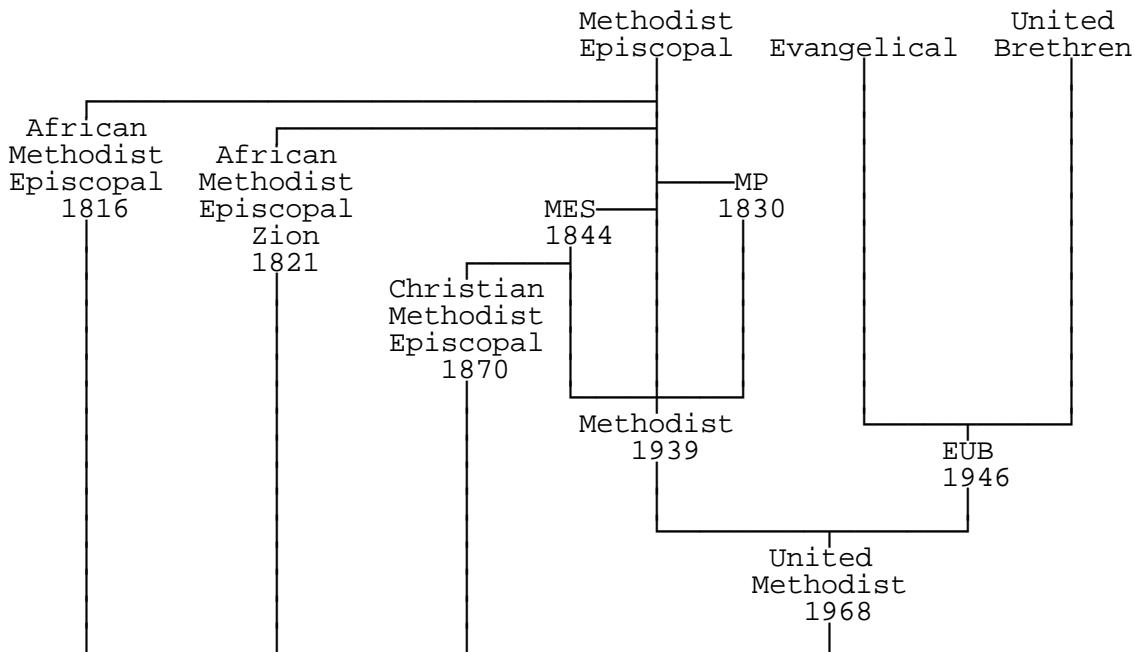


## United Methodism and the American Negro An Historical Perspective

Dr. Milton W. Loyer, 1996<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to popular opinion, history generally tends to embody culture's cutting edge. This occurs because the needs, attitudes and problems of society really haven't changed across the generations or even the centuries. Those who take seriously the past are therefore the best prepared to deal with the present and lead into the future.

There is now the distinct possibility of union of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME), African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ), Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME), and United Methodist (UM) denominations in the fore-seeable future -- perhaps as early as the General Conferences of 2004. The relationships between those four bodies (represented by the vertical lines that continue to the bottom of the chart) to each other and to other denominations discussed in the paper may be summarized by the following diagram.



Furthermore, the somewhat misleading title of this paper might better be "Some Thoughts on the Church." Although intending to prepare a totally objective historical account, the author could neither ignore nor disguise his own biases and conclusions. From any perspective, however, one fact is inescapable: Individuals, congregations and conferences that do not carefully and prayerfully examine the past will be unprepared for the future.

## Colonial America

The place and treatment of the American Negro within United Methodism cannot and should not be dealt with apart from secular and social context. Modern educators will verify that current political correctness requires instructors to include references to female and ethnic contributors in all fields. The one African-American consistently lifted up as a prominent mathematician is Benjamin Banneker.

Though best known as the original surveyor for the District of Columbia, Banneker was a true Renaissance man. In 1753, at the age of 22, he constructed from wooden materials what is said to have been the first clock made entirely in America. He studied astronomy and accurately predicted a 1789 solar eclipse. In 1791 he began printing an annual almanac. The United States Postal Service issued a commemorative first class (15¢) postage stamp in his honor in 1980.

It is his little-known personal background, however, that is now revealed to illustrate the status of the Negro in the early days of America and Methodism. In particular, the story of Benjamin Banneker's grandparents helps to set the historical context for American Methodism.

Molly Welsh, was a white English farm maid who in 1682 was accused of stealing milk that she had spilt. The penalty for stealing in those days in England was death by hanging. Literate convicts under sentence of death, however, were shipped to America as indentured servants to work on the plantations of British aristocrats. When Mary proved that she could read, she was sent to Maryland, sold at auction to a tobacco farmer, and worked 7 years to gain her freedom.

In 1690 she began her own small tobacco farm, and by 1692 it was more than she could handle by herself. Although she detested slavery, the only way she could run the business was by purchasing two African slaves. Four years later, in 1696, she granted the slaves their freedom -- but she had fallen in love with one of them, a man of noble African birth called "Baneky."

There was, however, a law enacted in Maryland in 1684 which stated that "a white woman who married a Negro or bore his child forfeited her freedom and became a servant to the use of the Minister of the Poor of the same Parish." It appears that Molly was either unaware of that law or determined that her small isolated farm was too remote to attract the attention of the authorities.

Molly married her freed slave in 1699. They had four daughters together before Baneky died in a yellow fever epidemic in the early 1700's. Mary, the oldest daughter, married an ex-slave named Robert in 1730. That couple used the surname Baneky, which gradually evolved to Banneker. Living and working on Molly's plantation, they celebrated the birth of their first child Benjamin on November 9, 1731. Remembering how the ability to read had once saved her own life, Molly taught her grandson to read before he could even walk.

There certainly was some racial discrimination in Colonial America. The Banneker story illustrates that in general, however, a person's station in life was determined more by education, ability and personality than by color of skin.

## Early Methodism: those that left

Depending on your criteria, the first Methodist preacher and society in America was either Philip Embury at John Street in New York City or Robert Strawbridge at Sam's Creek in Maryland. Either way, American Methodism was integrated from the beginning. In New York City, several blacks were members of the John Street church and contributed to its construction. In Maryland, a black woman named Annie Sweitzer was a member at Sam's Creek.

While other denominations carried on separate "missionary" work among the blacks, the Methodists made no such distinction. Their street preaching, house preaching, camp meetings and salvation experience

were open to all who would respond. Because of this racial inclusiveness, and the warmth and enthusiasm of Methodist preaching, many blacks were attracted to the denomination.

There was just one problem. Seating at formal worship services was on a segregated basis -- with blacks relegated either to the rear of the sanctuary or to the balcony. The exact events that led the blacks to establish their own Methodist churches, and eventually their own Methodist denominations have been shrouded in legend and speculation, but the following brief accounts summarize the beginnings of the AME, AMEZ and CME churches.

**African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church.** In 1787 Richard Allen and 42 other black members of Philadelphia's St. George's church began to meet separately for prayer and worship. In 1793 they erected Bethel church, dedicated by Francis Asbury, a church that prohibited any white brother from "being elected into any office... save that of a preacher or public speaker." Richard Allen was formally ordained by Francis Asbury in 1799. Other such churches were erected, and the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination was officially organized in 1816 -- with Richard Allen consecrated its first bishop at the hands of Francis Asbury.

Nation-wide the denomination has about 8000 congregations and over 3 million members. Its work in Pennsylvania is divided between two conferences: Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. The former includes all the territory south and east of Harrisburg, plus the counties of Cumberland, York, Adams, Franklin and Fulton. The latter follows the contour of the mountains from the northeast to the southwest to include the rest of the state.

**African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church.** The growth in the number of Negro members at New York City's John Street church rendered the building unable to accommodate the crowds. The Negro members were given permission to hold separate meetings, and eventually to erect their own building -- but they were left on their own. Apparently no white itinerant was assigned to preach or administer the sacraments to them, and black ministers were not being accepted into the itinerant ministry. While debate about the situation dragged on without resolution, other such churches were erected.

In 1821 these black churches finally organized into the AMEZ denomination -- "Zion" being taken from the name of the first building erected by those who left John Street. Nation-wide the church has about 3000 congregations and over 1 million members. Central Pennsylvania is part of the Philadelphia and Baltimore Conference of the denomination's Third Episcopal District.

**Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church.** The last of Methodism's major Negro denominations, which was named the Colored Methodist Episcopal church until 1954, was formed in 1870 by the remaining black congregations in the predominantly white Methodist Episcopal South (MES) denomination. Following the Emancipation Proclamation, most black congregations left the MES to join the northern-based AME, AMEZ or mainstream ME denominations. Those that remained until the end of the war petitioned the MES for permission to organize on their own. This was granted by the General Conference of 1870, and all MES assets held for the use of its black members were turned over to the CME Church.

Nation-wide the denomination has over 2000 churches and about 750,000 members. Pennsylvania is included within the Seventh Episcopal District (which stretches from South Carolina to New York), but the CME Church has no congregations in the central part of the state.

## Later Methodism: those that stayed

**Methodist Episcopal (ME) Church.** Many black Methodist congregations did not join the AME or AMEZ denominations, but chose to remain in the mainstream ME church. The first of these was Philadelphia's Zoar congregation, formed in 1794 by 21 blacks (18 men and 3 women) who left St. George's to organize in their own neighborhood. Zoar, whose building is one of the denomination's official historic shrines, remained a member of the Philadelphia Conference until the Delaware Conference of black churches was formed in 1864. Another Delaware Conference Church, Philadelphia's Tindley Temple (named for its prominent song-writing evangelist-preacher Charles Albert Tindley) rose to become one of the ten largest membership churches in the entire Methodist denomination.

While the formation of Negro conferences created many long-term problems and divisions, it was not a racist move<sup>2</sup> -- but one similar to the formation of the shorter-lived German conferences, which started as German districts in 1844. The parallel between these two movements is particularly striking because it was the 1864 General Conference that established both the first German conferences and the first Negro conferences. The main difference between these movements was that German youth gradually adopted American language and customs, thus making the membership of the German conferences increasingly older and older. Conditions during World War I accelerated this phenomenon, and the German conferences started disbanding in 1924. Only the East German conference remained to participate in the 1939 merger, and it was disbanded in 1943.

Negro youth were not able to move into mainstream America, however, and the black conferences continued. Within the bounds of the Central Pennsylvania Conference, there were two enduring Negro congregations that were part of the all-black Washington Conference -- the Asbury church in Gettysburg, whose 1874 cornerstone now resides in the Adams County Historical Society Museum, and the Mitchell Memorial church in Harrisburg.

The 1884 Washington Conference statistics are the first to give any data for Harrisburg -- and the only figure they show is a membership of 31, with all other categories (finances, Sunday School, etc) are blank. The Gettysburg charge for that year shows 32 members in two churches. While the location of the second church is unknown, it may have been in the Littlestown area or in Maryland. It is known that from 1899 to 1910 there was a Washington Conference church in Hanover on the charge with Gettysburg.

Both Harrisburg and Gettysburg remained active during the early twentieth century as the Washington Conference's northernmost charges. While Harrisburg's Negro congregation hosted the 1935 annual meetings of the Washington Conference, the delegates actually met at the much larger and better equipped building of the [Caucasian] Central PA Conference's Ridge Avenue church (which later was sold to the AME denomination).

The 1935 statistics show 190 members for Harrisburg and 65 members for the two-point charge of Fairview and Gettysburg. Beginning in 1930 the Gettysburg congregation was linked with Fairview -- believed to be in Maryland. About 1942, Harpers Ferry WV was also placed on the charge. By the 1950's there were only a handful of members left at Asbury, and the Gettysburg building was finally sold in 1958.

## The 1939 Merger

The Methodist Episcopal (ME) church suffered splits over the years, including the Methodist Protestant (MP) and Methodist Episcopal South (MES) divisions of 1830 and 1844 respectively. The MP's were very progressive in many ways. While they did have all-black conferences in the deep south, racial integration was the norm in the northern and border states. After the 1870 exodus of its black members to form the CME, however, the MES showed little interest in Negro Americans. Consider, for example, the message inherent in the following page from the 1938 MES General Conference.

Table 21 on the next page shows, for example that Alabama has 345,867 urban church members in all denominations, and 66,932 (or 19.35%) are MES members. Table 22 shows that there are 262,570 white urban unchurched in Alabama, and that the MES church should feel responsible to reach 19.35% (or 50,797) of them for the denomination. The non-white unchurched are not even considered part of the MES mission field.

In 1939 the ME, MP and MES denominations re-united to form the Methodist church. At this time the jurisdictional system was created. While doctrinal and disciplinary changes are made by the denomination's General Conference, all programmatic decisions and the election of bishops are made at the jurisdictional level. All the conferences in the United States were grouped into five geographic jurisdictions -- except for the Negro conferences of the former ME and MP churches, which were placed into a sixth jurisdiction called the Central Jurisdiction.

The jurisdictional system was created at the insistence of the former MES church. Critics argue that this was an attempt by the southern white churches to (1) maintain regional control and not be swallowed up by the larger ME church, (2) avoid placing all the power in one General Conference and so risk a repeat of the problems that lead to the 1830 and 1844 splits, and (3) keep the Negro conferences separate. While there is truth to these accusations, it is also true that one General Conference could no longer wisely and administer such a large and geographically diverse body as the new Methodist Church.

Eventual elimination of the Central Jurisdiction was a goal of the new denomination from the very beginning. Many Methodist groups were embarrassed by the segregation -- especially the WSCS (Women's Society of Christian Service), forerunner of the United Methodist Women. In 1952 the WSCS issued a ten-point statement of *Racial Policies* that included the italicized items (underlining added) in the following paragraphs.

Point #1 made it clear that all personnel and leadership positions were to be filled in color-blind fashion.

*1. Persons to fill positions within the official body or staff of the Woman's Division of Christian Service shall be selected on the basis of qualifications without regard for race.*

Several points make it clear that members of the Central Jurisdiction were not required to attend that body's workshops and/or programs (which could be anywhere in the country) when similar programs in other jurisdictions would be much more geographically convenient. As some Central Jurisdiction conferences in the north and west had to cover an area of several states (that overlapped with several conferences not in the Central Jurisdiction), this policy also applied at the conference level.

*5. Summer Schools of Mission and Christian Service of both jurisdictions and conferences are urged to seek increasingly to establish a working relationship across racial lines in planning and carrying out all phases of the programs, taking into account geographic accessibility of the groups involved.*

*6. Summer School subsidies provided by any jurisdiction or conference should be available when requested for use at the school most accessible to the person receiving the subsidy.*

*7. Workshops, seminars and institutes should be set up on a geographical basis with full opportunity for initial participation by all racial groups in the making and execution of the plans.*

## Methodist Episcopal Church, South

TABLE 21.—Number of Church members in all denominations and in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, together with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, percentage of members in urban and rural territory: (A) in the fifteen States in which the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, operates most extensively; (B) in the sixteen States in which the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, operates less extensively. (Calculated from 1926 census.)

STATE	MEMBERS IN ALL DENOMINATIONS		MEMBERS IN THE M. E. C., S.		M. E. C., S. Percentage	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
(A)						
Alabama	345,867	871,303	66,932	130,287	19.35	14.95
Arkansas	182,672	438,435	41,815	81,861	22.89	18.17
Florida	267,747	260,633	35,139	39,103	13.12	15.00
Georgia	427,573	922,611	90,214	159,508	21.10	17.27
Kentucky	433,712	617,792	35,320	85,138	8.14	13.78
Louisiana	500,636	536,372	25,051	31,831	5.00	5.93
Mississippi	170,844	629,665	32,995	101,578	19.31	16.13
Missouri	967,323	613,955	47,395	78,939	4.89	12.85
North Carolina	392,321	1,014,684	77,479	172,437	19.50	16.98
Oklahoma	282,264	298,819	34,369	41,402	12.18	13.86
South Carolina	221,694	651,834	40,008	95,121	18.05	14.59
Tennessee	409,750	608,283	68,327	121,503	16.67	19.97
Texas	1,060,075	1,220,291	157,967	222,486	14.90	18.31
Virginia	418,268	754,179	75,919	161,984	18.15	21.48
West Virginia	227,684	304,299	19,584	45,474	8.64	14.94
Total	6,308,430	9,743,155	848,514	1,578,652		
(B)						
Arizona	85,977	62,109	2,690	1,600	2.95	2.57
California	1,253,584	268,627	12,271	5,250	0.98	1.95
Colorado	253,738	99,125	1,812	975	0.71	0.98
District of Columbia	238,871		6,306		2.64	
Idaho	74,776	87,903		370		0.40
Illinois	2,633,916	729,469	1,247	4,954	2.04	0.68
Indiana	831,692	551,126	395		0.04	
Iowa	486,122	594,036		269		0.05
Kansas	360,705	386,373	839	442	0.23	0.11
Maryland	523,270	235,096	7,166	10,450	1.35	4.44
Montana	76,787	75,600	491	402	0.64	0.53
Nebraska	224,661	337,892		181		0.05
New Mexico	56,488	159,075	3,586	5,262	6.30	3.30
Oregon	163,702	69,029	968	1,525	0.59	2.21
Pennsylvania	4,059,006	1,154,017		513		0.04
Washington	286,245	97,937	480	84	0.17	0.08
Total	11,609,540	4,907,414	38,251	32,277		

TABLE 22.—Total white non-Church population and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, proportionate responsibility for the non-Church population in urban and rural territory, in the fifteen States in which the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, operates most extensively. (Calculated from 1926 census.)

STATE	TOTAL WHITE NON-CHURCH POPULATION		M. E. C., S., PROPORTIONATE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE NON-CHURCH POPULATION			
	Urban	Rural	Percentage		Number of Persons	
			Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Alabama	262,570	778,266	19.35	14.95	50,797	116,350
Arkansas	155,182	799,857	22.89	18.17	35,491	145,334
Florida	366,464	331,254	13.12	15.00	48,210	49,688
Georgia	287,122	737,761	21.10	17.27	52,069	127,411
Kentucky	320,227	1,143,759	8.14	13.78	26,066	157,608
Louisiana	172,011	357,938	5.00	5.93	7,850	20,691
Mississippi	90,562	454,210	19.31	16.13	17,487	93,264
Missouri	784,488	1,115,328	4.89	12.85	38,361	142,034
North Carolina	285,713	973,563	19.50	16.98	55,713	165,310
Oklahoma	488,898	1,121,822	12.18	13.86	59,547	155,478
South Carolina	89,550	386,576	18.05	14.59	9,716	54,711
Tennessee	359,479	987,930	16.67	19.97	41,055	197,289
Texas	838,104	1,516,326	14.90	18.31	124,877	337,813
Virginia	258,934	717,766	18.15	21.48	46,996	154,176
West Virginia	245,066	869,639	8.64	14.94	21,173	129,924
Total	6,004,370	12,291,995			645,408	2,047,081

In addition, point #2c recognized and addressed the existence of legal (and illegal) segregation at the local level.

*c. Where law prohibits or custom prevents the immediate achievement of these objectives, workers and local boards are charged with the responsibility of creating a public opinion which may result in changing such laws and customs.*

How far have we come? Even though this is a sensitive issue (not only in the church, but also in society in general), it must be faced. Compare the commitment in #1 above to fill all positions on the basis of qualifications without regard for race with the minutes on file at the conference archives for the conference's latest UMW executive committee meeting -- dated February 3, 1996. One member "wanted it recorded that the Administrative Committee of the Executive Committee is not racially inclusive" (underlining added).

The latest statistics for the Central Pennsylvania Conference show 172,996 total members, 430 of which were reported as black or African-American. 430 of 172,996 is less than 1/4 of 1%. The conference's UMW executive committee of 20+ members formed an administrative sub-committee to make necessary decisions between meetings, etc. Even if African-American membership in the conference were 50.00% instead of 00.25%, which is more appropriate: the 1952 policy of filling positions on the basis of qualifications without regard for race, or the 1996 notation that a particular sub-committee is not racially inclusive?

While commending the denomination's WSCS for standing for racial equality during the years of the Central Jurisdiction, let us not fail to commend our own Central PA Conference and the Mitchell Memorial church for their actions and subsequent place in history. On June 15, 1956, the Mitchell Memorial church of Harrisburg transferred from the Washington Conference of the Central Jurisdiction to the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Northeast Jurisdiction. In doing so it became the very first black church in the entire denomination to move out of the Central Jurisdiction. Unfortunately, however, that fact and the story behind it are not well known.

After years of discussion, the General Conference of 1952 finally established a complicated procedure for the transfer of a church from one jurisdiction to another. Although the Central Jurisdiction was not mentioned by name, the intent was to at last provide a mechanism for black congregations to leave the Central Jurisdiction and become a part of the "white" conference in their area. For each congregation involved, the procedure required the approval of General Conference, both Jurisdictional Conferences, both Annual Conferences, and -- of course -- the congregation itself.

At the 1956 General Conference, a much more streamlined procedure for transfer was approved. There were, however, three congregations already prepared to apply under the much more complicated 1952 rules. All three were given permission to proceed by the 1956 General Conference. Since the Central PA Conference and the Northeast Jurisdiction held their meetings before the other conferences and jurisdictions involved, Mitchell Memorial became the denomination's first black church to transfer from the Central Jurisdiction to a previously "white" conference. As it turns out, the other two congregations (applying for transfer to the Central Kansas and Colorado conferences) decided to come in under the less complicated 1956 rules the following year.

In 1964 the all-black Methodist conferences still operating in Pennsylvania (the Washington and Delaware conferences) were transferred from the Central Jurisdiction to the Northeast Jurisdiction, and their congregations were transferred to the appropriate geographic conferences. Other areas of the country were still slow eliminate segregation.

## The 1968 Merger

In 1968 the Evangelical United Brethren and Methodist denominations united to form the United Methodist Church. One of the conditions for union set forth by the EUB's was the elimination of the Central Jurisdiction. In 1967 the final conference of the Central Jurisdiction was called for the express purpose of legally dismantling the organization. In 1968, all Negro conferences were placed in their appropriate geographic jurisdictions. The jurisdictions were further instructed to merge all overlapping racially determined conferences as soon as practicable. In every instance this was accomplished with remarkable speed and brotherhood, and there are no longer racially determined conferences within the United Methodist Church.

But what of the EUB's? While they pushed the Methodists into eliminating the Central Jurisdiction, what was their own record on integration. Both the Evangelicals and the United Brethren were ethnically German -- and German-speaking in most areas until after the Civil War. As a consequence, social and religious interaction with other races did not naturally occur. There are, however, specific local examples that show these groups tended to practice the Christian love and anti-slavery message that they preached.

The August 3, 1963, Telescope-Messenger, the EUB's national bi-weekly magazine, carried an article entitled "The Negro and the Evangelical United Brethren Church." The author, a Negro pastor assigned to a former Evangelical church in Philadelphia, places the following account of his own experiences in historical and national perspective (underlining added).

*Since 1959, the author has been pastor of Trinity. Former white members, contrary to the predictions of many, have stayed with the church and have given wonderful support to the interracial program. Many of the white members have died since the change, but few have asked for transfers. The services are pervaded by a deep sense of worship. True brotherliness is seen at the Communion table, when Negroes and white members kneel to take the Lord's Supper together. Although the future of Trinity points to an all-Negro church in ten years, after the passing away of the original members, yet it can truly be said, that the interracial program was in every aspect a great success while it lasted. The pastor and his family have had a most wonderful relationship with the members of the church and count this as one of the most challenging assignments they have had. The church has a membership of 157 at present: approximately 107 Negroes and 50 Caucasians.*

That was 1963, 33 years ago. What is Trinity like today? How accurate and/or realistic were the projections of one generation ago? Today Trinity has 85 members, 83 black and 2 white. Their membership has been slightly increasing over the past few years. They have been pastored since 1988 by a black female who has a M.Ed. from Beaver College and a M.Div. from Eastern Baptist Seminary. As the pastor's husband is considered the family bread-winner, she is able to give the church full-time service while not receiving a full-time salary. It appears that the church has lived up to the vision established in 1963.

On the United Brethren side, consider the following statement from page 141 of the 1996 issue of THE CHRONICLE regarding early UB work in Harrisburg.

*An interesting footnote to the work here involves a venture into working with minorities. The 1873 General Conference Committee on Missions presented this resolution directed to the denomination's Board of Missions: "Your Committee call the attention of the Board to the fact that there is a fine opening for a mission among the colored people of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and recommend that, as early as practicable, they examine into it, and if the way opens, either independently or by the help of the East Pennsylvania Conference, establish a mission in that city." That same year a building named Plymouth Chapel was erected on Herr Street west of Cameron and used for mission and Sunday School work until about 1890. In 1894 the building was sold to the Asbury ME church of the Washington (black) Conference. Later re-named Mitchell Memorial, this*

*congregation moved several times (Briggs & Cowden, 1322 Marion, 1919 N. Fourth) before uniting with the Camp Curtin church at the latter's location to form the present Camp Curtin Memorial Mitchell UM congregation.*

And so one of Mitchell Memorial's first buildings was a structure used by the German-oriented United Brethren to carry on Sunday School work among the blacks in Harrisburg for over 17 years.

### **Central Pennsylvania Conference**

What has happened since merger? The Central PA Conference of the United Methodist Church in many respects is one of the denomination's more progressive and "successful" conferences. It has not been immune, however, from many of the problems faced by the UM church and other mainline denominations across the county -- viz., shrinking and aging membership, declining urban presence, loss of committed members to more aggressive denominations or independent churches. Compounding the problem, the Central PA Conference inherited many areas of substantial Methodist-EUB overlap. In fact, an April 1995 program presented by the archivist to the Retired Ministers' Fellowship documented 178 conference church buildings that had members on the rolls at the time of the merger and that have since been closed.

Although the simple fact that the conference has sold closed church buildings is not relevant to the topic "United Methodism and the American Negro," the manner in which the sales have been conducted is relevant. It has been, and understandably so, the policy of the conference not to sell closed church buildings to groups that would divide the community or compete with United Methodism. And so closed church buildings are typically either sold with the restriction that they not be used for regular worship or sold to groups like the Mennonites -- or, particularly in the inner cities, to African-American congregations.

On the surface selling unused building to African-American congregations seems noble and unprejudiced. If the policy is to sell to non-competing groups, however, does that not suggest that African-Americans are not potential United Methodists? How is this different from the pre-1939 MES policy referred to earlier of omitting non-whites when tabulating unchurched target populations? Is this a subtle indication of racism?

At present, in fact, the Central PA Conference is the defendant in a hearing before the Human Relations Commission over this very issue. When dissatisfied former members of the closed Fort Littleton church thought they were not given fair opportunity to purchase that building, they claimed religious and racial discrimination -- on the grounds that had they been Mennonite or African-American, they would have been sold the building without question.

Another measure of the Central PA Conference's record in this area would be its performance handling the two historically African-American congregations for which it is responsible: Harrisburg's Mitchell Memorial UM Church and State College's Bethune Memorial UM Church. Even though the former body dates from the 1880's while the latter was officially organized in 1990, the two congregations have traveled remarkably similar paths.

By 1989 the neighborhood around Harrisburg's Camp Curtin UM Church became increasingly African-American and membership had dropped from 373 at the time of the 1968 denominational union to 118. During that same time membership at Mitchell Memorial, whose building was among the smallest and least equipped of Harrisburg's UM structures, held fairly stable and declined only slightly from 243 to 228. On June 25, 1989,

these congregations united to meet in the former Camp Curtin building as the Camp Curtin Memorial Mitchell UM Church.

Promotional material proclaims these churches were united "to become a more viable source of witness and to enhance the work of mission and ministry in Uptown Harrisburg. We celebrate our new beginning with a unique witness through a racially mixed congregation in a multi-ethnic community. We honor our historic past and recognize our contemporary witness while anticipating an exciting future." Compare this rhetoric of the 90's with the more realistic assessment of the 60's given earlier that declared a similar situation at Philadelphia's Trinity EUB church "points to an all-Negro church in ten years."

Despite the words of the church's promotional material, the Camp Curtin Memorial Mitchell congregation is essentially an African-American one. An African-American pastor from the Western New York Conference has been assigned to the church. Joint Lenten and other special services are held with African-American churches of other denominations rather than with "sister" UM congregations. When this author attended a recent special Sunday afternoon service at the church, he was one of seven European-Americans in a crowd of about 200.

In State College, the Bethune Memorial UM Church met in the Wesley Foundation building until it was yoked with St. John's on July 1, 1993. At this time the St. John's congregation, a former EUB church that dropped from a pre-union 1968 membership of 233 to a current membership of 81, adopted the name of Albright UM Church. Perhaps in light of the experience in Harrisburg, this action was a yoking of two congregations that continue to meet at different times in the same building -- and not a union.

In the words of the church's promotional material, "The two congregations, led by the same appointed pastor, share expenses and ownership of the church property. While each congregation is self-directing, we share equal representation on the Albright-Bethune administrative council and other committees. Although each congregation maintains its unique style and identity, the Albright-Bethune church is committed to building an authentic multi-cultural community. Each congregation welcomes all people. Though we use different ways and different words, we are one in the spirit. We are diverse peoples growing together."

Unfortunately, here as in Harrisburg the reality failed to match the rhetoric. At this moment it appears that the Albright congregation will formally disband at the end of the conference year, with none of the members transferring to the remaining Bethune congregation. The African-American pastor assigned to the yoked congregation has already been reassigned elsewhere for the new year conference year. Questions that remain unanswered at this time are: Can the 30 member Bethune congregation afford to maintain the building on their own? Can they afford even a part-time pastor? Can the conference locate an appropriate African-American pastor to serve the congregation?

The situation in State College is complicated by another factor. Unlike the former Mitchell Memorial congregation, the members at Bethune are not from United Methodist backgrounds but merely local African-Americans seeking an appropriate structure in which to worship. If it were not for the fact that they would lose the building, the congregation might well opt to leave the denomination entirely.<sup>3</sup>

While the Central PA Conference is a progressive and socially conscious UM conference, it clearly has difficulty ministering to African-American congregations. If there is further denominational union, how would isolated former AME and AMEZ congregations fare in such a conference?<sup>4</sup>

### **The Future**

An AME/AMEZ/CME/UM union has the potential to create the most powerful structurally united integrated force ever assembled to fight the problems of society and reach the masses for Christ. If history teaches anything, however, it is that such a union will not be successful without considerable effort from each of the principals.

In addition, for such a union to be successful there are two obstacles that must be dealt with in the very early stages: the current tendency to concentrate more on politically correct rhetoric than on honest assessment, and the distinct possibility that each side may ultimately be seeking union for the wrong reasons.

Comparisons presented in this paper between past and present approaches help to identify examples of honest assessment slowly giving way to politically correct rhetoric. The 1952 vs 1996 statements by women's groups and the 1963 vs 1996 approaches to inner city church in changing neighborhoods contain lessons that dare not be ignored.

Another serious obstacle to success involves motives rather than methods. Is the predominantly European-American UM denomination that has been fleeing the inner city embracing union with its AME/AMEZ/CME cousins as instantaneous social consciousness? Why bother struggling to cultivate minority or urban ministries when they can be acquired by union in one fell swoop? Overnight, the UM church could cease being so embarrassingly European-American at the grass roots level and become a model denomination of racial inclusiveness.

On the other side, many AME/AMEZ/CME congregations are saddled with older buildings in need of repair, not the dominant forces they once were in the African-American community, and losing members to more aggressive black denominations and independent churches. Would union with the UM church provide instant capital, respectability, and accompanying growth?

Within the European-American community, the UM Church and other mainline denominations are declining numerically, while the Assemblies of God and other more aggressive groups enjoy remarkable growth. In the African-American community, the mainline AME/AMEZ/CME denominations are experiencing similar decline while the Church of God in Christ and other less formal fellowships begin new congregations. If Methodism unites with each side believing the "others" will provide new vitality and halt the decline, it will not happen. "Growth" by union is not a substitute for self-examination and honest assessment of reasons for stagnation.

## Endnotes

1. Milton Loyer was invited to give this paper as the archivist of the Central PA Conference of the UM Church. He is a member of the both the conference's and the northeast jurisdiction's Commission on Archives and History. Dr. Loyer has personally visited the site of every church that has ever been in the conference since the 1968 UM merger, as well as most of the known sites of bygone churches of the predecessor denominations. His grasp of what has been involved in their histories and his concern for their futures qualify him to speak to the issues he raises.

2. The 1864 General Conference formed Negro conferences upon the recommendation of the *Committee on the State of the Work Among the People of Color*. This committee was headed by Rev. James McKendree Reiley (1817-1897) of the Central PA Conference, then known as the East Baltimore Conference. [This Reiley family contributed four generations of preachers to the Central PA Conference. Rev. James McKendree Reiley was

the son of pioneer circuit rider James Reiley (1784-1841), the father of William McKendree Reiley (1847-1907), and the grandfather of James McKendree Reiley (1876-1952). The direct line actually includes more generations through great-grandson William Witman Reiley of the Ohio Conference.] That the report and action were motivated by Christian and not racist ideals is seen by the language of the recommendation, which resolves in part:

- 1. that it is the duty of our Church to encourage colored pastorates for colored people wherever practicable, and to contribute to their efficiency by every means in our power.*
- 2. that the efficiency of said pastorates can be best promoted by distinct conference organizations -- provided that nothing in this resolution be so construed as to impair the existing constitutional rights of our colored members on one hand, or to forbid, on the other, the transfer of white ministers to said conference or conferences where it may be practicable and deemed necessary.*
- 3. that [we] take into careful consideration the condition of our colored people, and should conferences be organized among them, make to them*  
*-- consistently with other demands upon funds -- such appropriations as may be essential to success.*

3. The events at State College's Albright-Bethune United Methodist Church did occur as anticipated at the time the paper was delivered. The Albright congregation voted to disband. The Bethune congregation voted to remain United Methodist and have been assigned an ordained pastor on loan from the National Baptist Convention, an African-American baptist denomination.

4. Challenged by the speakers at the 1996 annual meeting of the Historical Society, and seeking to respond to the issues they raised, the conference's Commission on Archives and History has drafted the following "Neighbor Congregation" resolution for presentation to the June 1997 session of the Central Pennsylvania Annual Conference.

*•WHEREAS, the United Methodist (UM) Church is beginning formal discussion with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME), African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) and Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) denominations regarding enhanced structural connection and/or union,*

*•AND WHEREAS, membership statistics of the participating denominations within central Pennsylvania make it likely (a) that such action will not change the boundaries of the Central PA Conference and (b) that responsibility for successful implementation of such action will rest largely with the Central PA Conference,*

*•AND WHEREAS, both a realistic assessment of the complexities involved in church union and a respect for the history, identity and future integrity of those involved call for a pro-active approach to the opportunity before us,*

*•BE IT THEREFORE RESOLVED that the Central PA Conference Council on Ministries undertake the following actions either through an ad hoc committee or an existing conference board, agency or commission.*

- 1. Identify and prepare a list of every AME, AMEZ and CME congregation within the Central PA Conference boundaries.*
- 2. Work with the district superintendents to identify a "neighbor congregation" for each congregation identified in #1 above. A neighbor congregation is an existing UM congregation (possibly, but not necessarily, the closest geographic UM congregation) that will initiate contacts encouraging joint meetings and programs in such areas as VBS, youth fellowship, men's and women's groups, and seasonal (Lent, Thanksgiving, etc.) and special (visiting choirs, speakers, etc.) services.*
- 3. Prepare a yearly report on the implementation of #2 above to be presented at the annual sessions of the Central PA Conference beginning in 1998 and continuing until such time as organic union of the above denominations is completed or this resolution is repealed by annual conference action.*