

## **A STEP BACK OR A STEP FORWARD? THE CREATION OF THE CENTRAL JURISDICTION**

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There is an orthodoxy of interpretation among today's mainstream United Methodist historians about the creation of the Central Jurisdiction (CJ) in 1939. This orthodoxy asserts that the CJ was an unwarranted concession on the part of Northern Methodist whites to the racism of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS). This orthodoxy holds that the CJ introduced and embedded racial segregation into the Methodist political economy. It is understood to be self-evident that the CJ was a setback for improved race relations.

But consensus opinion among historians may not necessarily be true just because other eminent historians have said so. An opinion is expressed and becomes, upon repetition, a fact.

After seventy-five years, perhaps it is time for another look at the realities of the decision to create the Central Jurisdiction.

### **The Methodist Episcopal Church and Race, 1864-1936**

Racial segregation and slavery are two different matters, even if overlapping in American history. People could and did make a strong Biblical case for slavery. That cannot be done for racial segregation; Biblical justifications for segregation were always hollow. Relations between blacks and whites in the American Methodist tradition were mostly defined by the institution of slavery until 1865 and in terms of racial segregation afterwards.

The separation of the Methodist Episcopal Church into North and South in 1844 was, according to the northern interpretation, based solely on the slavery issue. Southerners argued that the split of 1844 was occasioned by internal political differences, namely the power of the General Conference *vis a vis* the Bishops. Both sides were partially correct. The problem, in Northern eyes, was resolved with emancipation. The MECS did not see it that way for several reasons, one of which was indeed the racial divide. In the two decades following 1844, each denomination grew vigorously in its respective section, but with deepening hostility toward each other. The Methodist divorce contributed greatly toward the sectional antagonism that led to secession in 1860 and to war in 1861.

As Union forces captured land and population from the Confederacy, the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) moved quickly and decisively into the recent slave territory. In 1864, the MEC general conference set up two new annual conferences, the Delaware and the Washington, each of them in slave-holding border states but within Union lines. Both of these were

made up of colored<sup>1</sup> preachers and churches, under white leadership.<sup>2</sup> This structure set a precedent which was followed in numerous other cases in the ensuing decade.

After the war, the MEC was remarkably successful in attracting freedmen as converts and transfers; it also developed a viable presence among whites, both indigenous Southerners and Northern transplants. As the MEC expansion into the conquered states prospered, the congregations of these new MEC members were grouped together into geographic annual conferences, often regardless of race.

By 1876, it was clear that the biracial conferences were not working well. Among other things, the arrangement limited the rise of colored leadership. Further, the educational standards for MEC clergy could seldom be met by black preachers who were only a dozen years removed from the mandatory illiteracy imposed by the American slave system.<sup>3</sup> It was also obvious that the MEC work among whites in the South was handicapped by the mixed-race annual conference setup. Thus the MEC General Conference of 1876 provided for a division of its southern annual conferences where both races wanted it. Much of the momentum for separation over the next two decades came at the instance of the black Methodists themselves. By 1895, *all* the MEC annual conferences in the south were racially segregated.<sup>4</sup> The bishops noted this in the 1912 episcopal address: “On grounds of expediency and it may as well be said, *by mutual preference*, in view of all conditions our Negro members have their separate Annual Conferences and local church organizations.”<sup>5</sup>

Racial segregation was a sensitive matter for the Methodist Episcopal Church, as the language of the Disciplines showed. In defining the boundaries of annual conferences, the Disciplines of the period gave little or no indication *in print* as to which were which. The only mention of race in the 1884 *Discipline*, for example, came when it enabled the Florida annual conference to divide itself “when a majority of both colored and white members as any session of the Conference shall ask for such a division.”<sup>6</sup> The 1888

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<sup>1</sup> The preferred terminology varied from period to period, from African to colored to Negro to black to Afro-American. I will generally use the nomenclature of the time, except to have a preference for the word black because of its simple counterpart term, white.

<sup>2</sup> Julius E. Del Pino, “Blacks in the United Methodist Church from the Beginning to 1968,” *Methodist History* 19.1 (October, 1980): 10-11.

<sup>3</sup> See, as example, Elaine Parker Adams, *The Reverend Peter W. Clark: Sweet Preacher and Steadfast Reformer* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2013), 6-8. When the Mississippi Mission Conference of the MEC was established in 1865, none of the twelve black ministers present was sufficiently literate to take the minutes of the conference.

<sup>4</sup> Del Pino, “Blacks in the United Methodist Church,” 11.

<sup>5</sup> John H. Graham, *Black United Methodists: Retrospect and Prospect* (New York, Atlanta, Hollywood: Vantage Press, 1979), 75 (italics mine). The term “by mutual preference” is absolutely crucial to understanding the attitudes of black MEC members toward the Plan of Union in 1939. In point of fact, motivations for the segregation of the MEC were complex. See, for example, the story of segregation in the MEC Holston Conference in Durwood Dunn, *The Civil War in Southern Appalachian Methodism* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2013), 137-139.

<sup>6</sup> Methodist Episcopal Church, *Doctrines and Discipline*, 1884, Para. 521.5.

and 1892 volumes sometimes identified “white” conferences, but seldom if ever used the term “colored.”<sup>7</sup> “Colored” does not appear at all in the 1896 or 1900 *Discipline*, though segregation of the denomination’s Southern conferences was now complete. Throughout all this, it appears that the MEC was reluctant to use the language of segregation in print except when absolutely necessary, even while the process of segregating by race was going forward at full speed.

It was not until 1904 that the MEC finally came out of the closet by openly identifying the “colored” annual conferences in the *Discipline*.<sup>8</sup> This terminology identified the African-American annual conferences in all subsequent editions until the 1932 *Discipline*, where the language changed from “colored” to “Negro.”<sup>9</sup>

The lack of black bishops put the MEC at a disadvantage when competing with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME), African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) and Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) denominations, all of which boasted black episcopal leadership. A Negro preacher came close to episcopal election in the MEC in 1896, but ultimately was not chosen.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, in response to an increasing clamor from the black membership of the MEC for black bishops, the 1920 General Conference agreed to elect two Negroes, Robert E. Jones and Matthew Clair, Sr., to the episcopacy on a separate ballot.<sup>11</sup> It was intended that these men would preside only over black annual conferences. Even so, the two could not possibly lead all the nineteen black conferences currently operating, so white bishops continued to preside over most of them. Further, Clair was immediately dispatched to Africa handle only the Liberia Conference.

In the next few years, the election of black bishops paid visible dividends. Under the leadership of newly-elected Bishop Jones, black annual conferences secured property on the Gulf of Mexico at Waveland, Mississippi, and

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<sup>7</sup> Methodist Episcopal Church, *Doctrines and Discipline*, 1888, Paras. 438-548.

<sup>8</sup> Methodist Episcopal Church, *Doctrines and Discipline*, 1904, Para. 438.

<sup>9</sup> Methodist Episcopal Church, *Doctrines and Discipline*, 1932, Para. 503.

<sup>10</sup> Graham, *Black United Methodists*, 74.

<sup>11</sup> It was probably a sign of MEC uneasiness with this obvious racial discrimination that the *Disciplines* never mentioned this rule, which was so clearly constitutional that it certainly should have been in the denomination’s law book. That this was discrimination *for* the African-American MEC membership rather than discrimination *against* them should not detract from the fact that it *was* racial discrimination. Jones and Clair were not the first Negro Americans to be elected bishop by the MEC. The general conference elected and consecrated Isaiah B. Scott, editor of the New Orleans *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, to be “missionary bishop” (expressly *not* a “general superintendent”) to Liberia in 1904. See Nolan B. Harmon, “Missionary Bishops” in Nolan B. Harmon, ed., *Encyclopedia of World Methodism* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), 1632-1633. But when Rev. Clair was elected in 1920 to be a bishop for the Negro conferences in the United States, the church sent him to replace the retiring Bishop Scott in the Liberia Conference, though not as a “missionary bishop.” See 1908 and 1920 MEC *Disciplines*, both Para. 539. In 1924, the church brought him home to the United States and gave him an episcopal area of his own. It is not clear what the MEC thought it was doing in the 1920 assignment, appointing a “general superintendent” bishop exclusively into the mission field. The inconsistencies displayed by the MEC reflect the ambiguity the church seemed to have experienced on this matter.

there erected what was called “Gulfside Assembly” in 1924. “The Gulfside Assembly has served as a Chautauqua for black people in the South,” wrote John H. Graham. “It has been a ‘Mecca’ for black people for half a century.”<sup>12</sup> The MEC general conference elected a special Board of Education for Negroes (called the Freedmen’s Bureau until 1920) whose task was to promote “schools and colleges among the colored people in the Southern States and elsewhere.” The curricula for these schools were literary, professional, Biblical, and industrial. Each local MEC congregation had a counterpart committee to promote the cause, primarily through an annual Lincoln’s birthday offering.<sup>13</sup> And for many years, the MEC had a special newspaper, the *Central Christian Advocate*, to serve its African-American constituency. Based in New Orleans, it was edited by a black. Taken together, these structures were nothing less than legally-authorized segregation. Nevertheless, this *modus vivendi* seemed acceptable to both blacks and whites in the MEC.

In the twentieth century, talks between the MEC, the MECS, and sometimes the Methodist Protestant Church (MPC) went forward looking to a reunion of these three branches of American Methodism. The first unification plan (1914), which looked very much like the one finally adopted, was derailed by the MEC 1920 general conference, and a different, much weaker, plan was defeated in the MECS annual conferences in 1925. After a brief breathing spell, talks to merge the MEC, the MECS, and the MPC resumed in the mid-1930s and produced a third proposal.

This third plan for a unified church came before the MEC and MPC general conferences in 1936. Because it was a “bundle of compromises,” it had several features that made one or another of the parties uncomfortable. One was the jurisdiction system, which seemed to some Northerners more likely to divide than to unite. Another was the continued use of bishops, which made some MPs remember that their denomination had left the main church in large part because of powerful bishops. Another was the Judicial Council, which drained power from the MEC general conference and from the MECS bishops. Even then, some in the Southern church still feared the MEC predominance in the proposed general conference.<sup>14</sup> But solid majorities in each denomination decided they could live with all that.

The most controversial part of the whole business for the Northern church was the plan that placed the traditionally African-American annual conferences into a separate jurisdiction, purely on the basis of race. As noted above, the MEC racial structure featured nineteen all-black annual conferences, two black bishops, a Methodist newspaper by and for blacks, and a

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<sup>12</sup> Graham, *Black United Methodists*, 85.

<sup>13</sup> Methodist Episcopal Church, *Doctrines and Discipline*, 1920, Para. 452.

<sup>14</sup> This was the source of the southern insistence on geographic jurisdictions. Even without any black participation in unification, there were going to be jurisdictions in the merged church. The race-based jurisdiction did not cause this concept—it was the other way around. See Robert W. Sledge, “‘This New, Novel and Dangerous Arrangement’: The Jurisdictional System in Methodist Unification,” *Proceedings of the Southeastern Jurisdiction Historical Society* (2002), 1-14.

black Methodist campground. A handful of black members of the MEC, mainly in the Northeast, attended predominantly white churches. Other MEC members in the North and West belonged to black Methodist churches in white annual conferences, but all these exceptions together represented only about 5% of the black constituency of the MEC.<sup>15</sup>

The MEC pattern was obviously official racial segregation, and yet there had been little interest in the MEC in changing it. The issue hardly came up in the general conferences. A poll taken by the MEC's *Northwestern Christian Advocate* in 1932 showed that the respondents favored the existing racial structure by a ratio of five to one.<sup>16</sup> However, in 1936, when the unification plan called for a racially segregated jurisdiction in the merged church, there was suddenly an uproar. Negroes in the MEC became incensed about the proposed structure and white Northern consciences were quickened, though the new plan was barely different from the existing structure. Most blacks in the MEC<sup>17</sup> and a number of whites felt that this provision was a fatal flaw, though a similar arrangement in the 1920 plan had apparently been tolerable to them, and virtually the same pattern was the current MEC practice.

The proposed Central Jurisdiction was a racially-based alignment of annual conferences, counterpart to five geographically-based white jurisdictions. The concept was a compromise, since the MECS favored the creation of a separate but allied Negro Methodist church encompassing the AME, AME Zion, CME and MEC black memberships. The white and black Methodist churches would then relate to each other in a fashion similar to the MECS-CME connection.<sup>18</sup> The MECS delegates did not get their way on this point. The compromise plan called for the creation of a race-based Central Jurisdiction which would be within the fellowship of the new church, but with personal interaction only at the general level. The compromise passed through the MEC general conference and its annual conferences in 1936-1937 by handy margins, through the MPC in the same way, through the MECS annual conferences in 1937, and finally through the MECS general conference in 1938. Though some had reservations, the strong majorities

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<sup>15</sup> Dwight W. Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1955), 82-83.

<sup>16</sup> Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A Sourcebook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 370.

<sup>17</sup> The correspondent of the *Christian Century* weekly journal could tell this in advance. "One ventures the guess that more Negroes are opposed to unification in its present form than favor it," Robert Leonard Tucker, "Methodists Open General Session," *Christian Century* (May 13, 1936): 711.

<sup>18</sup> The same proposal was receiving favorable attention at the African Methodist Episcopal Church's general conference meeting in New York simultaneously with the MEC 1936 general conference in Chicago. "The thought uppermost in the mind of this [AME] conference is that of race discrimination to which their fellow Methodists are being subjected. Their reaction is toward a unification of all the scattered forces under a mighty Negro Methodism," "Negro Methodists Hold Quadrennial," *Christian Century* (May 20, 1936): 745. See also the discussion of the idea's continuing vitality in Major J. Jones, "The Central Jurisdiction," in Grant Shockley, ed., *Heritage and Hope: The African-American Presence in United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 199.

in each denomination mandated that the merger would go forward toward a Uniting Conference at Kansas City in May, 1939. That was the state of affairs as 1939 dawned.

### Historiography

From the very beginning there were two interpretations of the Central Jurisdiction, both vigorously expressed in the debates of the 1936 MEC General Conference. When the unification plan came before the conference for a vote, the only element under contention was the racial jurisdiction. Though the passions were strong, the debate was polite. Most delegates favored the plan and wanted to get on with it. Most of the Negro delegates and some white progressives, however, wanted to register a protest against the racial inequality that they believed was inherent in the plan. In the outcome, as noted, the proposal passed handily, but the protest was on the record.

In discussing the whole matter, subsequent historians have generally fallen into one or the other of those two camps. One may be called “the pragmatic approach” and the other “the idealist approach.” Because the pragmatic stance was the one that predominated in the contemporary debate, it became the basis of the accounts for the next forty years. Pragmatists argued that racial segregation needed to be continued in the merged Methodist Church for an indefinite period because that was the only way unification could be consummated. Idealists argued that the CJ was an introduction of institutional racism and a concession to Southern prejudices which should never have been approved. But it was not as simple as either side suggested.

In the last thirty years or so, United Methodist observers have come to accept the view of the Northern idealist minority. Southern historians and the earlier Northern interpreters generally saw things from the pragmatic perspective. The restrained anti-plan statements of 1936 have become more impassioned and prevalent. The whole affair was and is so emotionally-charged that misstatements show up more often than they do over less controversial topics.

A case in point is the comment that apparently originated in 1967 regarding the Negro vote in the 1936 Methodist Episcopal General Conference. It stated that eleven black delegates abstained rather than cast a vote for the pending Plan of Union while the rest voted no. This assertion, which was not true, has been passed on through subsequent iterations of the story. The fact is that the eleven voted “yes.” The notion of eleven abstentions seems to have first come from James P. Brawley in an article in the *Central Christian Advocate* in 1967.<sup>19</sup> Brawley may have been working from memory twenty years after the event, but he must have misremembered. The notion took on a life of its own after that. It was repeated by John H. Graham in *Black*

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<sup>19</sup> James P. Brawley, “Methodist Church from 1939,” *Central Christian Advocate* (October 15, 1967): 384.

*United Methodists*, in 1979<sup>20</sup> and by Richey, Rowe and Schmidt in 2010.<sup>21</sup> The report of the *Pittsburgh Courier* (a secular Negro newspaper) at the time said the 11 votes were *for* the motion, not abstentions. This was correctly noted by Paul A. Carter in 1952 article in *Church History*<sup>22</sup> and repeated by Peter C. Murray in a 2004 book, *Methodists and the Crucible of Race*.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the error has passed on from account to account. It may seem a minor point, but it is illustrative.

For another example, a recent commentator remarking about the current debate in the church over homosexuality compared the circumstances of homosexuals to the perceived situation of blacks in the church in 1939:

Many of us who are African American have remained in The United Methodist Church that once relegated us and our churches to racially segregated and second-class status. From 1939 to 1968 we were shunted into a segregated jurisdiction. We know what it feels like to be called “children of God” or “persons of sacred worth,” but be treated as inferior and blocked from full participation.<sup>24</sup>

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.

This essay will focus narrowly on the motivations of the negotiators of the 1939 Plan of Union, the options available to them at the time, the legal solution they developed, and how later historians have handled these matters. Was the Plan of Union and its Central Jurisdiction a step forwards or a step backwards in race relations? The currently accepted consensus says “backwards.” I will argue otherwise.

This is not intended as a defense of early twentieth-century Southern attitudes on race, attitudes which permeated much of the membership of the MECS—and a good part of the MEC and MPC too. Nor does it argue that the CJ was anything more than a temporary solution to a complex issue. This is rather a defense of the Central Jurisdiction as a *necessary first step* in the gradual development of a more inclusive Christian fellowship. It is to suggest that the minority of MEC whites and the majority of MEC blacks who opposed unification on the basis of the CJ were demanding from the MECS more than could be given. In fact, they were demanding more than the MEC itself was willing to give, a fact recent interpreters seem unwilling to accept

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<sup>20</sup> Graham, *Black United Methodists*, 88

<sup>21</sup> Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 371.

<sup>22</sup> Paul A. Carter, “The Negro and Methodist Union,” *Church History* 21.1 (March, 1952): 62-63, 70.

<sup>23</sup> Peter C. Murray, *Methodists and the Crucible of Race* (Columbia and London: U of Missouri P, 2004), 41.

<sup>24</sup> “Open Letter to the United Methodist Council of Bishops” from Gilbert Caldwell, ret. elder, Rocky Mountain Conference, posted on internet 9/17/12; downloaded from umconnections.org website, November 18, 2013.

as significant.

The debate over the CJ was (and still is) a confrontation between idealism and *realpolitik*, between emotion and reason, between the perfect and the possible, between the theoretical and the practical. In the 1936 MEC General Conference debate, delegate Matthew Davage understood this when he argued for the CJ plan, saying that the vote must “bridge the gap between the ultimate ideal and the immediately possible real.”<sup>25</sup>

The first histories of the matter reported it in a straightforward way, taking events and statements at face value, that is, from the pragmatic perspective. Paul N. Garber, a Southern Methodist and later bishop, published a book entitled *The Methodists Are One People* in 1939. As the title implied, it celebrated the merger. Though written from the viewpoint of a MECS unificationist, the book managed to give a fair summary of the arguments of the northern opposition to the CJ. “The objection was voiced that the placing of the Negro members in a separate Jurisdictional Conference was not only segregation, but also a moral loss, since it violated the principle of practical brotherhood.”<sup>26</sup> Garber did not refute this argument except to mention that not all Northern black Methodists felt that way. Four years later, Bishop John M. Moore, who was more than any other person responsible for the 1939 unification plan, published his understandings in *The Long Road to Methodist Union*. *The Long Road* was a personal document, but reasonably fair, considering his role in the whole business. His exasperation with the northern opposition showed through briefly when he commented that “the conclusion to be drawn from the argument [that they did not like the jurisdiction plan] was that they would have the Negro Conferences included in the Jurisdictional Conference in which they are geographically located. Since they are located largely in the South, the utter impracticability of such an arrangement would be quite glaring to those who know the South, its customs and its attitudes.”<sup>27</sup> Moore’s comment here suggested that the MEC dissenters simply said “no” to what was proposed, without putting any *clear* alternative on the table.

There was an early account from a Negro participant in 1947. Bishop Matthew Clair contributed an article on “Methodism and the Negro” to William K. Anderson’s volume called *Methodism*. He explained the reasons for a revised Negro attitude toward a racial jurisdiction between the initial proposal in 1914 and the debates of the 1930s. The provision for a separate Negro jurisdiction was acceptable during the 1914-1920 discussions, but not so much in 1939. Bishop Clair noted “a new social atmosphere,” new science about race, a new generation of young Negroes, a smaller world, and the rise of Fascist ideology. Clair took a survey of his constituents and found varying degrees of dissatisfaction with the idea of the CJ, but concluded that

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A History*, 550.

<sup>26</sup> Paul N. Garber, *The Methodists Are One People* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1939), 127.

<sup>27</sup> John M. Moore, *The Long Road to Methodist Union* (Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1943), 198.



“the Central Jurisdiction was the best the church could do in 1939.”<sup>28</sup> The black unhappiness with the CJ was partially revealed in this commentary. But Clair did not quite touch the deepest reason for the Negro about-face.

Another of the earlier accounts of the birth of the Central Jurisdiction was Dwight Culver’s book *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church* which appeared in 1953.<sup>29</sup> This was a factual account which covered all aspects of the issue and remains perhaps the most clear-headed and dispassionate account in this whole bibliography.

The following year, J. B. F. Shaw published a study which considered the broader subject of *The Negro in the History of Methodism*. Shaw reported the creation of the Central Jurisdiction and detailed the roles and offices of the Negro delegates to the Uniting Conference, but did not attempt to evaluate the CJ pro or con.<sup>30</sup> *Understanding The Methodist Church* by Nolan B. Harmon came out in 1955<sup>31</sup> and gave a simple description of the Central Jurisdiction, neither affirming nor condemning.

In 1964, Abingdon Press produced a thick three-volume study called *The History of American Methodism*, edited by Emory S. Bucke. Two articles in the third volume addressed the origins of the CJ. One, by Willis J. King, told the story from the perspective of a Negro participant. King gave an even-handed account, observing that “while the Central Jurisdiction posed a problem of a separate racial structure, it did have manifest advantages.”<sup>32</sup> The second article was “The Story of Unification” by historian Fred Maser. Maser quoted extensively from the Northern opponents of the Plan but concluded with Bishop Francis McConnell’s comment that, in 1936, everybody was tired of the debate and that the Plan gave “the Negro more than he had had and made it possible for him to take more, if he will.”<sup>33</sup>

Also in 1964, the second volume of the new periodical *Methodist History* featured a short article on “Background and Consequences of Methodist Union,” by Elwood Smith. Smith mentioned the CJ but added little to the debate. However, he did foresee the possibility of an early end of the CJ, which in fact came about only a few years later.

*Organizing to Beat the Devil*, an unofficial account of the denomination’s life by Charles Ferguson came out in 1971, offering a more compact general history. Ferguson’s theme was that Methodists loved to fight over polity, but seldom over theology. In keeping with that theme, he concluded about the CJ fight that “the unsatisfied were wise enough to know that Methodists

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<sup>28</sup> Matthew W. Clair, Jr. “Methodism and the Negro” in William K. Anderson, ed., *Methodism* (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1947), 247.

<sup>29</sup> Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*.

<sup>30</sup> J. B. F. Shaw, *The Negro in the History of Methodism* (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1954), 157-163.

<sup>31</sup> Nolan B. Harmon, *Understanding the Methodist Church* (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1955), 105-106.

<sup>32</sup> Willis J. King “The Central Jurisdiction” in Emory S. Bucke, ed., *The History of American Methodism*, III (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964), 489.

<sup>33</sup> Fred E. Maser, “The Story of Unification” in Emory S. Bucke, ed. *The History of American Methodism*, III, 456-457.

did not accept any act as final, and that if a constitution could be drawn, it could be amended."<sup>34</sup> That, of course, appeared after the CJ had officially been disbanded.

Fred Norwood's *The Story of American Methodism* (1974) became the standard textbook on the subject for a generation. Norwood commented, again in hindsight, that the CJ was "a usable compromise which was made to work for the time being. It would never be, nor was it ever intended to be, a permanent solution of the problem of race relations. The joint commission . . . decided that the task of reuniting the church was quite enough to handle without embroilment in the larger task of reforming the church."<sup>35</sup> A few years later, he produced a *Sourcebook of American Methodism* which featured extensive quotes from the 1936 MEC general conference debate, with speeches from David Jones, Lewis Hartman, and Ernest Fremont Tittle opposing the Plan and from Lynn Harold Hough and Matthew Davage favoring it.<sup>36</sup>

A more wide-ranging work from the United Methodist Publishing House appeared in 1974. *Encyclopedia of World Methodism* included articles by general editor Nolan B. Harmon on "Jurisdictions" and Willis J. King on "Negro Methodism in the United States." Harmon's article noted that calls for changing the CJ began at once.<sup>37</sup> Bishop King pretty much repeated his take on the matter from ten years earlier, saying that the CJ's "existence proved to be an embarrassment to the whole Church, and feelings ran high over the very existence of the Jurisdiction at successive General Conferences." However, "the plan did have certain advantages . . . the Central Jurisdiction made possible the beginning of the full-fledged brotherhood which has since been evolving."<sup>38</sup> This language was virtually identical to an article by the same writer in *Methodist History* in 1969, in which he stated that "the basic objection . . . was the fact that it was a separate racial structure and that it wrote into the Constitution of a Christian denomination a definite segregated arrangement. On the other hand, it did offer manifest advantages . . . the Central Jurisdiction made possible the beginning of the full-fledged brotherhood which is now evolving."<sup>39</sup>

An article by Julius Del Pino on "Blacks in the United Methodist Church from the Beginning to 1968" appeared in *Methodist History* in 1980. He gave a detailed discussion of the black opposition to a segregated conference in the 1930s, but made only limited moral pronouncements.<sup>40</sup> The revised

<sup>34</sup> Charles W. Ferguson, *Organizing to Beat the Devil* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1971), 302.

<sup>35</sup> Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 408.

<sup>36</sup> Frederick A. Norwood, *Sourcebook of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 572-576.

<sup>37</sup> Nolan B. Harmon, "Jurisdictions" in Nolan B. Harmon, ed., *Encyclopedia of World Methodism* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), 1293.

<sup>38</sup> Willis J. King, "Negro Methodism in the United States" in Harmon, *Encyclopedia*, 1712.

<sup>39</sup> Willis J. King, "The Negro Membership of the (Former) Methodist Church in The (New) United Methodist Church," *Methodist History* 7.3 (April, 1969): 41.

<sup>40</sup> Del Pino, "Blacks in the United Methodist Church."

edition of Bishop Jack Tuell's *The Organization of the United Methodist Church* in 1989 passed over the whole business with the comment "the Central Jurisdiction was the center of controversy from its beginning, and by the time of the birth of The UMC, was eliminated from the structure."<sup>41</sup>

In *Methodism's Racial Dilemma*, Bishop James S. Thomas rehearsed the Negro unhappiness with the CJ but came down firmly on the side of the pragmatic interpretation. His account nevertheless had some puzzling assertions. "Even though no African American delegate to the Uniting Conference voted for the Plan of Union, Dr. Davage knew that realism called for working within the Plan once it was adopted." But Davage surely voted for it, one of those eleven affirmative votes in 1936. Thomas went on to say that the plan was "overwhelmingly rejected by [Davage's] African-American colleagues in the Uniting Conference."<sup>42</sup> But the Uniting Conference was not a referendum on the Plan, which was already ratified by the three participating denominations, so technically speaking, nobody voted on the Plan of Union there. The climactic vote, which adopted, not the Plan, but the Declaration of Union, showed that "the entire assemblage" voted yes, and when Bishop Moore called for opposition votes, he noted "No one stands." Then, "the entire Conference arose and there was prolonged applause."<sup>43</sup> It is possible that Bishop Moore and/or the *Daily Christian Advocate* reporter missed some visible dissent, but the record does not show any at this meeting.

All of the accounts noted above shared a common theme—that there was considerable opposition to the CJ but the overall outcome was probably a step forward for the church.

While the affirmative theme predominated in the early historiography of the creation of the Central Jurisdiction, there was a parallel, almost covert, stream of criticism. Just as the "pragmatist" view noted above essentially replicated the arguments of the majorities in the MEC, MPC, and MECS, the "idealist" perspective represented a continuation of the Northern minority's arguments. This point of view was not as visible at first as it would be later. But the language used in discussions within Negro Methodist circles was openly and vigorously critical from the first, though seldom apparent among the principal histories.

As the demise of the CJ became more and more likely in the 1960s, pent-up black anger erupted in print in a series of essays from African-American pens that articulated the other view of the CJ, a view that denounced it as evil from its inception. The reassessment of America's racial division exhibited by the secular struggle over civil rights in the 1960s had its counterpart in the church. That which earlier Methodist historians had deemed a necessary expedient was now denounced as immoral and fundamentally flawed. This reassessment was, perhaps, a necessary element of the decision to end the

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<sup>41</sup> Tuell, Jack E., *The Organization of the United Methodist Church*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 30.

<sup>42</sup> James S. Thomas, *Methodism's Racial Dilemma* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 49.

<sup>43</sup> The Methodist Church, *Daily Christian Advocate* (1939), 471.

CJ, serving as a justification for its discontinuation. It should be changed, it was argued, because it had been wrong from the start.

These moral pronouncements constituted something of a variance from the usual understanding of writing history. For most professional historians, moral judgments were considered out-of-bounds. Historians, it was assumed, should write the facts and their interpretations of the facts, leaving ethical evaluations to the readers. Now those boundaries began to change and the accounts became consumed with moral indignation, with little pretense at objectivity.<sup>44</sup>

Two of the most influential of these “new” interpretations appeared in the closing issues of the *Central Christian Advocate*. With the end of the CJ an immediate certainty, the *CCA* in 1967 published several evaluations of the CJ, most of them beginning with denunciations of the creation of the entity. J. W. Haywood expressed his outrage in passionate language, calling the CJ “an overt, ignominious fact in Methodist history.” Working from memory three decades after the events, he asserted that “the Negroes had voted unanimously against establishing the CJ,” a statement, as noted above, that did not mesh with the record. He denounced the representation which the CJ had on the denominational board as “little more than tokenism . . . since it was limited to subordinate areas.”<sup>45</sup> This also was an inaccurate interpretation. James P. Brawley’s article “Methodist Church from 1939,” while equally angry, was usually more factual. He said that

it was the hope of the negro [sic] membership of the MEC [in 1936] that this status would be improved in the new united church and that no structure would set him apart and give him less dignity and understanding than he already had . . . This was a stigma too humiliating to accept.

As a delegate to the 1939 Uniting Conference, however, he acquiesced in the decision, though calling it “a far step backward.”<sup>46</sup> From these articles, and from the actions of the CJ through the years, it was clear that the concept of a racial jurisdiction had festered for a long time.

Some hint of this perception had already shown up. One of the earliest scholarly critiques of the creation of the CJ, “The Negro and Methodist Union,” appeared in the journal *Church History* in 1952. Paul A. Carter’s presentation of the affair was reasonably balanced until he came to his conclusion, at which point he could contain his judgment no longer. “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.”<sup>47</sup> “Even if the Central

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<sup>44</sup> To be sure, no historian is completely objective, but most strive to be so and are normally careful to use neutral language. In this case, some of these essays appear to be intended as polemic, not bound by the usual canons of historical discourse. But therein lies the problem.

<sup>45</sup> J. W. Haywood, “Where Do We Go from Here?” *Central Christian Advocate* (November 15, 1967): 431-432.

<sup>46</sup> Brawley “Methodist Church from 1939,” 384.

<sup>47</sup> Carter, “The Negro and Methodist Union,” 67.

Jurisdiction should prove ultimately to be no barrier to the integration of the Negro into the Methodist Church,” he continued, “—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.”<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup>

A decade after the CJ ended, John H. Graham assessed the landscape in a book called *Black United Methodism, Retrospect and Prospect*. In it, he outlined what he perceived to be the objections to the 1939 Plan:

- (1) The plan wrote segregation into the constitution of the church.
- (2) The plan discriminated against the negroes. Discrimination is a denial of the dignity of man, subverts the union which all Christians have in Christ, and stultifies the mission of the church.
- (3) The Blacks opposed because it put union above brotherhood. Blacks believe in ecumenicity but they refused to become “ecumaniacs.”
- (4) The Central Jurisdiction was a segregated structural arrangement. All other jurisdictions were regional and included all Methodist [*sic*] in the regions.<sup>50</sup>

Graham introduced a symbol that was widely repeated. “The Negro,” he wrote, “became the sacrificial lamb on the altar in order that union could be consummated. It was indeed an exorbitant price to pay for church union.”<sup>51</sup>

Bibliographer and historian Kenneth Rowe gave an account of the CJ debates in 1982 in a short primer on American Methodist history edited by John McEllhenney. At the end of his discussion, he affirmed what was becoming the new orthodoxy—“the Central Jurisdiction was the price for which, by moral compromise, the union of Methodists north and south was purchased.”<sup>52</sup> That comment, written by a Northern historian, could as easily have been voiced verbatim by Southern segregationists, but with an entirely different meaning.

The anger evinced in the *Central Christian Advocate* articles showed forth again in William B. McClain’s *Black People in the Methodist Church: Whither Thou Goest?* (1984). He spoke of “the so-called Uniting Conference” of 1939. This was a questionable usage, since that was the name the event bore and it was an accurate description. His title declined to say “United Methodist” even after the elimination of the CJ. He denounced the adoption of the Central Jurisdiction as “a cause to sit and weep.”<sup>53</sup> While McClain acknowledged that the MEC was segregated, he ignored that fact

<sup>48</sup> Carter, “The Negro and Methodist Union,” 68.

<sup>49</sup> Obviously, that works both ways.

<sup>50</sup> Graham, *Black United Methodists*, 81.

<sup>51</sup> Graham, *Black United Methodists*, 90.

<sup>52</sup> Kenneth E. Rowe, “The Twentieth Century” in John G. McEllhenney, ed., *Proclaiming Grace and Freedom: The Story of United Methodism in America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 105.

<sup>53</sup> William B. McClain, *Black People in the Methodist Church: Whither Thou Goest?* (Cambridge, MA: Scheckman Publishing Co., 1984), 75-76.

when he went on to say that “for the first time in the MEC history there was an official policy of segregation” inherent in the CJ.<sup>54</sup> “Sacrificial lamb,” “a sense of outrage,” “segregation in the ugliest way,” and “too humiliating to accept” were emotionally charged terms quoted by McClain to express a point of view, and they projected the strong feelings of some Negro Methodists. These comments indeed reflected an emotional reality but one which, taken by itself, obscured other, more objective, realities. This volume was as much a polemic as a history.<sup>55</sup> However, it has been widely quoted in subsequent writings.

McClain’s views have not moderated with the passage of time. In a 2013 publication he wrote “The reunion [of 1939] was made at a very expensive price to the church’s African American Methodist constituency: a demeaning and insulting, racially constituted, segregated Central Jurisdiction.”<sup>56</sup> “Why did [African American Methodists] remain when, in a pernicious plan concocted at Kansas City in 1939 (a plan worthy of Machiavelli), they were officially segregated into a separate ‘church-within-a-church’ for the first time in their almost 175-year history of association with Methodism? The 1939 reunification was . . . the institutionalization of segregation through the establishment of a separate jurisdiction for African Americans, the Central Jurisdiction. Why did African Americans endure the demeaning institutional machinery set in motion to affect this humiliating ‘church-within-a-church’ contrivance?”<sup>57</sup>

In the last decade of the twentieth century, Grant Shockley and others produced a book called *Heritage and Hope: The African-American Presence in United Methodism*.<sup>58</sup> It summarized the whole of the black Methodist experience from the beginning. The chapter that covered the issue in question here was “A Union that Divides: Development of a Church Within a Church” by Karen Y. Collier. The chapter title was counterpart to the following chapter by Shockley, “A Division that Unites: Pride and Perseverance, 1940-1968.” Collier wrote exclusively from the point of view of the African-American dissenters to the merger of 1939. She reiterated the distinc-

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<sup>54</sup> McClain, *Black People in the Methodist Church: Whither Thou Goest?*, 76.

<sup>55</sup> McClain, *Black People in the Methodist Church: Whither Thou Goest?*, xv. In his Foreword, Bishop James Thomas observed that McClain “writes both with the scholar’s critical vision and the preacher’s passion.”

<sup>56</sup> William B. McClain, “African American Methodists and United Methodism: A Peculiar Relationship or a Strange Affair?” in Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, ed., *A Living Tradition: Critical Recovery and Reconstruction of Wesleyan Heritage* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2013), 52. This quote is one of the few comments added to McClain’s original essay “African American Methodists: A Remnant and a Reminder” from Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell and William B. Lawrence, ed., *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission and Identity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 77-91. With a few modifications of style and a few additions of content, the two essays are word-for-word identical.

<sup>57</sup> McClain, “African American Methodists and United Methodism: A Peculiar Relationship or a Strange Affair?” 54, and McClain, “African American Methodists: A Remnant and a Reminder,” 84.

<sup>58</sup> Grant Shockley, ed., *Heritage and Hope: The African-American Presence in United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991).

tion between legislative and constitutional segregation, blithely accepting the first and roundly condemning the latter.<sup>59</sup> Some of her assertions were, at best, exaggerations. As one example, she claimed that the “episcopacy continued to be identified in terms of a white general superintendency. Negroes who were elected to the episcopacy were elected to a Negro episcopacy that served the Central Jurisdiction and not the total church. This redefined the meaning of episcopacy, such that a Negro episcopacy was determined to be different and unequal.”<sup>60</sup> Much of that statement was simply not true. There was no difference at all at any level between a bishop of, say, the Western Jurisdiction, and a bishop of the Central Jurisdiction. There was no inequality built into the structure at any point, as there had been from 1920 to 1939 in the MEC. In fact, it was not until the advent of the Central Jurisdiction that the black episcopacy received parity with whites for the first time. There was no “redefinition of episcopacy” because the black episcopacy of the old MEC was more truly “separate and unequal” than that of TMC. A better presentation of the matter came in the chapter by Major J. Jones, “The Central Jurisdiction: Passive Resistance.” Though Jones came down on the idealist side of the CJ question, his introductory sentence was a striking and succinct warning to all who study the matter: “When legends are allowed to masquerade as history, truth gets distorted and checkered and sentimental memories operate as if they were facts.”<sup>61</sup>

A more balanced view came in Russell Richey’s *The Methodist Conference in America* (1996). In the midst of some insightful observations about the impact of the jurisdictional system, he accepted the conclusions, but not the intemperate language, of recent presentations of the idealist perspective.<sup>62</sup>

Morris Davis’s *The Methodist Unification: Christianity and the Politics of Race in the Jim Crow Era* (2008) basically addressed the negotiations and plans from the World War I era, but stepped outside that era to repeat the more outraged cries of the critics of the CJ. The racial segregation plan inherent in the 1939 CJ was present in the negotiations of 1914-1920 and it was there that Davis mainly concerned himself. The judgmentalism of this viewpoint unfortunately lent itself to debatable interpretations.<sup>63</sup>

Some of this moralization crept into three recent books written by the distinguished United Methodist scholars Russell Richey, Kenneth Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt. Two of the volumes were intended to replace the dated counterpart works by Fred Norwood, one a collection of sources and the other a regular narrative. The new pair were designed to provide updated textbooks for seminary and college classes on American Methodism. The first volume of their two-piece work appeared in 2000 in the form of a

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<sup>59</sup> Karen Y. Collier, “A Union that Divides,” in Shockley, *Heritage and Hope*, 99.

<sup>60</sup> Collier, “A Union that Divides,” in Shockley, *Heritage and Hope*, 114.

<sup>61</sup> Major J. Jones, “The Central Jurisdiction,” in Shockley, *Heritage and Hope*, 189.

<sup>62</sup> Russell E. Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996), 182, 183.

<sup>63</sup> Morris L. Davis, *The Methodist Unification: Christianity and the Politics of Race in the Jim Crow Era* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2008).

thick collection of primary sources, *The Methodist Experience in America: A Sourcebook*.<sup>64</sup> The narrative volume, *The Methodist Experience in America: A History*,<sup>65</sup> followed a decade later. Both books cast a wider net than Norwood's predecessor works, including previously under-reported elements. The *History* volume was keyed to the *Sources* volume by continual references to the appropriate primary sources, so that the two volumes could each stand alone, but would best be studied in tandem. Subsequently, an abridged version of the narrative volume, *American Methodism: A Compact History*, presented a less bulky book more accessible to the general public. It also was keyed to the *Sources* volume.<sup>66</sup>

The contrasts between Norwood and Richey-Rowe-Schmidt are extensive. In the matter under consideration here, Norwood presented the pragmatist perspective while the newer volumes stood firmly in the idealist camp. This essay takes issue with several of their idealist conclusions. It was perhaps colorful to say that The Methodist Church was "a church slouching so as not to disturb the South's peculiar institution and MECS racial sensibilities."<sup>67</sup> But that clearly revealed a point of view that can be questioned. Such language absolved the MEC of its own existing commitment to racial segregation. In the *Sources* book, a selection praising the advanced racial attitudes of the women of the MECS seriously misrepresented those attitudes. Under the heading of "Methodist women in the South oppose segregated Plan of Union," there was a reprint of a resolution passed by the Women's Missionary Council of the MECS in 1936. The problem here is that the report does not at all say what the headline suggested—it was *not an opposition* to the Plan, but rather a *qualified endorsement* of it. The resolution as quoted read, in part,

Your committee agrees that the plan is less than ideal . . . [but] is it not preferable to a church in which a Negro minority is included, but with little opportunity for developing a leadership of its own and church program suited to its needs and interests? Your committee believes that certain provisions of the plan represent an advance in inter-racial respect and cooperation.

The only portion of the report that could be construed as supporting the headline was then italicized but the ensuing sentences which offered a different approach to the dilemma were not.<sup>68</sup> Since this excerpt was referenced in the counterpart narrative texts, the problem was compounded. "The plan was criticized by key denominational leaders, especially by Methodist women, including the southern women who for a decade and a half had labored through the Commission on Interracial Co-operation for better race rela-

<sup>64</sup> Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A Sourcebook*.

<sup>65</sup> Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A History*.

<sup>66</sup> Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *American Methodism: A Compact History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012).

<sup>67</sup> The term "the South's peculiar institution" is not used correctly in this context. "Peculiar institution" referred historically to slavery, not to segregation. Since segregation was by no means unique to the South, the term makes no sense when applied to segregation.

<sup>68</sup> Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A Sourcebook*, 552-553.



tions.” It was “a step backward that southern white women clearly recognized.”<sup>69</sup> But the quotation did not say that.

When professional historians make assessments of these sorts, one can hardly be surprised that journalists may carry them farther. The official UMC website ran a series of articles on the subject in 2005, the lead of which was titled “Remembering the Central Jurisdiction: ‘The story needs to be told.’” The story does indeed need to be told, but it needs to be told *right*. This article took the attack on the CJ to even greater extremes. The reporter used an incendiary phrase, calling creation of the Central Jurisdiction “The Crime of ’39.” “They [African Americans] were singled out to be a church within a church, denied full entry to the newly formed union.” The author used phrases like “a shameful chapter of church history.” She repeated mistakes like the one that conflated events in the ME General Conference of 1936 with the Uniting Conference of 1939. The report that some blacks sat and wept while the conference sang “We’re Marching to Zion” is set at Kansas City in 1939, when in fact it took place at the general conference of 1936. The entire article is predicated on the assumption that segregation was introduced into Methodism in 1939.<sup>70</sup>

This is where the discussion stands today. This essay will attempt to re-present that current idealist interpretation and then suggest a rebuttal for much of it. To put it another way, you have heard from the prosecution—now it is time to argue the defense’s case. This historian is not comfortable as a revisionist in any circumstances, particularly when it pits him against those he admires, respects, and likes. But here, the situation seems to require it.

Besides, the current consensus is itself revisionist, and quite different from the style of the earliest interpreters of the story. Historical revisionism usually emerges to correct an oversimplification on one side by introducing an oversimplification on the other side. Eventually, at a third stage, the pendulum swings back toward the middle in recognition that the more accurate account is more complex than either extreme. Though Russell Richey leaned toward the moral attitudes of the MEC arguments in *The Methodist*

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<sup>69</sup> Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *American Methodism: A Compact History*, 168.

<sup>70</sup> <http://master.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=2&mid=6723>. Jan Snider, “Remembering the Central Jurisdiction: ‘The Story Needs to Be Told’” Downloaded February 17, 2005. The probable source of this is William B. McClain’s ambiguous statement “Dr. James P. Brawley, former President of Clark College and a delegate to the so-called ‘Uniting Conference of 1939,’ reports that when the Plan of Union was adopted, reuniting the three major erstwhile separated white bodies of Methodism, ‘delegates arose, after the voting, to sing “We Are Marching to Zion,” the Negro delegates remained seated and some of them wept,” McClain, *Black People in the Methodist Church*, 75. This does not exactly conflate the conferences of 1936 and 1939, but it leaves the impression that James Brawley, who was quoted here, said the sitting and weeping took place in 1939. Morris Davis, quoting from McClain, said “As the new church officially began, the delegates rose to sing a celebratory hymn of Christian union, ‘We’re Marching to Zion.’ But in one corner of the segregated auditorium, most of the eighty-seven black delegates remained seated in protest, many weeping . . .” Davis, *The Methodist Unification*, 1-2. Snider probably got her information from Davis and/or McClain, and thus the error is perpetuated and ratified by an official church statement.

*Conference in America*, he highlighted the difficulty of evaluating the CJ in a one-sided fashion, calling it “an artifact of white racism and a vehicle for black empowerment, an expression of ethical failure and an instrument of social witness, an emblem of a divided community and a structure for black fraternity and sorority.” Richey concluded that “the CJ lived a far more complex existence than the other jurisdictions.” This is a more sophisticated approach than most of the previous works on the subject on both sides.<sup>71</sup>

This pattern is typical of the writing of American history in general. An initial narrative is often a straightforward account of public events given with little mention of hidden currents or complexities. Then comes a period of revisionism, in which the underdog’s point of view is revealed and shown to be the “real story.” Later comes a time when that view is challenged and the original interpretation is shown to be not so bad after all.<sup>72</sup>

Though the present essay critiques the excesses of the idealist point of view, it is intended to fall into that third category, recognizing the validity of divergent viewpoints and calling for more objective presentations from both angles.

Since the idealist perspective so dominates today’s interpretations, and since it is usually cast as accusation and condemnation, it may not be inappropriate to respond to it using a law court metaphor. Then this essay can conclude by summarizing the conflicting points of view and seeking to pinpoint the essence of each argument.

### **In re the case of “United Methodist Historians vs. the Central Jurisdiction,” before the court of UM Public Opinion**

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury;

I am speaking to you today in defense of the Central Jurisdiction. You have heard the prosecution’s arguments many times over. Now that the prosecution has rested its case, let me recount it and attempt to rebut it point by point. To begin, the defense will stipulate the following:

Firstly, the Central Jurisdiction was racially based.

Secondly, Negro members of the Methodist Episcopal Church mostly did not like the CJ, and neither did some of the whites in the ME Church. They *thought* it demeaning and of course, in one way, it was.<sup>73</sup> They called it a step backwards, a judgment the defense will challenge.

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<sup>71</sup> Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History*, 183.

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, the changing interpretations of the American Revolution, beginning with the nineteenth-century face-value patriotic perspective of George Bancroft that was learned by generations of schoolchildren. In the early twentieth century, “revisionist” historians such as Charles Beard, Carl Becker, and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr. challenged the old political view with socio-economic explanations. After World War II, Beardian revisionism was critiqued by scholars including Clinton Rossiter, Edmund Morgan, and Bernard Bailyn, who sought a more balanced picture, taking the economic interpretation into account but showing that Bancroft was mostly right. More recent scholars, Gordon Wood and David Hackett Fischer, for example, have revealed additional complexities not considered by the earlier interpreters.

<sup>73</sup> Jones, “The Central Jurisdiction,” in Shockley, *Heritage and Hope*, 196.

Thirdly, the impetus for the creation of the Central Jurisdiction came *mostly* from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, though only as a fall-back position.

### **Charges and Rebuttals**

**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.**

Major Jones: “It was a Machiavellian scheme to segregate the church officially for the first time, without calling it segregation, to appease the Southern church.”<sup>74</sup> Linda Gesling: The CJ was “clearly a compromise, designed to appease the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.”<sup>75</sup> Kenneth Rowe: “The Central Jurisdiction was the price for which, by moral compromise, the union of Methodists north and south was purchased.”<sup>76</sup>

**Reply:** That it was racial is certain. That it was racist is almost as certain. That the Southern negotiators insisted on at least this degree of separation is also true. That has been stipulated. Given the attitudes of the South, however, union could not have happened without the CJ or something even less inclusive. At least after 1939, Southern whites and Southern blacks were now under the same roof, even if not yet in the same room. Any alternative plan, had one even been proposed, would have forced Southern blacks and whites together in some manner, but not Northern whites to any similar degree. It’s the art of the possible! Plus the MEC membership generally approved of segregation.<sup>77</sup> A few prominent dissenters, no matter how loud or incensed or prophetic, obviously did not represent the bulk of MEC opinion.

Additionally, it should be pointed out that the Central Jurisdiction did not force blacks out of churches or out of The Methodist Church. Under church law, any Methodist could join any Methodist congregation. The segregation of the CJ applied legally only to annual conferences, not to local churches and not to preachers and not to members. Actual practice was an altogether different story, but the issue here is law, not practice. The absence of a Central Jurisdiction would have changed little in this respect.

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

J. W. Haywood: “The Negro became the ‘sacrificial lamb’ on the altar in order that union could be consummated. It was indeed an exorbitant price to pay for church union.”<sup>78</sup> W. B. McClain featured this comment in his chapter on the establishment of the CJ when he wrote “It was the price for reunification. John Graham repeated the charge: “The Negro became the ‘sacrificial

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<sup>74</sup> Jones, “The Central Jurisdiction,” in Shockley, *Heritage and Hope*, 195.

<sup>75</sup> Linda Gesling, *Mirror and Beacon: The History of Mission of The Methodist Church, 1939-1968* (New York: General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church, 2005), 23.

<sup>76</sup> Kenneth E. Rowe, “The Twentieth Century” in McEllhenney, *Proclaiming Grace and Freedom*, 105.

<sup>77</sup> Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A History*, 370.

<sup>78</sup> Graham, *Black United Methodists*, 90.

lamb' on the altar in order that union might be consummated."<sup>79</sup>

**Reply:** Like many of the idealist arguments, the use of the term “sacrificial lamb” is unwarranted hyperbole. If compromise and concession makes you a “sacrificial lamb,” then there was a whole flock of sacrificial lambs involved in the result. In this bundle of compromises, everyone gave up something. Some Methodist Protestants could and did claim that it was a compromise with the evils of episcopalianism. They were as surely a “sacrificial lamb” as anybody. They kept no continuity at all—they were simply gobbled up.

Everybody was a sacrificial lamb somewhere. You could say all parties, blacks included, were victims. And for blacks, where was the real sacrifice? They gained a few things and lost nothing. What they wanted and didn't get in the restructuring was they hadn't gotten it before in the MEC anyway. If they and their white allies wanted it, why hadn't this been a major confrontation in the MEC general conferences? It is as absurd to say there should be no compromises as it is to say one side should agree to everything the other side wants.

Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt cogently observed that “something about the new conferences unsettled each predecessor church's clergy—size certainly, but also adjusting to bishops, to laity at all, to laity in equal numbers to clergy, to the increased presence of women, to strange informal rules and organizational structures—adjustments whose cost and effect on conference life and governance were perhaps never fully appreciated . . . .”<sup>80</sup>

**Charge #3: 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.**

W. B. McClain: “*For the first time* in the MEC history there was an official policy of segregation.”<sup>81</sup> J. W. Haywood: “With little or no compunction the northern branch accepted the ‘deal’ and legal segregation *became* an overt, ignominious fact in Methodist history.”<sup>82</sup>

**Reply:** Racial segregation was firmly established in the MEC—black bishops (elected as blacks by white-dominated general conferences), black *Christian Advocate*, black campground, black annual conferences filled with black preachers and black congregations. This was *de facto*, but also *de jure*, even if the MEC tried to keep it out of their Disciplines. Individual blacks in the MEC could belong to white churches and whites to black churches, and black congregations could belong to white annual conferences. In the MEC, there was no provision in law stopping a black person from transferring membership to a white church, or vice versa. But the same was true in The Methodist Church, meaning that in law a black Methodist could now transfer into a former MECS congregation—maybe it couldn't yet happen in

<sup>79</sup> McClain, *Black People in the Methodist Church: Whither Thou Goest?*, 75. The “sacrificial lamb” quote from Graham came from *Black United Methodists: Retrospect and Prospect*, 90.

<sup>80</sup> Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *American Methodism: A Compact History*, 175.

<sup>81</sup> McClain, *Black People in the Methodist Church: Whither Thou Goest?*, 76 (italics mine).

<sup>82</sup> Haywood “Where Do We Go from Here?,” 431 (italics mine).

practice, but the option was there in law.

Why didn't this happen more frequently in the MEC? Because racism was already institutionalized there, as much from black initiative as from white. That's *black* racism, or perhaps not necessarily racism, but racial consciousness. The term "racism" is a pejorative too often employed in these discussions, and not always justly.

Dwight Culver quite properly observed that "while it may be correct to say that the Central Jurisdiction is a segregated arrangement or will tend to make the lines of segregation more rigid, it is not correct to say that segregation in The Methodist Church dates from unification in 1939."<sup>83</sup>

Delegate Lynn Harold Hough said in the 1936 debates: "I want to remind you and the members of the Conference that this report does go as far as the Methodist Episcopal Church has gone in seventy years, when it has regarded itself as the particular guide and philosopher and friend of those who are in our thought this morning. To say that we will not adopt the report, unless it goes farther than we have cared to go—when we ourselves possessed a majority at every point to say that—is to ask something incredible of those who are anxious to meet us, to go forward with us."<sup>84</sup> The vast majority of the delegates listened to Hough; subsequent interpreters have not done so.

The CJ gave blacks the right to choose the personnel of their episcopacy, a right previously held by the white-dominated MEC general conference. The CJ gave them the right to elect as many bishops as they needed—so they went from two in 1939 to three in 1940 and five in 1944. This is evidence suggesting that membership in the MEC was actually holding African-Americans back some. At the 1936 MEC general conference, delegate Edgar A. Love moved to defer election of black bishops so that the new all-black CJ might do the electing four years later. Spirited debate ended with the election being done anyway and Alexander P. Shaw was chosen. Would it have been Shaw, or perhaps someone else, who was elected by an all-black electorate? Love protested "You have adopted, by an overwhelming majority in the face of a pronounced objection by a great majority of Negro delegates, the Plan." He argued that blacks had not been asked who *they* wanted as bishop.<sup>85</sup> Were some MEC blacks already yearning for the freedom they would have in the CJ?

Even J. W. Haywood recognized the problem. "Let us always remember that setting up the Central Jurisdiction was merely expressing overtly what had existed covertly in the church throughout all of its American history. The MEC had the Negro members set off in segregated units as an unmistakable part of its historic policy . . ."<sup>86</sup>

The Central Jurisdiction, it can be fairly argued, simply continued the MEC status quo, but with improvements.

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<sup>83</sup> Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, 82.

<sup>84</sup> Norwood, *Sourcebook of American Methodism*, 574.

<sup>85</sup> Methodist Episcopal Church, *Daily Christian Advocate* (1936), 314-315.

<sup>86</sup> Haywood "Where Do We Go From Here?," 431.

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

Many in the MECS probably assumed that the Central Jurisdiction was permanent. Northern blacks may not have thought this, but their protests, particularly their emphasis on constitutional structure, strongly implied a belief in its permanence, because constitutional law is harder to change than legislative law.

**Reply:** Segregation of black annual conferences had been completed in the MEC by 1895, even if they appeared to think nobody would notice if they didn't mention it. Total segregation was thus over forty years old. In TMC, as it turned out, segregation of racial annual conferences lasted only thirty years, so which was more permanent, legislative segregation or constitutional segregation? It is true that a rule imbedded in a constitution is harder to change than one that is merely legislative. But no structure is immutable. The constitution of TMC was not "the laws of the Medes and the Persians," and members of the CJ began to work almost at once to change it. Indeed, within twenty-five years, its demise was sure.

Lynn Harold Hough argued in the 1936 GC debate that the CJ was not set in stone. "We have left the future free to follow the guidance of the spirit of the living God just as rapidly as with wholesome majority we can go."<sup>87</sup> That is realism.

Frederick Norwood reported the details of the structure and concluded "The creation of a racially oriented Central Jurisdiction is a measure of the status of the black man in the church at unification, of his place in the American society before World War II, and of the involvement of the church and world in the twentieth century. It was also a usable compromise which was made to work for the time being. It would never be, nor was it ever intended to be, a permanent solution of the problem of race relations."<sup>88</sup>

On this point, Linda Gesling quoted the episcopal address read by Bishop Robert Jones to the 1940 CJ. "Why, then, did those of us who constitute the Central Jurisdiction accept this restriction constituting a Jurisdiction on racial lines? Answer: Morally we refuse to desert an effort to work out an ideal—So long as we are working toward the ideal we have every reason to not be weary in well doing."<sup>89</sup>

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

Major Jones wrote of "stepping backward from the inclusiveness which the black membership sought and the principles which the gospel proclaims."<sup>90</sup> In the 1936 debate, white delegate L. O. Hartman said "The separate jurisdiction for negroes represents, in my opinion, not only no progress, but a definite backward step in the field of race relations."<sup>91</sup> Richey, Rowe,

<sup>87</sup> Methodist Episcopal Church, *Daily Christian Advocate* (1936), 87.

<sup>88</sup> Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 408.

<sup>89</sup> Harmon "Jurisdictions" in Harmon, *Encyclopedia*, 1293.

<sup>90</sup> Jones, "The Central Jurisdiction," in Shockley, *Heritage and Hope*, 196.

<sup>91</sup> Fred E. Maser, "The Story of Unification" in Bucke, *The History of American Methodism*, III, quoting L. O. Hartman in the 1936 general conference debate, 456.

and Schmidt called it “a step backward that southern white Methodist women clearly recognized.”<sup>92</sup> James P. Brawley: “There were emotions of . . . regret that the Methodist Church in the making had seen fit to write legal segregation into its constitution, which was a far step backward and a retreat from the high ground this great church had taken on the moral issue of race in years past.”<sup>93</sup>

**Reply:** No, it was a step *forward* for blacks and whites alike, but not as large a step as some had hoped. Southern whites began to learn that they could work with blacks in the same church organization. For blacks, they could now elect their own episcopacy and have more bishops (which they needed) and a wider measure of autonomy, plus a wider voice in national church affairs. For the first time, black bishops were elected on the same basis (if not in the same venue) as white bishops (who were themselves elected in five different venues). No law said the CJ had to elect only black bishops or the others only white bishops.

MEC Bishop Francis McConnell believed “the proposed provisions do give the Negro more than he had and make it possible for him to take still more, if he will . . . speak up positively aggressively on his own.” That was not exactly a ringing endorsement, but it did see positive aspects of the CJ.<sup>94</sup>

During the first general conference of the new church, in Atlantic City in 1940, there came a moment with Bishop Robert Jones presiding when a committee report was presented by chairman Clarence Dannelly of Alabama. Delegate J. Emerson Ford of South Carolina spoke during the discussion. Both white Southerners addressed the black chairman with the same respect and deference that they would have given a white bishop. Bishop Jones responded in kind. The sky didn’t fall. Everybody was learning quickly.<sup>95</sup>

Gesling correctly noted that “the Central Jurisdiction had given African-Americans certain advantages they did not previously have.” Gesling quoted from an article by Thurmon L. Dodson in the *Central Christian Advocate* in 1955, which said the new advantages “are principally representation, church-wise, on all boards and commissions and the right of self-determination in selection of episcopal leadership.” Even though it was step forward, it was not a panacea. She went on: “The evil to be overcome was segregation. And it would be possible to eliminate the jurisdiction and still have segregation.”<sup>96</sup>

**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.”<sup>97</sup>**

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<sup>92</sup> Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A History*, 371.

<sup>93</sup> Brawley “Methodist Church from 1939,” 384.

<sup>94</sup> See Bucke, *The History of American Methodism*, III, 456-457.

<sup>95</sup> The Methodist Church, *Daily Christian Advocate*, 1940, 384.

<sup>96</sup> Gesling, *Mirror and Beacon*, 148-149.

<sup>97</sup> Grant S. Shockley, “A Division that Unites,” in Shockley, *Heritage and Hope*, 119.

Major Jones: “The plan clearly subordinated the black membership to the whites.”<sup>98</sup> Grant Shockley: Another problem was “the imbalance of power it created for blacks in a predominantly white denomination. Despite the effort to equalize voting rights, delegate power, and Negro staff presence, it was still virtually impossible to neutralize the impact of the overwhelming odds of 375,000 versus 9 million in any legitimate way.”<sup>99</sup>

**Reply:** It must be recognized that the “separate” aspect of the structure was based principally, though not exclusively, on a white attitude of superiority. In that one sense, it was certainly unequal, as the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed in *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education*, saying “separate facilities are inherently unequal.” But the races were already separated in the MEC, and nobody claimed that was unequal.

In any other sense, nothing could be less true. The CJ had population-proportionate representation on all the general boards and agencies. There was nothing unequal about the selection of presiding officers at the general conference. Haywood conceded that “the white brethren in the united church gave them wide representation on the boards and agencies of the church [but] this representation, since it was limited to subordinate areas, was little more than tokenism.”<sup>100</sup> This was erroneous; board membership was intended to be truly representative in all areas of the denominational governance, and the CJ was the guarantee of that. If there was not black-white parity in the denominational structure, that was because blacks constituted such a small proportion of the whole.

Karen Collier argued that episcopacy “continued to be identified in terms of a white general superintendency. Negroes who were elected to the episcopacy were elected to a Negro episcopacy that served the Central Jurisdiction and not the total church. This redefined the meaning of episcopacy, such that a Negro episcopacy was determined to be different and unequal.”<sup>101</sup> Note the incongruity between her use of the word “continued” and her use of the word “redefined.” Collier had it completely backward. Black bishops were no more limited in TMC than white bishops. In the old MEC, they were limited in some ways but in the new church, there was not the slightest trace of color advantage or disadvantage among the bishops. In law, bishops in the CJ were *no different in any respect* from bishops in the other five jurisdictions. Each was elected by the jurisdiction to serve in the jurisdiction. They presided at the general conference the same as every other bishop. They served on general boards the same as the others.

Major Jones noted that African-Americans now had “proportionate representation on all boards and agencies and even membership in its highest councils.” But he said that it was nevertheless understood that “there were many positions that black people did not dream they would ever hold.”<sup>102</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Jones, “The Central Jurisdiction,” in Shockley, *Heritage and Hope*, 196.

<sup>99</sup> Shockley, “A Division that Unites,” in Shockley, *Heritage and Hope*, 119.

<sup>100</sup> Haywood, “Where Do We Go From Here?,” 431.

<sup>101</sup> Collier, “A Union that Divides,” in Shockley, *Heritage and Hope*, 114.

<sup>102</sup> Jones, “The Central Jurisdiction,” in Shockley, *Heritage and Hope*, 199.



To the extent that that was true, it was the fault of racist attitudes North and South, not the fault of the CJ structure. In addition, if there was bias in the assignments made to blacks in TMC, imagine what there would have been without the CJ. Racism is not merely a matter of structure. Remember, this is a defense of the Central Jurisdiction, not of racial bias.

There were some blacks who felt that black representation on general boards increased in The Methodist Church, but that no Negro had been elected to a top position on any of the general boards and agencies. Grant Shockley said that a big disadvantage of the CJ “was the imbalance of power it created for blacks in a predominantly white denomination.” That, of course, was not so. It was not the *structure* that created an imbalance. If anything, the structure went a good way toward redressing the imbalance. The imbalance lay in the fact that Negroes had been a minority in the MEC and were even more so in TMC. Further, “despite the effort to equalize voting rights, delegate power, and Negro staff presence, it was still virtually impossible to neutralize the impact of the overwhelming odds of 375,000 versus 9 million in any legitimate way.”<sup>103</sup> That was perfectly true, but again the problem was not the CJ structure—it was the inescapable fact that there were many more whites than blacks in TMC. The solution to that dilemma was simple—follow the MECS plan for a separate black Methodist Church. In fact, black delegate Daniel Shaw had suggested that very thing in the 1936 MEC debates. But that was clearly out of the question.

Blacks wanted proportional representation in the high councils of the church, and they got it in the new plan. However, they could not have an equal voice; they were small minority in the predominantly white church, just as they had always been.

Matthew Davage said, “Paradoxical as it may seem, the very thing which more than anything else guarantees [the rights of Negro members of the MEC in the new church] is the very thing which is the occasion of our fears and the object of our bitterness and attacks, namely, the Jurisdictional Conference. This guarantees as a minority group we shall always have proportionate representation at the GC, that we shall have fair representation on the boards, that we shall have bishops—and they will be bishops of our own choosing. We shall not lose anything, but we shall gain much.”<sup>104</sup> He was right.

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

Karen Collier again: “It [episcopacy] also continued to be identified in terms of a white general superintendency. Negroes who were elected to the episcopacy were elected to a Negro episcopacy that served the Central Jurisdiction and not the total church. This redefined the meaning of epis-

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<sup>103</sup> Jones, “The Central Jurisdiction,” in Shockley, *Heritage and Hope*, 196.

<sup>104</sup> Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A History*, 550.

copacy, such that a Negro episcopacy was determined to be different and unequal."<sup>105</sup> Bishop R. J. Cooke, in the discussion of the 1914 plan, asked "Where is your episcopacy? Were we sent here to destroy itinerant general superintendency?"<sup>106</sup>

**Reply:** This is irrelevant to attacks on the CJ, since it was the *jurisdictional system* that allegedly limited itinerant general superintendency. Unification would not have happened without the jurisdictional system, regardless of the race issue. Maybe it changed itinerant general superintendency for the MECS, though even that is doubtful. It did no such thing for the MEC. This charge was untrue from several angles. No one in the MECS raised this objection, because they knew it simply was not so. In the fiery debates of 1937-1939, Southern Bishop Collins Denny and his lawyer son tried every legal angle they could find to fight unification, but not this one. They knew the argument would not wash or they would have jumped on it.

The itinerant general superintendency was already compromised long since in the MEC from when it designated "missionary bishops." It was compromised again when the MEC elected a separate set of black bishops specifically to serve black annual conferences.<sup>107</sup> Richey's book on conferences that said one result of the jurisdictional system was "the reduction of bishops from itinerating general superintendents to regional and eventually diocesan officers."<sup>108</sup> Partially true, but in both North and South, there was already a trend toward regionalization of the episcopacy—the creation of episcopal areas. That was happening well before unification. The bishops of the new Central Jurisdiction were no more (or less) restricted than those in the other five. All remained general superintendents in that they served on the general boards and agencies.<sup>109</sup> It was not the CJ itself that (maybe) limited episcopacy, but the jurisdictional concept as a whole. Even if blacks had been left out of the equation, there would have been jurisdictions because of the southern fear of that all-powerful MEC general conference.

Paul Carter's comment is germane here. He said the jurisdictional structure might be seen as undermining the concept of itinerant general superintendency, "but since the work of the bishops [in the MEC] since before the turn of the century had already been administratively divided into Episcopal Areas, the practical difference in itinerancy would be slight."<sup>110</sup> The MECS episcopacy had moved a good way in the same direction in the preceding twenty years.

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<sup>105</sup> Collier, "A Union that Divides," in Shockley, *Heritage and Hope*, 114.

<sup>106</sup> Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *American Methodism: A Compact History*, 166.

<sup>107</sup> If a limited general superintendency was acceptable in the north for African-American bishops, then equity suggests that the whole case against Bishop Andrew in 1844 was specious, since he could have been perfectly acceptable presiding over the southern annual conferences. But the understanding of episcopal itinerancy was different between 1939 and 1844.

<sup>108</sup> Richey, *The Methodist Conference*, 183.

<sup>109</sup> Graham, *Black United Methodists*, 80-81; Bucke, *The History of American Methodism*, III, 489.

<sup>110</sup> Carter, "The Negro and Methodist Union," 57.

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

J. W. Haywood charged that “with little or no compunction the northern branch accepted the ‘deal’ and legal segregation became an overt, ignominious fact in Methodist history.”<sup>111</sup> According to Major Jones, “black Methodist Episcopal members were never able to forgive the white members for the humiliation of being set aside in the Central Jurisdiction.”<sup>112</sup>

**Reply:** The MEC was negotiating; in negotiation, there is give and take. Conceding a point in order to gain another is a sign of respect for your trading partner, not a sign of weakness. All sides won some and lost some. It is called pragmatism, especially since no alternative was viable. Besides, one could as easily say that the Southerners lost on this point. The MECS negotiators wanted a separate, cooperative Negro Methodism. Were the Southern representatives “selling out” when they acceded to the Northern insistence that the MEC blacks be kept within the church?<sup>113</sup>

If one says it was “clearly a compromise, designed to appease the MECS,” one could as well say “clearly a compromise, designed to appease the blacks and liberals in the MEC.” The concessions were not all on one side. The Northern minority point of view may have held the moral high ground, but it did not hold the practical high ground.

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

It was argued that the racial jurisdiction somehow restricted communication between neighboring Methodist churches, by erecting an additional structural wall between them. Thus, as Linda Gesling said, “the separation delayed the kind of ordinary encounter for many lay and clergy across racial lines that might have provided a model for the larger U.S. society.”<sup>114</sup>

Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt asserted that “the CJ dissociated Black Methodists from their crosstown white counterparts.”<sup>115</sup>

**Reply:** If it placed Methodist churches in the same town in different jurisdictions, wasn’t it better to have them at least in the same denomination? They would have the same literature, same observances, same general policies, same national leadership. It certainly did nothing to push neighboring white MECS congregations and black MEC congregations farther apart, or white MEC churches, for that matter. Even the white MEC congregations in the South were not in the same annual conference with black ones. And what connection did they have otherwise? This way, at least, all the black and white churches in the South could relate as the MECS and CME already did.<sup>116</sup> What difference would jurisdictions make? The argument simply

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<sup>111</sup> Haywood, “Where Do We Go from Here?,” 431.

<sup>112</sup> Jones, “The Central Jurisdiction,” in Shockley, *Heritage and Hope*, 199.

<sup>113</sup> Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A History*, 366.

<sup>114</sup> Gesling, *Mirror and Memory*, 299.

<sup>115</sup> Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *American Methodism: A Compact History*, 177.

<sup>116</sup> Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A Sourcebook*, 552.

does not hold water.

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

A sympathetic eyewitness from the *Christian Century* said that upon hearing the final tally at the 1936 general conference, “many people of the colored races did not rise and did not sing. And their eyes were filled with tears.”<sup>117</sup> James F. Brawley’s take on this statement was “it is reported that when the General Conference delegates arose, after the voting, to sing ‘We Are Marching to Zion,’ the negro delegates remained seated and some of them wept.”<sup>118</sup>

Under the headline, “A Cause to Sit and Weep,” McClain repeated Brawley’s comment.<sup>119</sup> DelPino said that the vote “would perpetuate their oppression as a people” and was “morally untenable.”<sup>120</sup>

It was, wrote Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, “a sad chapter in the life of American Methodism.”<sup>121</sup>

**Reply:** This was (and is) the Negro *cri de coeur* and it should be heard. But it was over the frustration of rising expectations. They hoped the reorganization occasioned by the merger would do away with the segregation that existed in the MEC. It could just as easily have been a cause to rejoice. It was eminently practical and a step in the right direction. And of course, it was absolutely necessary for union. Again, what was the practical alternative? It was not a cause to mourn. The glass was more than half full.

**Alternatives**

There were other alternatives open to the negotiators of the Plan of Union, but each of them had unacceptable flaws. In evaluating the disposition of the issue of black-white relationships in the new church, the range of viable options must be taken into consideration.

**Option #1:** The negotiators who created the Plan could simply have thrown up their hands, saying we cannot reach an agreement, and left the matter as it was. In that case, there would still have been white Methodists in the South and black Methodists in the South with no connection to each other. There would have been two or three denominations still fretting over small slights. Very few on either side wanted that.

**Option #2:** The Southern plan proposed the creation of an all-black Methodist Church in the United States. It suggested the merging of the several African-American versions of Methodism—AME, AME Zion, CME and the MEC blacks—into a single denomination, coordinate with the new white merged body. This was absolutely unacceptable from the northern point of

<sup>117</sup> Robert Leonard Tucker, “Methodists Vote for Unification,” *Christian Century* (May 20, 1936), 741.

<sup>118</sup> Brawley, “Methodist Church from 1939,” 384.

<sup>119</sup> McClain, *Black People in the Methodist Church: Whither Thou Goest?*, 75.

<sup>120</sup> Del Pino, “Blacks in the United Methodist Church,” 13.

<sup>121</sup> Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *American Methodism: A Compact History*, 177.

view. It would have meant cutting off an integral part of their fellowship. And it assumed that the white-dominated new church could dictate to its sister black denominations how they should organize themselves.

**Option #3:** The Northern plan, if there ever was one, was never fully articulated. Bishop John M. Moore, as noted above, could not quite ascertain what the northern dissenters wanted.<sup>122</sup> He could only *infer* what the Northern alternative *might* be.

The MEC dissenters never publically formulated their ideas in any positive proposal, but contented themselves with attacking the Central Jurisdiction. Moore assumed that the Northern idea (one cannot call it a plan) was simply to merge the two churches, leaving the annual conference structures intact. This was a theologically and politically defensible alternative in the North, since it was the MEC status quo, which presumably was still acceptable to the MEC. In such a structure, there would be black conferences, black bishops almost certainly limited to presidency over black conferences, a black *Advocate*, a black campground, black church-sponsored schools—in other words, what the MEC already had. It would still be segregation at all levels below the jurisdictional conference. Given the non-negotiable Southern insistence on geographical jurisdictions to dilute the power of the general conference, black annual conferences would presumably have been placed mainly in the Southeastern and South Central Jurisdictions. “Since [the Negro annual conferences] are located principally in the South, the utter impracticability of such an arrangement would be quite glaring to those who know the South, its customs and its attitudes.”<sup>123</sup> If and when one of the incumbent black bishops retired, his successor would probably be white. There would have been little likelihood of electing a black bishop again any time soon.

**Option #4:** Or perhaps the northern hope was the complete integration of annual conferences completely based on geography? In the outcome, that is exactly what happened among white preachers and congregations (MEC, MECS, MPC). Did the MEC dissenters really expect to merge and have the annual conferences of the SEJ and SCJ lead desegregation? If the MEC wanted integrated annual conferences, why didn’t they do so in a forum (the MEC general conference) where presumably there was no racist opposition? They could have had that in the MEC anytime they wanted. As it was, they barely did it in the North. In the South, any race mixing would have been problematic and maybe even illegal, even assuming the members of the MECS were that far ahead of their neighbors, which they were not. Where could a mixed race annual conference have met in, say, Alabama, in 1939? In any case, the southern commissioners would never have accepted this idea, knowing that Methodism in the South would dissolve rather than agree. The problem is that there was never an alternative plan presented,

<sup>122</sup> Moore, *The Long Road to Methodist Union*, 198 (italics mine).

<sup>123</sup> Moore, *The Long Road to Methodist Union*, 198.

so the MECS (and later historians) could not know what would have been acceptable.

**Option #5:** Despite the vagueness of Northern intentions, there was one concrete course of action that came up in 1936. That course was to postpone action indefinitely. Ernest Fremont Tittle, clergy delegate from the Rock River Conference said: “My belief is that we should wait another quadrennium, if necessary, two quadrenniums, when I fully believe we can have union without compromise . . . .”<sup>124</sup> As it turned out, such a stance was profoundly over-optimistic. It took much more than two quadrennia. Failure to approve the Plan in the 1936 General Conference would have left the Methodist Protestants in the lurch. It would have meant that most black and white Methodists in the South would continue to have no communion with each other at all. It would have convinced the Southern unificationists (not to mention the foes of union, who were small in number but loud in voice) that the MEC was the same old bunch from 1848, not negotiating in good faith.

**Option #6:** The best choice, and the one that was adopted, was the Central Jurisdiction provision. If there was to be a merger, the Plan had to be acceptable to a good majority on both sides. Acknowledging that a number of people in the MEC did not like the Plan, one must also remember that a number in the MECS did not like it either, for opposite reasons. Neither side was completely satisfied—that generally means that a compromise was appropriate to the times and conditions. Neither minority could have a veto over the desires of the great majorities.

But suppose that Option #4 above was consummated (which it could not have been in 1939 under any circumstances). That very thing happened in 1970, when times were radically different. The secular society was integrating under force of law. The historically-white Methodist colleges were already integrated. The Central Jurisdiction had nothing to do with that. Did the ending of the CJ improve things all that much? When the mergers came, the leading black preachers didn’t get the high steeple churches—they got conference offices and district superintendencies and traditionally black congregations. This may have been desegregation, but it was not integration and certainly not Christian brotherhood. As Russell Richey observed, “Racial divisions survived the elimination of the Central Jurisdiction on a congregational level and in appointment patterns.”<sup>125</sup> In the years after 1970, blacks did get elected to the episcopacy, even in the SEJ and SCJ. But pastoral situations? Not so much. Maybe the different grammar of worship styles does not mesh very well between black and white traditions. That is a matter of culture, not genetics, of preference, not law.

## Conclusions

This essay argues that the merger of 1939, including the Central Jurisdic-

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<sup>124</sup> Methodist Episcopal Church, *Daily Christian Advocate* (1936), 547.

<sup>125</sup> Richey, *The Methodist Conference*, 184.

tion, was a step forward because it brought black and white southerners into one church at the general conference and general board levels. That's more than either had before. It allowed both to have a contact previously impossible, and moved both toward a better understanding of the other, at least at the top levels. It allowed black Methodists to elect their own bishops, instead of sharing the election with a strong white majority. If it was true that Negro bishops could only preside over annual conferences in the CJ, the same was now similarly true of white bishops in their respective jurisdictions. But all the bishops, black or white, shared the presidency of the general conferences and the leadership of the boards and agencies. All were still general superintendents.

*The single most important argument against the Central Jurisdiction was the motivation* for segregated annual conferences—putting blacks into an overt separate category at the instance of whites, as opposed to what they had, which was the same thing, except it was at the instance of the blacks themselves. It appeared to be a small distinction, but it was a crucial one. Delegate George W. Lewis expressed the point most clearly in the 1936 general conference debate: “Somebody says that this Plan is what we have already had. That isn’t true. They say that is what we have now. That isn’t true. 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.” He went on to illustrate the feeling by comparing it to another aspect of segregation. He did not mind, he said, voluntarily riding with other blacks in a certain part of a streetcar, but he was deeply offended by a sign that said he *must*.<sup>126</sup> That was the real heart of the argument against the CJ.

Bishop Willis J. King, in reviewing the process, said that “the basic objection . . . [was that] . . . it was a separate racial structure and that it wrote into the Constitution of a Christian denomination a definite segregated arrangement.”<sup>127</sup> That was an oft repeated statement, but really missed the point, since the MEC already had precisely that, even if they didn’t write it into the Constitution. An argument over whether it was constitutional or legislative would not have created all the commotion. The issue was intention: whether the segregated structure overtly showed black and white Methodists to be peers—or something less.

Paul Carter raised the question of how “the proposed jurisdictional plan differed sufficiently from the existing situation in the Northern church to warrant opposition to the one and support of the other.”<sup>128</sup> His answer illustrates the point: “The analogy between the existing segregation-pattern in the M. E. Church and the proposed Negro Central Jurisdiction was historically inaccurate; the creation of Negro congregations and Annual Conferences had been on the basis of a ‘mutual understanding to enable the Negro to make the most of the situation’ which society at large had imposed upon

<sup>126</sup> Methodist Episcopal Church, *Daily Christian Advocate* (1936), 89 (italics mine).

<sup>127</sup> King, “The Negro Membership of The Methodist Church,” 41.

<sup>128</sup> Carter, “The Negro and Methodist Union,” 57.

race relations.”<sup>129</sup>

That sensibility is indeed a truth, albeit a subjective truth. *Taken alone*, it obscures the objective reality that black Methodists had somewhat more autonomy and authority after 1939 and were in fact no more segregated than before. But it sure didn’t feel that way to blacks.

*The single most important argument for the plan* was that there was no other politically possible alternative except the status quo—two churches, with racial segregation in the MEC just as firmly imbedded, and no contact at all with their MECS neighbors. Julian Del Pino observed that “it was still the most, indeed the only, viable and workable system at the time.”<sup>130</sup> Present-day commentators don’t seem to understand that. The 1936 MEC dissenters wanted all or nothing at all. Again quoting George Lewis: “Somebody has said that this Plan is the best under the circumstances. That is compromise . . . Did Jesus Christ compromise?”<sup>131</sup> He went on to quote a Lewis Hartman editorial in *Zion’s Herald* insisting that there be no retreat from the model of a fully inclusive church.

But this line of argument did not impress most of the members of the 1936 general conference, including delegate A. C. Knudsen. He said that you can’t logically oppose the Negro Central Jurisdiction unless you also oppose what we have now—Negro annual conferences. Rev. Lynn Harold Hough of the New York East Conference told the 1936 meeting: “The Utopian, sir, who substitutes an undisciplined and uncritical idealism for a cool and clear analysis of the practical elements of a situation has been for centuries, without desiring or meaning to do so, the greatest foe to the on-going of the Kingdom of God. It is, sir, when we ask what in a particular situation we cannot have, instead of being content to take a step, with the other steps to be taken when the proper time comes. It is precisely by doing that that century after century the really on-going movement of the Kingdom of God has been made practically impossible.”<sup>132</sup> This was decisive for the most of the white and some of the black delegates.

When all was said and done, pragmatism prevailed. The forty and more years of legislated racial segregation in the Methodist Episcopal Church were ended after only thirty constitutionally segregated years in The Methodist Church. The Central Jurisdiction was a means to that end.

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<sup>129</sup> Carter, “The Negro and Methodist Union,” 58.

<sup>130</sup> Del Pino, “Blacks in the United Methodist Church,” 13.

<sup>131</sup> Methodist Episcopal Church, *Daily Christian Advocate* (1936), 87.

<sup>132</sup> Methodist Episcopal Church, *Daily Christian Advocate* (1936), 87-88.