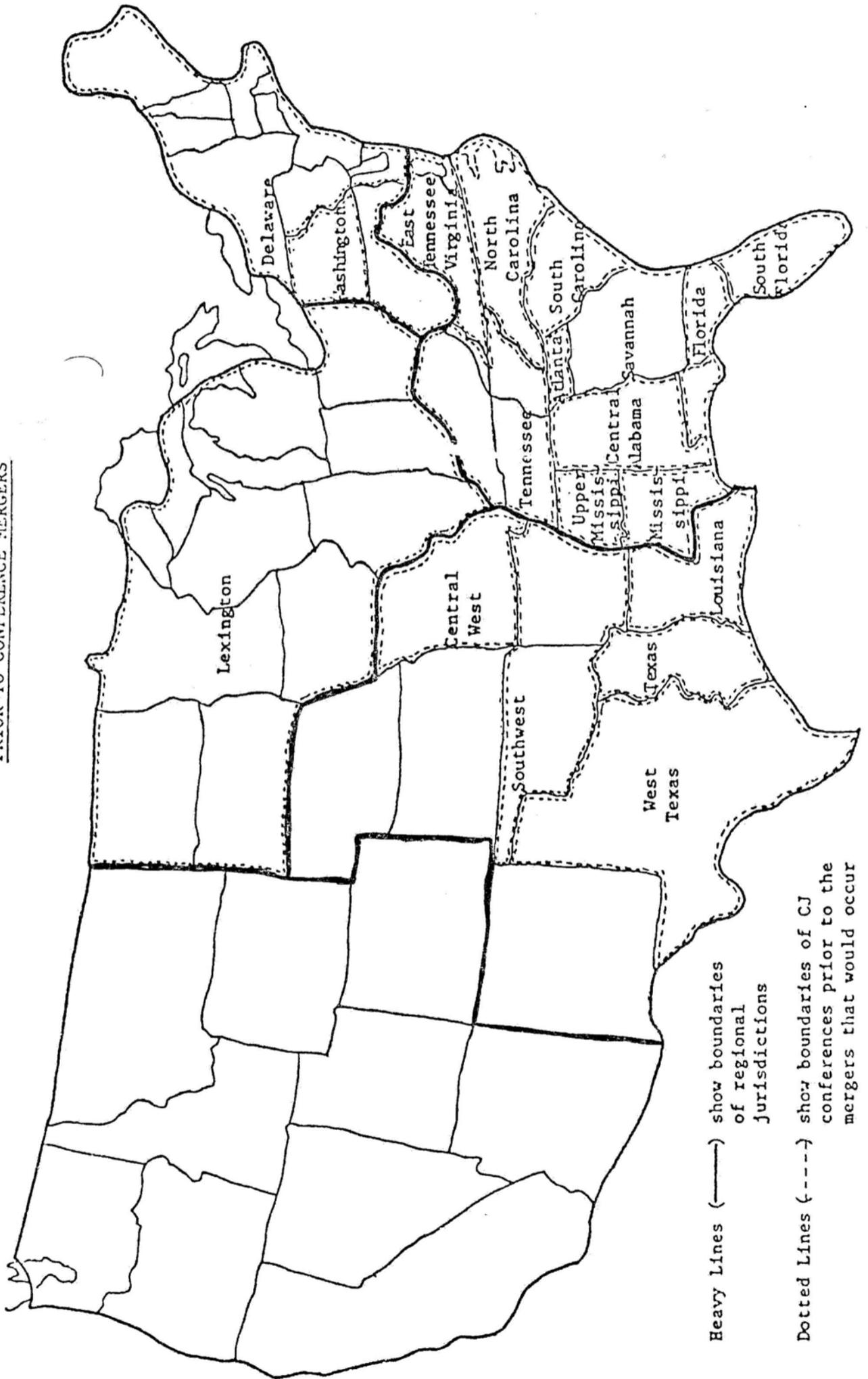
<sup>27</sup>King, "The Negro Membership of the (former) Methodist Church in the (new) United Methodist Church," p. 14.

<sup>28</sup>Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, p. 75.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*

figure shows the relationship of black annual conferences to each other. It indicates the boundaries of the Central Jurisdiction in relationship to the regional boundaries of the other five jurisdictions, and shows the original nineteen conferences of the Central Jurisdiction before any merger occurred.

FIGURE: 2.2  
THIS MAP SHOWS LOCATION OF CJ CONFERENCES  
PRIOR TO CONFERENCE MERGERS



Heavy Lines (————) show boundaries of regional jurisdictions  
Dotted Lines (-----) show boundaries of CJ conferences prior to the mergers that would occur

The map readily shows that the Central Jurisdiction covered a large area. In addition, there were several states which had only two to five churches (Minnesota, Wisconsin, New Mexico, Colorado, Iowa and Nebraska). Because of the geographical distances, these churches could not readily experience a rich and meaningful fellowship with other black Methodist churches. Isolated from other annual conferences, it was difficult to relate to and become actively involved in the planning processes of their respective conferences.

District superintendents had to travel far to hold a quarterly conference. Many of the district superintendents would visit each pastoral charge four times a year. Some district superintendents had to travel as far as four hundred miles to hold a quarterly conference.

*A Financial Overview of the Central Jurisdiction.* Historically, black people have always experienced economic oppression. This was no different with blacks in the Methodist Church.

Fifty-two of the district superintendents in the Central Jurisdiction indicated that the money received by them from all sources was clearly insufficient to enable them to perform their responsibilities.<sup>30</sup>

It is not the intention here to discuss in detail the economic conditions of the district superintendents in the Central Jurisdiction, but only to show that economic factors were a major consideration for blacks in leadership positions in the Methodist Church.

*Continued Opposition to the Central Jurisdiction.* Soon after the Uniting Conference adopted the 1939 plan of merger, verbal protestations began to echo throughout the Church. In the episcopal address of the College of Bishops, black bishops in 1944 voted their opinions about the racially segregated jurisdictional system:

We accept the setting apart of a Central Jurisdiction only as an administrative arrangement for the Negro membership in the Methodist Church. We are not at all in harmony with any Methodist or others who think such a plan necessary in a truly Christian brotherhood. We consider it expedient only on account of the Christian Childhood of some American Methodists who need a little coddling until they can grow into full grown manhood (and womanhood) in Christ Jesus. We are hopeful that in the near future our Methodism may become sufficiently Christian in character and maturity to find a more excellent way.<sup>31</sup>

*The General Conferences of 1944 and 1948.* It had become evident that if there was to be a modicum of hope for the Methodist Church, something would have to be done to change the organizational structure. The 1944 General Conference proclaimed:

<sup>30</sup>*The Methodist Church and Race: A Guide to Understanding the Jurisdictional System.* (Washington, D.C.: p. 10 of Human Relations and Economic Affairs, 1962), p. 18.

<sup>31</sup>Allen M. Mayes, comp. and ed., *Journal of the Eighth Session of the Central Jurisdictional Conference*, (Nashville, Tenn.: Methodist Publishing House, 1967), p. 74.

We look to the ultimate elimination of racial discrimination within the Methodist Church (and) . . . Equal opportunity in employment, upgrading and conditions of work, in exercise of full rights of citizenship.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, the General Conference of 1944 had good intentions, though little or no definitive action was taken to begin dealing with the dissolution of the Central Jurisdiction.

The General Conference of 1948 declared:

We must address ourselves with patience and perserverance to the infinitely complicated task of removing racial discrimination, root and branch, from our common life, both in the Church and in the nation we live.<sup>33</sup>

This conference made changes in boundaries with the Western and Central Jurisdictions to make black churches in Arizona a part of the Southern California-Arizona Conference.

*The Central Jurisdiction Conference of 1948.* The 1948 Conference of the Central Jurisdiction organized its first commission to study the organizational dynamics of that jurisdiction. Furthermore, special emphasis was directed toward identifying the advantages and disadvantages of the Central Jurisdiction. Similarly, the Lexington Annual Conference called for the organizing of a study commission to investigate the issue of racial discrimination in the Methodist Church from a wide perspective. This commission continued its work until 1956.

#### The General Conference of 1956 and Amendment IX.

Faced with the United States Supreme Court ruling of 1954 which declared unequivocally that all people are entitled to human dignities, the mood and feeling of many church men and women became more sensitive to the issue of racial segregation in the church.

Many days of study and debate were spent over the elimination of the Central Jurisdiction at the 1956 General Conference. Amendment IX to the Constitution was developed to provide the type of legislation necessary for implementing the elimination of the Central Jurisdiction. For many whites and blacks, Amendment IX represented an expression of the Church's willingness and ardent desire to move towards abolishing the Central Jurisdiction.

However, as time progressed, it became abundantly clear that Amendment IX, like other amendments and resolutions, did not solve the problem the Methodist Church had faced since its inception. For some, the amendment represented a plan to prevent and/or delay dissolution of the Central Jurisdiction.

---

<sup>32</sup>Winston H. Taylor, *Ending Racial Segregation in the Church* (Washington, D. C.: Division of Human Relations and Economic Affairs, n.d.), p. 8.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*

The 1964 General Conference gradually moved closer to the church's goal -- racial inclusiveness; it was also clear that the 1964 conference would not dissolve the Central Jurisdiction by constitutional amendment (or employ plans of legislation), but would follow the example of other general conferences by allowing annual conferences to decide for themselves when it was best to become an integrated organization.

*Black Conferences Merge Into Regional Jurisdictions.* Despite unresolved problems and the uncertainty that both blacks and whites expressed in the 1964 General Conference, black conferences did transfer into regional jurisdictions. In July of 1964, the Delaware and Washington conferences transferred into the Northeastern Jurisdiction, and the Lexington Conference transferred into the North Central jurisdiction. These three conferences set a precedent that accelerated the elimination of the Central Jurisdiction.

To say that the actions taken by these conferences were a guarantee of the achievement of "racial inclusiveness" in the Methodist Church would be premature. However, conditions were created that made possible the elimination of the last vestige of structural segregation in the Methodist Church.

By May, 1965, thirteen annual conferences remained within the Central Jurisdiction. Many people who were still members of the jurisdiction did not feel that the dissolution was a feasible solution to the race problem.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the process of "gradualism" continued to be the approach used to abolish the Central Jurisdiction.

### The Historic 1966 General Conference.

This conference had a two-fold purpose. First, this general conference convened to consider the Evangelical United Brethren (EUB) plan of union. It was here that the Methodist and EUB Churches would vote to become one. The Methodists voiced their overwhelming approval of the union; those in the EUB Church shared similar feelings.

Second, this special session was held to report on progress towards eliminating the Central Jurisdiction. It had been the ardent hope of many Methodists that all of the annual conferences of that jurisdiction would have been transferred into conferences of the Southeastern and South Central Jurisdictions by the first half of the 1964 quadrennium. However, it had become evident that all black conferences would not be merged by 1968.

The General Conference spent hours debating the report that was created by the church's Commission on Interjurisdictional Relations. In the end, the conference established 1972 as the target date for removing

---

<sup>34</sup>"Integrating the Central Jurisdiction As a Whole," *Central Christian Advocate*, May 15, 1965, p. 3.

all forms of structural segregation within the Methodist Church. The plan of voluntary "gradualism" continued to underlie the church's strategy as each General Conference moved slowly towards removing a long standing tradition, "separate but equal."

*The Historic 1967 Central Jurisdictional Conference.* This was the last session of the Central Jurisdiction prior to the merger in 1968. Much of this historic meeting focused upon developing a historical record and reviewing the achievements of the jurisdiction. The conference employed drama, written documents, and verbal pronouncements as it sought to emphasize the importance of its role in Methodist history.<sup>35</sup> There was, to be sure, an air of "finality" in this special session, the first of its kind ever in the history of the Methodist Church.<sup>36</sup>

After the conference, black Methodists continued to work towards ending structural segregation in the Church. However, other concerns did emerge. One major concern which black Methodists shared was adequate representation and the opportunity to participate at all levels of the church. These feelings of uncertainty and apprehension were reasonable, given the past history of blacks in the church, and, indeed, in the nation.

*The 1968 General Conference.* In this conference, the Commission on Interjurisdictional Relations recommended that 1972 should be the final year any racially constituted structure should be allowed to exist in the church. Because of the apparent success of mergers, and the willingness of whites to accept blacks within annual conferences, the commission declared:

Our policy continues to be that mergers of conferences within jurisdictions be urged on a voluntary basis; but, that, if any previous Central Jurisdiction conferences remain unmerged in 1972, we recommend that the General Conference shall take final action for the merging of such conferences.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Commission on Religion and Race Established.**

To facilitate greater interracial understanding and to help resolve the problems facing those annual conferences that would eventually merge with the other regional jurisdictions, the General Conference of 1968 established for the next quadrennium, the Commission on Religion and Race. Briefly, the responsibilities of the Commission were to:

1. Assume supervision of the administration of the Temporary General Aid Fund.
2. Counsel and encourage local churches which desire to become inclusive fellowships.
3. Work closely with black churches, especially those which are United Methodist.

<sup>35</sup>"A Historical Session," *Central Christian Advocate*, August 1, 1967, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup>Major A. Jones, "The Negro's Stance Within the Context of the United Methodist Church," *Central Christian Advocate*, November 1, 1967, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup>"General Conference to be Asked to Desegregate Methodist Annual Conferences Definitely in 1972," *Central Christian Advocate*, December 1, 1967, p. 15.

4. Design, develop and support movements for racial and social justice.
5. Report information at the following general conference of its findings on the role of ethnic groups in the UMC, and on the elimination of all segregated structures.
6. Develop and plan ways by which blacks and other racial or ethnic groups in the UMC will be afforded equal opportunity.
7. Work closely with the Council of Bishops and annual conferences to plan convocations on religion and race.<sup>38</sup>

The Commission on Religion and Race, thereafter, solicited the assistance of boards and agencies of the Church in its effort to eradicate structural segregation in the life of the UMC. Faced with many obstacles and disappointments, they forged ahead and forcefully reminded the Church that there could be no "racially inclusive" church unless all grew into full personhood.

### The Development of Black United Methodists for Church Renewal.

The growing concern of black people within the United Methodist Church to assess the structural changes that had occurred, and to carefully examine future negotiations between white and black annual conferences led to the creation of Black United Methodists for Church Renewal (hereafter referred to as BUMCR). One of the BUMCR's primary objectives was to insure that the merger processes did not jeopardize the future of blacks in the Church.

The BUMCR first convened on February 6, 1968, in Cincinnati, Ohio. Over two hundred delegates responded to the ad hoc committee's request to look at the pressing and potential problems due to de facto integration. The successful lobbying at that time resulted in the establishment of the Commission on Religion and Race. Today, the major (theoretical) aims of the BUMCR are to:

1. Identify the processes and resources that will strengthen local churches.
2. Recruit more black ministers into the denomination.
3. Provide an opportunity for fellowship.
4. Create and develop programs which will cogently speak to the needs of the black community.
5. Force the entire church body to think theologically about its ministries to all ethnic groups in the UMC.
6. Develop strategies to help the total church relate effectively to *all* ethnic groups within its membership.

It would be presumptuous to state that the BUMCR is accomplishing all of its goals. However, from all indications, it does seem that black United Methodist churches are experiencing and will continue to experience a plethora of problems until serious consideration is given, by the entire church leadership, to how to recruit and then utilize the

<sup>38</sup>Journal of the 1968 Conference.

resources available in local black churches.

Although, by 1972, the majority of former Central Jurisdiction conferences were merged, much work yet remained towards achieving a truly "inclusive church." Some of the problems unresolved after 1968 were:

1. The placement of former Central Jurisdiction district superintendents.
2. The appointment of blacks to serve in white churches. (Blacks were and are frequently moved across jurisdictional boundaries for promotion because of the reluctance of whites to accept a black pastor.)
3. The expeditious placement of blacks into board and agency positions in the church.
4. The equitable election of black bishops to the episcopacy.
5. The reluctance of southern white conferences (mostly in the Southeastern Jurisdiction) to merge with black churches.

Thus, the successful struggle to dissolve the Central Jurisdiction was (and is) only the initial step towards developing an "inclusive church." To suggest that racism has been obliterated by the role and work of blacks within the United Methodist Church is to deny reality. Covert racism defines and shapes the life and work of the Church. Open itinerancy is a myth. The writer therefore contends that, despite the fact of such landmark events as the 1939, 1956, 1960, 1964, 1968, and 1972 General Conferences, the United Methodist Church has not held forth the same promise to colorful people generally, and blacks particularly, as it has to white men and most white women. Namely, that there is a place for blacks at *all* levels of the itinerant system. This circumstance underscores fundamentally the endemic and epidemic proportions of white racism — personal and collective.