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## The reunification of American Methodism, 1916-1939: a thesis

Blake Barton Renfro

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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THE REUNIFICATION OF AMERICAN METHODISM, 1916-1939: A THESIS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the

Louisiana State University and

Agricultural and Mechanical College

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

The Department of History

By

Blake Barton Renfro

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## **Acknowledgments**

Two mentors deserve credit for overseeing this project. During my undergraduate years, Ernie Freeberg identified my primary weakness and pushed me to organize my thoughts. While I have not mastered the skill of organization, Gaines Foster was patient and never rushed me along. Fortunately, Professor Foster permitted me much needed time and freedom to research and think about the broader history of American race relations. My interpretations, as a result, have also been greatly enhanced by a lengthy and occasionally disorienting venture into Methodist history. This project began as a simple curiosity. Yet, as I studied this narrative and the broader objectives of my discipline, the more I came to realize the moral questions and dilemmas that I believe are the foundation of humanistic inquiry. While I do not offer solutions to these dilemmas, I hope this story illuminates the complexity of ideas about race, religion, and citizenship.

My colleague and friend Jennifer Abraham deserves special thanks for securing my graduate assistantship, which was generously funded by the late Alfred Glassell Jr. If Jennifer and I had not met in April 2007, things would have been very different.

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## **Abstract**

In 1844 American Methodists split over the issue of slavery, and following the Civil War the regional churches took two paths toward accommodating African Americans. Northern whites put their faith in the ideology of racial uplift and believed freed persons could only rise through society through organic relations with their white brethren. Southern whites, however, contended that blacks should maintain their own racially segregated churches. Thus, by the 1870s, southern Methodism became an all white institution. Between 1916 and 1939 northern and southern Methodists debated a path to reunite American Methodism, and the role of African Americans in the church and the distribution of ecclesiastical authority became two primary obstacles.

When the churches agreed on a final plan in 1939, it appeared that southern whites' segregationist attitudes had prevailed over the northern Methodists' racial egalitarianism. Scholarly interpretations have confirmed this assumption, arguing that the final plan caste African Americans into a racially segregated "Central Jurisdiction" and only gave blacks representation in the quadrennial General Conference. However, a careful examination of the reunification debates reveals how white and black Methodist's conceptions of race changed over the inter-war years. Where other interpretations have caste reunification as a regressive measure in race relations, this essay argues that at the time, many Methodists believed it was one step toward a more racially and ecclesiastically harmonious Methodism.

## Introduction

In 1844 American Methodists split over the issue of slavery. Unable to reunite after the Civil War, the regional churches remained separate throughout the nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century, some Methodists desired a union that would reconcile the denomination's historical differences. From 1916 to 1939 northern and southern Methodists negotiated a path toward unification. As they searched for a new identity, the issue of racial justice and harmony, the place of African Americans in the predominantly white church, became a central obstacle to reconciliation. When northern and southern Methodists finally reconciled their differences in 1939, the segregationist views of southern whites appeared to have prevailed. The final Plan of Union created five regional jurisdictions which separated northerners and southerners, and allowed each respective jurisdiction to elect its own bishops. African Americans were cast into a separate "Central Jurisdiction," which segregated them from whites in the local annual conferences but granted them full voting privileges in the quadrennial General Conference. This arrangement segregated whites and blacks in local congregations and annual conferences, but allowed all Methodists, regardless of race, a role in the General Conference.

Many scholars' interpretations of this unification process have been shaped by John M. Moore's *The Long Road to Methodist Union*. A supporter of union and a southern Methodist bishop, Moore's historical account is told through his involvement in unification. He downplayed the debate over the place of black Methodists, contending that race was merely a scare tactic employed by the opposition. Moore tended to emphasize the debate over distribution of ecclesiastical authority. Southerners blamed the 1844 schism on a concentrated northern majority in the General Conference; thereafter, they followed in the steps of John Wesley, granting the College of Bishops supreme authority over the church's affairs. The northern

Methodists took a more democratic approach, allowing lay people, clergy, and bishops a proportionate vote in the General Conference. John Moore was one of the leaders responsible for challenging southern Methodist polity, and he encouraged greater distribution of ecclesiastical power. He argued that unification became possible, not through changing racial views, but through southern Methodists' resolution to democratize ecclesiastical representation.

Scholars have expanded Moore's one-dimensional interpretation, choosing to focus on the relationship between church authority and the racial Central Jurisdiction. These studies have explained the final plan of union as a compromise with southern whites' demand for racial segregation. However, these accounts have not fully studied changing racial attitudes over the course of the reunification debates; nor have they accessed differing attitudes among southern and northern whites, and black Methodists. When unification talks commenced, southern whites wholly rejected black representation in the quadrennial General Conference. They contended black voting rights there would inevitably lead to racial equality. In the 1930s, southern white opponents, still perceived unification as a threat to the region's white supremacy. Most southerners, though, voted for reunion. They accepted having blacks in the General Conference and touted reunification as a progressive step toward improving American race relations. Northern whites did not experience the same dramatic shift in racial attitudes as their southern brethren. The ideology of racial uplift, which had dominated the northern Methodist relationship with African Americans, was replaced by a less paternalistic approach, which empowered blacks to control their own affairs. As such, many northern whites believed the Central Jurisdiction was a flawed but practical step toward fostering black leadership and creating racial equality in American Methodism. Northern opponents saw the arrangement as a compromise to the racial egalitarianism they had preached since the Civil War. Northern and southern white opponents

to unification believed, for very different reasons, that their respective churches had compromised the racial attitudes of their region. Black Methodists, who had initially accepted the Central Jurisdiction as a concession to southern whites, eventually saw the measure as an obvious manifestation of Jim Crow segregation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dwight Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 60-78; Robert Watson Sledge, *Hands on the Ark: The Struggle for Change in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1914-1936* (Lake Junaluska: Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church, 1975); Russell E. Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996), 184; Peter C. Murray, *Methodists and the Crucible of Race, 1930-1975* Columbia: University Missouri Press, 2004), 3; Morris L. Davis, *The Methodist Unification: Christianity and the Politics of Race in the Jim Crow Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).



## Chapter One

Established after the American Revolution in 1784, the Methodist Episcopal Church (hereafter, MEC) led the Wesleyan movement in the United States. Years later, a schism erupted when Georgian bishop James O. Andrew inherited a slave, breaking with the official discipline of the church that prohibited bishops from owning slaves. From its inception the MEC denounced chattel slavery, and in its earliest days required newly converted slave owners to emancipate their slaves within one year. Wesley himself called the slave trade “that execrable sum of all villainies.” As Methodists expanded across the South in the early nineteenth century, they made their peace with slavery, and in 1844 southern Methodists broke with their northern brethren to create the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (hereafter, MECS).<sup>2</sup>

Before the Civil War fractured the American republic, southern Methodists, despite their ongoing dispute with the MEC over slavery, sought to rise above partisan politics and foster a spirit of Christian brotherhood. Even after the Schism of 1844, southerners expressed “a sincere

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<sup>2</sup> Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 46-49; Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain Fold Camp-Religion, 1800-1845* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1974), 57-58; Charles Elliot, *History of the Great Secession* (Cincinnati: Swormstedt and Poe, 1855), 871-872; The Methodist Episcopal Church, *Report of the Debates in the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, held in the City of New York* (New York: G. Lane and C. B. Tippet, 1844), 145-186, 193-195, 203-240. The most recent historical narrative of early American Methodism’s rise in North America is David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). For a comprehensive account of the debate over slavery, see Chris Padgett, “Hearing the Antislavery Rank-and-File: The Wesleyan Methodist Schism of 1843,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 12, no. 1. (1992). Mitchell Snay addresses the larger circumstances regarding slavery and southern religion throughout the antebellum period, arguing that “religion worked as an active agent in translating the sectional conflict into a struggle of the highest moral significance.” Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993). See also Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963). John Nelson Norwood, *The Schism in the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1844: A Study of Slavery and Ecclesiastical Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923).

desire to maintain a Christian union and fraternal intercourse with the Church North.” Though the churches maintained two ecclesiastical structures, MECS clerics contended that sending “fraternal” representatives to each others’ respective conferences would promote cooperation and Christian brotherhood. Yet, southerners abandoned this spirit of Christian fraternity when the 1848 Northern General Conference rejected the legality of the MECS and declared the *Plan of Separation* “Null and Void.” From that point, until the outbreak of Civil War, Northern Methodists refused to enter into fraternal relations and continued to propagate the gospel throughout the South. If the relationship between American Methodists had been strained throughout the 1850’s, four years of war amplified this distrust into outright hostility. When the MECS General Conference of 1866 convened in New Orleans, the first gathering since the Civil War began, they responded in kind, resolving that “we feel ourselves at liberty to extend our ministrations and ecclesiastical jurisdictions to all beyond that [Mason-Dixon] line who may desire us so to do.” One northern cleric serving in New Orleans during the conference reported the hostility of the southern Methodists toward their northern brethren. “My interpretations of the actions of the Southern General Conference respecting union is that they not only do not want union, but that they consider us *intruders*.” While both sides claimed to ignore regional boundaries, they exhaustively labored to define the geographical reach of their ministry. One southern bishop, reflecting on his southern upbringing, described the attitude that reflected the regional distrust of American Methodism: “Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Baptists might go to Heaven, but there was an interrogation point concerning Northern Methodists.” A united Methodism, much less fraternal relations, seemed a hopeless cause.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Letter from Joseph Crane Hartzell to J. P. Newman, June 6, 1870, Box 1, Folder 6, Joseph Crane Hartzell Papers, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University; James Cannon, *The Present Status of Methodist Unification* (n.p. 1925), 2-8.

Reconciliation seemed an impossible task in 1865, causing both churches to focus their attention on more immediate concerns. The southern Methodist church, much like the southern landscape, had worn thin after four years of war. The Nashville based MECS printing house had been overtaken by union forces in February of 1862, delivering a large blow to the denomination's widely circulated *Christian Advocate*. Even more infuriating, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton had granted MEC Bishops Matthew Simpson and Edward R. Ames the authority to take charge of southern Methodist congregations and install MEC clerics. Beyond these attacks on MECS institutions, countless southerners faced the emotional task of rebuilding their faith, which had been challenged by defeat. The most dramatic change visible in the South was the abolition of slavery. Before the war southern Methodists, while wholly supporting slavery as an economically legitimate and moral enterprise, evangelized among blacks and aggressively added them to the MECS rank-and-file. With emancipation, many freed persons left the MECS for the political and social autonomy provided in the all-black African Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal, Zion Churches. Southern white Methodists believed that emancipation spelled disaster for blacks' religious well-being. Under slavery they contended blacks were faithful disciplined Christians, but freedom resulted in "moral and spiritual darkness." Whites believed freed persons would become "indolent, sensual, and devilish." Aware of "an African American Exodus," and fearful that African Americans would become fully dependent on southern whites' already depleted financial resources, in 1870 the MECS created the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. This action transferred over three hundred thousand black communicants into the separate church, but still allowed for "fraternal" relations between whites and blacks. Black and white southern Methodists would maintain wholly separate congregations and ecclesiastical structures. But, as fellow Christians who shared the

name and founder, the MECS and CME churches could still preach brotherhood, decency, and charity under racial segregation. This “fraternal” relationship was the term American Methodists throughout the nineteenth century had used to describe the connectional nature of their denomination, despite its many branches. In the end, the MECS rationalized this racial separation as economically practical and mutually desired by both races, explaining that blacks would have the opportunity to govern their own religious affairs. Freed from bondage, African American Methodists could make their own religious community, and southern whites could rest assured that the color line was written firmly into its polity.<sup>4</sup>

Like their southern brethren, the MEC had felt the strain of war. Confident that God was on the side of the American Republic, the MEC General Conference of 1864 predicted that “the Southern rebellion will be crushed, slavery abolished, the union of the states restored, a permanent peace established, and last, we shall have such a revival of the work of God as the world has never seen.” And so, when victory was won the following year, northern Methodists

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<sup>4</sup> Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 40-42. See also: Hunter Dickson Farish, *The Circuit Rider Dismounts, 1865-1900* (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1938), 45-50. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980) 106-109. Russell E. Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996), 148. P. A. Patterson, *Handbook of Southern Methodists: A Digest of the History and Statistics of the MEC, South* (Nashville: Barbee and Smith, 1891), 147. Donald G. Matthews, “The Methodist Mission to the Slaves, 1829-1844,” *The Journal of American History*, no. 4 (March, 1965): 615-631. Eugene Porter Southall, “The Attitude of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South Toward the Negro from 1844-1870,” *Journal of Negro History* 16 (October 1931): 359-370. Southern white Methodists perceived that blacks’ religious and moral well-being was better fostered under slavery. Indeed, their own statistics showed that after the Schism of 1844, the MECS far outpaced the MEC in its addition of African American communicants. Contemporary historians have explained that a significantly larger African American population in the South accounts for this difference. David Christy, *Pulpit Politics or Ecclesiastical Legislation on Slavery, in its Disturbing Influences on the American Union* (Cincinnati: Faran and McLean, 1862), 174-181. See also Lewis M. Purifoy, “The Southern Methodist Church and the Proslavery Argument,” *Journal of Southern History* 23 (August 1966): 325-341.

could believe Divine Providence was on their side. When the federal government began to rebuild the nation, the MEC followed in step and vigorously championed the plight of freed African Americans. Where southern whites were indifferent to blacks, northern Methodists placed the welfare of African Americans' at the center of their ministry. Just as the federal government sought to incorporate blacks into American civic life, the MEC preached a gospel of social and racial uplift to black Methodists, proclaiming that whites had a responsibility to help freed people rise up through the ranks of the church and society. Perceiving that the MECS purged blacks from its membership, the MEC's Freedmen's Aid Society (FAS) sent numerous white missionaries into the South. The northern Methodists were the second largest Protestant organization dedicated to the uplift of African Americans and contributed over two-million dollars between 1866 and 1889 to southern missionary work. Passionate northern clerics who went South intentionally established interracial congregations, fostered black education and morality, and preached racial equality. They also had little interest in fraternal cordiality with southern whites. Commenting on the northern Methodist crusade, the FAS corresponding secretary, John W. Hamilton puffed, "The North is literally absorbing the South. Ichabod is written over every gateway along 'the borders'-and this absorption must go on until the end shall be, not fraternity, but identity. There will be no more South, it will be all North and all Christian."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> William L. Harris ed., *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1864* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1864), 291; Ralph E. Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885-1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 13, 16. See also Richard B. Drake, "Freedmen's Aid Societies and Sectional Compromise," *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 29., No. 2 (May, 1963): 175-186. Joseph Crane Hartzell, "Methodism and the Negro," *The Journal of Negro History* no. 3. (Jul., 1923): 301-315. L. M. Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1890). Oliver S. Heckman, "The Penetration of Northern Churches into

Northern Methodists were spurred by an emerging social gospel, which emphasized individual Christians' responsibilities to help alleviate societal ills, particularly those problems arising from economic inequality. Although the full breadth and intellectual scope of the Social Gospel movement developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, northern Protestants began applying its basic principles after the Civil War. The MEC proposed that African Americans could only rise from slavery into economic self-sufficiency if there were "organic" contact between the races. Northern whites charged that racial segregation, the path traveled by the Church South, only increased racial discontent and kept blacks unfairly under the burdensome legacy of slavery. Extending a hand of Christian brotherhood to African Americans, northern whites assumed that direct interracial contact at every ecclesiastical level, from the local parish to the General Conference, would provide blacks sensible opportunities to uplift themselves and ultimately become fully integrated American citizens and pious observant Christians.<sup>6</sup>

For southern white Methodists, organic interracial relations smacked of Yankee idealism, and the mere presence of northern missionaries prompted one MECS bishop to exclaim, "They have no business here. We don't want them here; they have no right here. Let them go back where they came from!" Charles Betts Galloway, MECS Bishop of Mississippi, suggested that MEC missionaries inflicted irreparable damage. He observed that mistakes "were made by

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the South, 1860-1880." (Ph. D dissertation, Duke University, 1938). William Warren Sweet, *The Methodist Episcopal Church and the Civil War* (Cincinnati, 1912).

<sup>6</sup> For an explanation on the origins and evolution of the Social Gospel movement see Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940). Ronald C. White, Jr., *Liberty and Justice for All: Racial Reform and the Social Gospel, 1877-1925* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990). Frank Kenneth Pool, "The Southern Negro in the Methodist Episcopal Church," Ph. D dissertation, Duke University, 1939, 18-72.

misguided persons who came South after the war. They made denunciations of former slave-owners an apology for their presence. Hate was planted in hearts where the seeds of love should have been sown, and races that ought to dwell together in unity were separated by bitter hostility.” The end of slavery spurred two diverging views among northern and southern white Methodists. Both sides claimed to understand the plight of African Americans, and both believed they represented the brotherhood of the Christian witness. For northern whites, the nation’s fate depended on uplifting African Americans out of the legacy of slavery. While the benefits of interracial contact were certainly more tangible for blacks, many northern whites believed that the death of slavery signaled a new day for the American republic. They saw it as their Christian duty to redeem the nation’s soul by giving freed persons the opportunity to participate in civic life. Joseph Crane Hartzell of the Freedmen’s Aid Society, preached that, through salvation of African Americans, God had blessed northern whites with “*gratitude*, for out of their toil we have grown rich; *self-interest*, for their redemption is our own; *Christian charity*, for they are in want and we are rich; and *patriotism*, for the Christian civilization of this nation is in conflicts with Rome, rum, and communism.” In a period where evangelicals and religious language dominated American life, northern Methodists depiction of the nation rarely distinguished between the sacred and secular. Divine Providence, they preached, was guiding the United States toward a more enlightened and egalitarian society. If blacks could benefit from education, free labor, and opportunity, northern whites could rest easy, knowing they were rebuilding a divinely blessed nation. The death of slavery and Reconstruction fueled a backlash among southern whites against African Americans. Southern Methodists concluded that blacks could only rise through society if they created a separate social order of their own. Southern whites saw organic contact as detrimental to freed persons. Sentimentalizing the postwar era,

one southern cleric explained that the 1866 southern Methodist General Conference did not purposefully segregate African Americans. The MECS “wanted to put the negroes in a separate organization-not a separate church. But at that time our colored people were intoxicated with their new liberty which had been thrust upon them and they were bent on asserting their freedom in every way possible. They insisted on being set off in an independent church, and to this insistence our fathers were compelled to yield.” Another southerner suggested that northern white’s model of organic interracial relations proved fruitless. Chiding the optimism of his northern brethren, the southern cleric observed that “after the passage of six decades you have but a little more than 300,000 out of 1, 800,000 of the Methodist negroes of the entire country. What is the matter? The answer seems quite apparent. Your plan necessarily keeps the negro in a position of dependence and subordination in a predominantly white church. Indeed it is probable that your success in dealing with your negro membership has been in direct proportion to your failure in winning the negroes to your fellowship.” These contrasting racial attitudes illustrated the need for white Methodists to find common ground on the place of African Americans within the church and society.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ralph E. Morrow, *Northern Methodism and Reconstruction* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1966), 235; Charles Betts Galloway, *The South and The Negro: An Address Delivered at the Seventh Annual Conference for Education in the South* (New York: Trustees of the John F. Slater Fund, 1904), 7-8; “Bishop Galloway on the Race Problem,” *Christian Advocate* (Nashville, May 12, 1911), 12-13; Joint Commission on Unification of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, *Proceedings of the Joint Commission on Unification of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Volume 2* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1918) (Nashville: Smith and Lamar, 1918), 213, 215; Joseph Crane Hartzell, *Education in the South* (n.d. n.p.), 15. My emphasis on the centrality of race in rebuilding the nation is largely influenced by David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). and Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Perennial, 1988). My understanding of the intersection of race relations and southern religious culture have been shaped by Paul Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming: Religious*



Even while northern and southern whites saw no possibility of organic reunion on the horizon, they still prayed for some form of reconciliation. Northern Methodists took the first step and sent fraternal representatives to the 1873 MECS General Conference. The Southern General Conference responded, “We hail with pleasure and embrace the opportunity at length afforded us of entering into negotiations to secure tranquility and fellowship to our alienated communions on a permanent basis. We stand ready to meet our brethren of the MEC in the spirit of candor and to compose all differences upon the principles of justice and equity.” Even as both churches accused each other of competing in their respective territories, they organized a fraternal commission which met during the 1876 Northern General Conference in Cape May, New York. The meeting was hailed as a milestone toward fraternal cordiality, when the MEC declared “Each of said Churches is a *legitimate* branch of Episcopal Methodism in the United States having a *common origin* in the Methodist Episcopal Church organized in 1784.” By recognizing the legality of the Church South and committing itself to fraternal relations, the northern church eased some of southerners’ fears about northern missionaries in Dixie. Fraternal Methodists, they preached “will vie with each other to wave the banner of the cross in this Western world, and henceforth will proclaim that these churches are one in spirit, one in purpose and one in fellowship.”<sup>8</sup>

Fraternal relations between the two regional Methodism(s) seemed an ideal arrangement. Besides the economic and spiritual benefits, fraternity became one way for white Methodists to illustrate their shared vision of a united American Methodism. Organic union would have required northern and southern whites to rewrite the denomination’s polity. And, because

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*Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Cannon, *The Present Status of Methodist Unification*, 8-9.

southern whites would only tolerate fraternal affiliation with African Americans, the MEC could promote fraternal Christian brotherhood among its southern white brethren, without comprising its organic relation to black Methodists. In this sense, fraternity became the primary point of contact between white Methodists after the Civil War. Yet, because it was born out of sectional crisis, fraternity brought to the forefront polarizing regional and racial boundaries. If organic union could bring northern and southern Methodists back together, fraternity worked both as a blessing and bane to reconciliation.<sup>9</sup>

By the 1890's northerners and southerners could find ample benefits from fraternity. In order to eliminate competition, they worked together under the Federal Council of Methodism in coordinating their foreign missionary campaigns. They also prepared a new hymnal, catechism, and Order of Service together, which was widely praised as a return to the pre-schism relationship. Despite the sanguine metaphors and spiritual renewal, fraternal relations could not completely wash away the past or bridge contemporary regional attitudes. If southern Methodism had been a historical bastion of evangelical religion and white supremacy, northern Methodism remained an optimistically democratic church, entirely committed to organic relations with its African American brethren. Following the Civil War, as northern religious life became increasingly diverse, southern whites still clung to a traditional evangelical faith. Indeed, there were differences between Baptists and Methodists, Presbyterians and Episcopalians, but southerners found common ground in the memory of the Lost Cause. Even after facing defeat, southern religious hegemony was solidified by a commitment to defending the South from a purportedly pluralistic northern society. Seeking to protect the insulated Southern Zion from the ills of secularism, southern Methodists rejected organic union with their

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<sup>9</sup> Richey, *Methodist Conference In America*, 149-50.

northern white brethren. Southern whites could not bring themselves to surrender their regional religious and racial attitudes. Where the MEC sought to remake the nation in the second half of the nineteenth century, southern Methodists wanted to preserve their heritage. It was not until the twentieth century, when the memory of the past began to fade, that southern Methodists considered organic union. Yet, even when the tragedy of history seemed to be fading, racial violence and hatred was amplifying regional differences.<sup>10</sup>

As Jim Crow segregation swept across the South, white southern Methodists wholly supported racial segregation. True, most of the nation's African American population remained in the South, which only solidified southern whites' belief that they better understood American racial relations. Refuting a northern critique of Jim Crow, one MECS editor asserted that "the Negro should not be drawn into politics. As long as the blacks are so numerous in the South, the white people will resent their active participation in the affairs of government." Black Methodists "should seek to maintain their racial integrity and develop a Christian social order of their own." The editor warned that "whoever leads the Negroes to believe that the time is ever coming when they may move in the same circles with the white people does them incalculable harm. The implanting of such ideas in their minds is vicious, and tends to start them upon a path that can only result in their destruction." Though northern Methodist missions among southern

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<sup>10</sup> For a full list of fraternal cooperation see: *Formal Fraternity: Proceedings of the General Conferences of the MEC and MEC, South in 1872, 1874, 1876, and of the Joint Commission on the Two Churches on Fraternal Relations, at Cape May, New Jersey, August 16-23, 1876* (New York: Nelson and Phillips, 1876). and *A Record of All Agreements Concerning Fraternity and Federation Between the MEC and MEC, South and The Declaration in Favor of Unification Made by the General Conference of the MEC, South* (Lamar and Whitmore: Nashville, 1926) 3-25. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, 1-18.

blacks had been admirable, he contended that MEC “methods of operation tend to exert an influence in the direction of social equality that is not helpful.”<sup>11</sup>

These differing approaches to the race issue were representative of another important distinction between northern and southern Methodists. The MEC and MECS held contrasting views about the structure of Methodist polity and the authority of the General Conference, bishops, and laity. At the turn of the nineteenth century, as Methodism swept across the nation, the denomination’s leaders sought to adapt its initial ecclesiastical organization to better accommodate its burgeoning flock. The *Schism of 1844* undoubtedly resulted from a moral debate over slavery. But, when the MECS was created, southerners argued Bishop Andrew’s inheritance of a slave was merely the *occasion* for separation. The larger conflict focused on the issue of church governance. Southerners claimed they had no choice but to withdraw from the MEC, as they had disproportionate ecclesiastical representation. Ever the traditionalists, they contended that bishops, not the General Conference, maintained supreme authority over American Methodism. Their founder John Wesley followed the Anglican tradition, granting Bishops Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke free-reign over the burgeoning American flock. Moreover, the very word *episcopal*, they reasoned, implied that the church was necessarily governed by bishops. As such, southern Methodism was “the product of a strong episcopal supervision running clear through the history of the Church [and] is the blue-blooded and the main trunk line of American Methodism.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “Our Duty to the Negro,” *New Orleans Christian Advocate* (New Orleans, September 12, 1912): 8. See also John H. Reed, *Racial Adjustments in the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1914).

<sup>12</sup> “Bishop Moore and the Episcopacy,” *Christian Advocate* (Nashville, February 4, 1921): 136. Nathan Hatch illustrates Francis Asbury’s role in expanding Methodism’s presence

Northern Methodists argued that a supreme General Conference was a more democratic form of ecclesiastical structure, and it prevented a small group of bishops from controlling the church. Like their southern brethren, northerners developed an historical interpretation of Methodist polity, which emphasized the flexibility of its leadership structure. True, northerners defended the episcopacy, but following the Civil War, they legislated a series of measures that limited the power of the College of Bishops. They attributed the churches' substantial growth in the first half of the nineteenth century to the flexibility of local congregations to remain autonomous, while maintaining a "connectional" ministry with the larger body of American Methodists. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the MEC organized an institutional and centralized hierarchy, one more capable of meeting the demands of its national missionary campaigns. Like other civic institutions, the MEC was influenced by the "organizational revolution" that swept the nation in the late nineteenth century. Various printing, educational, and missionary boards, which had previously been the domain of the local

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in the early republic. *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 81-93. For the southern interpretation of the relationship between the episcopacy and the General Conference see: John J. Tigert, *Original Status of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1887).; *A Constitutional History of American Episcopal Methodism* (Nashville: Barbee and Smith, 1894). *The Making of Methodism: Studies in the Genesis of Institutions* (Nashville: Barbee and Smith, 1898). Tigert was one of the leading academic voices for southern Methodists, and delivered the fraternal address at the 1892 MEC General Conference. While a professor of church history at Vanderbilt University, Tigert wrote several histories of American Methodism which consistently defended the itinerant episcopacy and supremacy of the College of Bishops. For a historical defense of Methodist episcopacy in the United States, see P. Douglass Gorrie, *Episcopal Methodism, as it was, and is; or, An account of the origin, progress, doctrines, church polity, usages, institutions, and statistics, of the Methodist Episcopal church in the United States* (New York: Derby and Miller, 1852). Nathan Bangs, *An original church of Christ: or, A Scriptural vindication of the orders and powers of the ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Mason and Lane, 1837). For general works on Methodist polity, see Thomas A. Morris, *A Discourse of the Methodist Episcopal Church Polity* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1859). James M. Buckley, *Constitutional and Parliamentary History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York, 1912).

conference, were consolidated into single entities and overseen by appointed committees at the General Conference.

The most significant component of this move toward a centralized bureaucracy was the establishment of residential episcopal appointments, which appointed a bishop's oversight to a single annual conference. In the antebellum period, American Methodist bishops did not oversee an assigned episcopal region. Following the example of Francis Asbury, early nineteenth century bishops crisscrossed the nation on horseback, overseeing the entire reach of the Methodist flock. Even after the Civil War the MECS clung to this tradition, arguing that John Wesley specifically instructed *circuit riding* American bishops. Southern Methodists devised an "episcopal visitation schedule," which prevented bishops from visiting a location at the same time, but this system did not eliminate bitter hostilities between certain southern bishops. The MEC eventually saw the itinerant episcopacy an impractical system. By the turn of the twentieth century, the MEC implemented residential bishops, hoping they would provide stable leadership and eliminate personal conflict. Northern Methodists' interpretations of ecclesiastical structure and their willingness to adapt it to their mission, continued to influence their vision of a reunited American Methodism.<sup>13</sup>

From 1890 to 1910, a number of MEC and MECS publications examined the potential value of "organic union." The period witnessed the highpoint of fraternalism, and nominally, at least, northerners and southerners praised each others' efforts to reconcile the past. In 1891 W. P. Harrison published a volume entitled *Methodist Union*. As editor of the MECS *Methodist*

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<sup>13</sup>Richey, *Methodist Conference in America*, 145-158. William McGuire King, "Denominational Modernization and Religious Identity: The Case of the Methodist Episcopal Church," *Methodist History* 20 (1982): 75-89. See also Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

*Review*, Dr. Harrison was widely esteemed for his scholarly contributions to Methodist history. Harrison observed that “the subject of organic union of all the Episcopal Methodist bodies possesses a charm for many persons.” Nevertheless, he argued that the Church South remained “nearly unanimous today as in 1844,” and that any proposed organic union would have to preserve southern whites’ autonomous control of their churches. Harrison outlined a union which placed Methodists under one nominal structure, but he divided ecclesiastical power into four “General Conference Jurisdictions.” The northern and southern jurisdictions would divide along the Mason-Dixon Line, and the territory west of the Mississippi River comprised a third region. The fourth division incorporated the Colored ME, AME, and AME, Zion Churches. These Jurisdictions would meet every four years under a “Methodist Church Council,” which had “no legislative or judicial functions, but to be an advisory body only.” As this church council would hold no actual ecclesiastical power, it seemed a judicious way to bypass clashing ideas about race and church governance. Harrison’s plan nominally claimed to be an organic union, but it ultimately solidified preexisting differences between the MEC and MECS. Though his plan lacked the strength needed to coordinate a national Methodist bureaucracy, Harrison’s Jurisdictional organization became a hallmark of unification.<sup>14</sup>

Harrison’s northern colleague, Bishop S. M. Merrill, published a book the same year entitled *Organic Union*. Bishop Merrill recognized that his southern brethren feared absorption by the larger northern Methodists. Yet, he also argued that southern Methodists illegally broke

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<sup>14</sup> Moore, *The Long Road to Methodist Union*, 76-77. Similar views were made by other southern Methodist clerics. See Elijah Embree Hoss, *Methodist Fraternity and Federation: Being Several Addresses and Other Papers on the General Subject* (Nashville: Smith and Lamar, 1913), 121-133. Claudius B. Spencer, *That They May Become One* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1915). John H. Brunner, *The Union of the Churches* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1892). John C. Kilgo, “A Plea For Methodist Union,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* (July, 1906), 1-15.

from the MEC. Contesting the southern explanation for the schism, Merrill wrote that “Slavery by its arrogance rendered the agitation unavoidable. Slavery was therefore both the ‘cause’ and the ‘occasion.’” Despite his chastising the MECS, Merrill gladly welcomed organic union and a return to the “old mother Church.” Instead of outlining a reorganization of ecclesiastical authority, he suggested the churches simply reunite under the pre-schism polity. This, of course, would never please southern Methodists who insisted union was only possible through *reorganization*.<sup>15</sup>

The debates waxed on for two decades, as each church continued sending fraternal representatives to their respective General Conferences. Notwithstanding all the talk and dozens of committee meetings, little significant progress was made. Finally, a “turn in the road” came in December 1910, when the Joint Commission on Federation met in Baltimore, Maryland. Gathering in the same city American Methodism had been founded, northerners and southerners commenced formal negotiations toward organic union. In hindsight, the meeting appeared to articulate the same cordial but guarded language of cooperation and fraternity. At the time, however, it was hailed as the first breakthrough in almost thirty years, when the 1876 MEC General Conference had recognized the legality of the MECS. The Commission proclaimed, “We are mutually agreed that our fathers settled the issues of the past conscientiously for themselves, respectively, and separated regretfully, believing that only such action could insure their access to the people they were called to serve.” Although fraternalism had “manifest[ed] improved feelings existing between these two communions,” they humbly admitted “these results do not in every way meet the demand of the times nor the expectations of our people.” Believing that a large portion of Methodist laypersons favored organic union, the Commission

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<sup>15</sup> Moore, *Long Road to Methodist Union*, 77-79.



appointed an official “Committee of Nine,” which would meet and draft an unofficial but practical set of suggestions for a reorganized church. The committee would report these suggestions to the Joint Commission, which would draft a plan of union “through *reorganization* [italics mine] of the Methodist Churches.” Significantly, the MEC realized southerners would only unite under a *reorganized* ecclesiastical structure. While the nineteenth century debate was dominated by northern Methodists refusal to redistribute Episcopal and lay authority, the MEC’s acknowledgement of reorganization signaled a potential willingness to compromise.<sup>16</sup>

The “Committee of Nine,” comprised of three representatives from the MEC, MECS, and the Protestant Methodist Church met in January 1911 and unanimously agreed on a list of suggestions, which they submitted to the Joint Commission. In May 1911 the Commission met in Chattanooga and considered the list presented by the “Committee of Nine.” After four days of frank and occasionally heated discussion, the body reported its support of regional jurisdictions as a logical organization of ecclesiastical authority. More important, two hotly debated resolutions involving the place of African Americans and the division of regional authority were adopted. Item three suggested that “the colored membership of the MEC, the Methodist Protestant Church, and such organizations of the colored Methodists as may enter into agreement with them, may be constituted and recognized as one of the Quadrennial or Jurisdictional Conferences.” Secondly, Item five contended that “We suggest that the Quadrennial Conferences shall be composed of an equal number of ministerial and lay delegates to be chosen by the Annual conferences.” The Joint Commission’s suggestions were next given to the MEC and MECS General Conferences, which were supposed to consider them and provide necessary

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-89.

alterations. And, like much of the workings of the churches' bureaucratic hierarchy, the task proved painstakingly slow.<sup>17</sup>

When the MEC General Conference received the report, it took no decisive action. Concerned that the supremacy of the General Conference had not been well articulated by the Joint Commission, northern Methodists commended the body for its commitment to organic union but effectively rejected its suggestions. Annoyed by their northern brethren's tepid reaction, the 1914 MECS General Conference replied, "it seems useless to take any further action thereon, in the present time." Nevertheless, southern Methodists unanimously adopted a lengthy declaration that declared unification by *reorganization* "feasible and desirable." Shocked by the MECS supposed enthusiasm for union, the May 1916 MEC General Conference enthusiastically committed itself to further negotiations. Yet, before official church meetings began again, northern and southern Methodists met outside the official confines of the church. Gathering in Evanston, Illinois, in February 1916, they confronted the two issues of race and ecclesiastical power.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 97-111; "Federation or Union-Present Status," *Christian Advocate* (Nashville, May 12, 1911): 11-12; "The Joint Commission on Federation," *Christian Advocate* (Nashville, May 19, 1911): 4. Bishop Elijah Embree Hoss presented the southern view at the Joint Commission's meeting. "What we wish to know is, how much we are going to surrender to this supreme General Conference so that it cannot be misunderstood. We are willing to give it all the powers it ought to have in order to make it a vital governing body. The question settled by the Civil War was that the state cannot withdraw from the Union of States, but inside of its limitations the state is just as supreme as ever. I oppose the idea that the General Conference is a supreme body in executive, judicial, and legislative powers." Moore, *Long Road to Methodist Union*, 101-102.

<sup>18</sup> Moore, *Long Road to Methodist Union*, 114.

When the Working Conference on the Union of American Methodism convened in Evanston, Illinois, rather than negotiate an actual plan of union, the conference was “to gather into a clear, impartial, and scholarly statement of the facts and considerations relating to the union.” Many clerics believed that a clearer articulation of their concerns would accelerate reunification negotiations. Thus, speakers delivered prepared addresses on a variety of issues including: The Problem: Sectional Characteristics, Church Polity, A Suggested Plan for Methodist Union, and The Comparative Value of Federation and Organic Union. While a handful of African American Methodists had served minor roles in the previous negotiations, blacks from the ME, AME, and AMEZ Churches were, for the first time, invited to speak before their white brethren.

This invitation, while significant, was not a white appeal for racial equality. “The Negro” session comprised the largest slate of speakers and reflected the polarizing importance of the topic. Northern and southern whites, regardless of their differing opinions, believed that blacks at least deserved an opportunity to explain how American Methodists could work together to alleviate racial strife. During the years from the high-point of fraternalism in the 1890’s until the 1916 Evanston Conference, interracial hostility escalated in the United States. Previous studies on unification have argued that, by the dawn of the twentieth century, northern Methodists were already willing to segregate blacks as the price of union; indeed, the Joint Commission had unanimously favored a separate “Negro Jurisdiction.” Nevertheless, the Evanston Conference illustrated that northern and southern whites still disagreed on the role of blacks in American Methodism. In the long arc of reconciliation, the Evanston Conference was the beginning of serious unification negotiations, but it was also representative of a transitive period in American

Methodism. While the preselected speakers represented a decidedly limited cross-section of regional attitudes, they clearly voiced different visions of a united Methodism.

Even though the conference was supposed to discuss reunification, many of the speeches dealt with less controversial topics, such as foreign and home missions, doctrine and ritual, and church discipline. Most of the speakers made references to regional and racial differences, but few addressed them at length. Of the thirty-six speakers, three individuals articulated the racial, historical, and regional circumstances surrounding the commencement of reunification negotiations. John M. Moore, Robert Elijah Jones, and Bishop Wilbur P. Thirkield had all lived and preached in the South for several decades, and each was a prominent spokesman in his church. Well rehearsed in the politics of race and region, they all had their respective enemies within their churches. Still, each imagined in his own way a new day for American Methodism, where regionalism and racial hatred would fade into the past. John Moore, an emerging southern white progressive, rejected the traditionalism of the MECS in favor of a modernized church, one more tolerant of African Americans and less shaped by southern nostalgia. Robert Elijah Jones, editor of the New Orleans based *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, was the most powerful representative of blacks in the MEC. Advocating Booker Washington's pragmatic gospel of racial uplift, Jones supported racially segregated jurisdictional conferences. But, lobbying against southern whites' insistence on Jim Crow, he pleaded for black representation in the General Conference. Jones was supported by his white friend and Methodist Episcopal Bishop Wilbur Thirkield. Although Thirkield detested any hint of racial segregation, he represented a long tradition of missionary work amongst black Methodists, which was influenced by the nineteenth century social gospel and ideology of racial uplift. Though a northerner by birth, the bishop ministered in the South for three decades, where he preached racial uplift and interracial

contact as the only method to relieve interracial hostility. He never promoted racial equality, at least by today's standards, but Thirkield blamed southern whites for permanently destroying any bond between blacks and whites. The future of Methodism and American democracy, he believed, depended upon interracial contact.

John M. Moore's thick white hair made him look a decade older than his forty-nine years. Born into a humble Methodist family in rural Kentucky, Moore studied at the Universities of Heidelberg and Leipzig, before earning a doctorate from Yale University in 1895. Returning to the South, he rose through the ranks of the MECS. At the time of the Evanston Conference, Moore was secretary of the Department of Home Missions, and he would become a bishop in 1918. Undoubtedly influenced by his time in the North, Moore believed that sectionalism and differing interpretations of ecclesiastical history hindered American Methodists' ability to evangelize the world. Distinguishing himself as the most vocal MECS proponent of the New South Creed, he authored a book entitled *The South Today*, which boasted of post-Reconstruction economic, educational, and industrial advances. Echoing other New South boosters, Moore proclaimed that the South was fast moving into the mainstream of American society.<sup>19</sup>

Beyond regional improvements, Moore envisioned an ecumenical American Protestantism, one that would finally bind together a nation still struggling to redefine itself after the Civil War. Fully aware of northern perceptions of the South as "a country apart," John Moore proclaimed that "every citizen should be made to realize that this nation has a mission in the world, a human task to perform, and a spiritual end to reach. God is setting forward humanity

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<sup>19</sup> For a complete narration of Moore's life and pastorate see his autobiography *Life and I or Sketches and Comments* (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1948).

through the instrumentality of the United States. God has chosen this American nation to make known this revelation.” Anticipating a future where regional boundaries were no more, Moore predicted that “the South’s great day is dawning. The long, hopeless years of dreary toil and meager returns have found their ending.” Southern churches were never “more hopeful, more aggressive, more progressive, nor more engaged.” Moore’s optimism and vision of an ecumenical Protestantism, forged through the bonds of American nationalism, was nothing new to the rhetoric of sectional reconciliation. If anything, it was a continuation of a long tradition that emerged after the Civil War and was propagated by northern and southern whites alike.<sup>20</sup>

When John Moore stood to address his colleagues at the Evanston Conference, he outlined a path toward union that compromised many of the ecclesiastical powers his southern brethren had been unwilling to relinquish to the larger MEC. Although fraternal relations appeared advantageous to the MEC and MECS, neither church had been willing to compromise its historical understanding of Methodist polity. Moore’s speech “A Suggested Working Plan for Methodist Union,” conceded that southerners needed to relinquish their traditionalism and adopt

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<sup>20</sup> John M. Moore, *The South Today* (Nashville: Smith and Lamar, 1916), 195-197; 216-217. See also: Paul Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (Louisville: New South Books, 1970). Edward Blum argues that white Protestants reconciled their differences by the end of the nineteenth century. I agree with Blum’s emphasis on the centrality of race and American nationalism, but the reunification of American Methodism illustrates that the process extended into the early twentieth century. *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1866-1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005). A number of studies have either paid little attention to southern Protestants or concluded that conservative religious leaders isolated southerners from the social gospel and progressive politics. Paul A. Carter, *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel, Social and Political Liberalism in American Protestant Churches, 1920-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1954). Robert Moats Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues, 1919-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958). Donald Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 45. C. Vann Woodward, *The Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1971 edition), 429-455.

a more progressive and democratic church governance. As long as the episcopacy remained the supreme ruling body over southern Methodism, Moore believed the church could never fully address contemporary social issues. Having played a leading role in the MECS Home Missions, he frequently confronted opposition from an older generation of southern bishops who resisted progressive social gospel initiatives. Moore further infuriated these bishops when he proclaimed that a united American Methodism, reorganized under a supreme General Conference, was the only way to secure full “organic” union. Though his position on Methodist polity might be interpreted as a concession to the MEC, it was really a firmly held belief among a minority of southern progressives. Moore and his allies believed that a centralized and all powerful General Conference was the only way for American Methodists to efficiently carry forward the Methodist mission of evangelism and individual salvation. In time, this contingency of southern Methodists helped change popular sentiment within their church, eventually bringing the MECS in line with the MEC.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Dewey Grantham’s work on Southern Progressivism has informed my ideas about Moore’s objectives. He analyzes several of Moore’s colleagues including Willis D. Weatherford and Will Alexander. It should be noted that even these reformers conceded racial segregation was best for both races. *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 230-245. See also William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). John Edgerton’s work on early twentieth century reformers in the South also shaped my thoughts about how some southern whites questioned the dominant southern racial attitudes. *Speak Now Against The Day: The Generation in the South Before the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995). For informative studies of progressivism in the MECS, see John Olen Fish, *Southern Methodism in the Progressive Era: A Social History* (Ph. D. dissertation, 1969, University of Georgia). Harold Lloyd Fair, *Southern Methodists on Education and Race, 1900-1920* (Ph. D. dissertation, 1971, Vanderbilt University). John Patrick McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South: The Women’s Home Mission Movement in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1886-1939* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982). John Lee Eighmy, “Religious Liberalism in the South during the Progressive Era,” *Church History* 38, no. 3 (September, 1969): 359-372.

Though John Moore's ideas eventually became main stream among southern Methodists, he was a decidedly vocal minority at the Evanston Conference. Standing before his colleagues, Moore recounted the well-plowed terrain of post-Reconstruction Methodist history. Tempering his remarks with differing perspectives, Moore observed that two extreme beliefs had dominated unification negotiations. As for the MECS, "the reason the proposal for organic union has hitherto never met with favor in the South, is because of this fixed belief that union in the end will be nothing less than absorption." Northerners, on the other hand, grumbled that southern autonomy would minimize the oversight of a centralized organic governing body. Three decades of fraternal cooperation was proof enough that regional autonomy only encouraged two distinctly separate churches. Moore quoted MEC Bishop R. J. Cook. "No section is to trust the other to make laws, rules and regulations for the whole." With an autonomous MECS, "the Methodist Episcopal Church is invited to commit suicide. It is to carve itself, under the guise of reorganization, into segments, fragments, divisions, each segment to think itself a unit, with about as much unity in a collective whole as there is in a scrap heap."<sup>22</sup>

These debates about the structure of Methodist polity and the regional distribution of ecclesiastical authority were established before the Civil War and went unresolved for decades. When the Evanston Conference met in 1916, most delegates, even if they disagreed, acknowledged that regional jurisdictions were likely the only way to reorganize American Methodism under one polity. The question, then, was how much authority would be invested in Jurisdictions? More importantly, if Methodism were to achieve full "organic" union, how could white southerners ensure that blacks would not have equal ecclesiastical power? John Moore

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<sup>22</sup> *A Working Conference on Methodist Union*, 413-414. See also: "Shall the Church Be Reduced to a Province?" *Christian Advocate*, Nashville, (November 10, 1916): 7-8.



sought to illustrate how the extreme beliefs of “absorption and fragmentation” overshadowed a more complex variety of opinions. If two competing positions had dominated the public debate, Moore contended that in the broader national church, most laypersons acknowledged the necessity of completely reorganizing the denominational polity. Though Moore could not actually illustrate any clear picture of these sentiments, he communicated his belief that the churches actually had more in common than they thought. And, the plan he endorsed seemed to solve each churches’ respective concerns. Undoubtedly a visionary and likely unaware of mounting southern opposition, John Moore told the brethren to forget the past and cast their sights on the future of a reunited American Methodism.

Moore claimed to speak for himself, but believed he was “voicing the desire of the leaders of the Church South.” He said: “We want one supreme lawmaking body for the entire church, no mere advisory General Conference, one book of discipline, no legislative powers in any jurisdictional conference such as to make possible the impairment of the unity of the church, one college of bishops, however elected, to be general superintendents of the entire church, and if the [joint] commission’s plan prevails, we desire only those territorial lines which are just, honorable, and in accordance with the highest interest of American Methodism.” By referencing the Joint Commission’s suggestions for union, particularly the regional jurisdictions, Moore effectively acknowledged MECS support of union. Yet, on the question of reunion through reorganization, he was a single voice within a church largely opposed to a supreme General Conference. Eventually, Moore would be hailed as the most important supporter of reunification. At the time, however, his remarks only alarmed his fellow MECS leaders. When

Moore expressed southerner's desire for a supreme General Conference, he effectively denounced the tradition of MECS episcopal oversight.<sup>23</sup>

Though Moore disagreed with his fellow southerners on the dynamics of ecclesiastical hierarchy, his position on the role of African Americans indicated he was in step with other southern whites. Moore proposed a plan that would promote black autonomy. He asked, "Has not their [African Americans] action been determined by race consciousness, race aspirations, desire for self-government, and the sincere belief that development in an independent body where their own leaders bear the responsibility will be more rapid than in a mixed body where whites naturally assume leadership and bear the chief responsibilities?" Likely uncomfortable with the notion of "organic" contact with blacks, Moore suggested that the four black Methodist churches (MEC, CME, AME, and AME, Zion Churches) should consider reuniting under a single institution, which could maintain "fraternal ties" with a reunited white Methodism. If MEC blacks would not submit to this arrangement, Moore saw a segregated racial Jurisdiction as the only logical way to incorporate blacks into the united church. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of this debate on race was Moore's complete avoidance of African American's role in the General Conference. Even while he spoke of the importance of a democratic General Conference, Moore avoided its racial makeup.<sup>24</sup>

Focusing on the Jurisdictions instead of the General Conference, John Moore managed to divert the conversation away from race and stress regional distinctions. While most scholars have emphasized the regionalism of the final plan of union, it should be noted that Moore's support of a supreme General Conference was a surprisingly progressive stance for a southern

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<sup>23</sup> *A Working Conference*, 415.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 423-426.

cleric. True, Jurisdictions would allow local churches and annual conferences to oversee their own affairs. Yet, a powerful General Conference would legislate much of churches' official discipline, including those interpretations of racial segregation in American society. Moore's silence on the potential role of blacks in the General Conference is telling of southern Methodism's opposition to interracial leadership. He concluded his address, "Men must see that the times and conditions require an outspoken loyalty to American Methodism as a whole, and also sincere good will and conspicuous consideration of every branch for every other. That loyalty involves not only patriotism and a sense of national responsibility, but also an enlarged conception of the duty of the church which can be fully discharged only by the consolidation as well as vitalization of its superb forces."<sup>25</sup>

When Robert E. Jones stood to address the Methodist brethren at the *Evanston Conference*, he echoed the language of the famed black leader, Booker T. Washington. The Wizard of Tuskegee had only been dead for a month, and his gospel of pragmatic racial uplift continued to shape how many blacks and whites perceived race relations in America. Jones, like Washington, was a light-skinned black southerner, well versed in the language of racial politics, who received the economic support and advice of influential white men. A resident of New Orleans since 1897, he protested segregation on the city streetcars and used his editorship of the weekly *Southwestern Christian Advocate* to promote solidarity among black Methodists. If the present was characterized by a chasm between the races, Jones believed the church could be the primary agent to create a less hostile relationship between blacks and whites. He warned that "if

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 426-427.

the church draws the color line, then the preachers of hate and segregation will have gained forceful endorsement of their propaganda which is as undemocratic, as un-American, as it is unchristian.”<sup>26</sup> Like Washington, Jones frequently chastised blacks for fulfilling white stereotypes, but he appealed to white Methodists best sensibilities, suggesting that most African Americans were hard working and God fearing people. Most importantly, he repeatedly reminded southern whites that black Americans did not want to end racial segregation. In one unification meeting after the Evanston Conference, he preached “I believe in the color line; I do not have any fears about that. The truth is, I have felt more at home among colored people than with white folks. Southern people can understand that.”<sup>27</sup>

Although most African Americans left the predominantly white MEC ranks in the 1870’s, favoring the political and social autonomy of the AME and AMEZ Churches, Jones’ ancestors were among a small contingent who remained. For a time they enjoyed the benefit of interracial contact, when whites and blacks worshiped together. These black Methodists believed that racially exclusive denominations amplified racial animosity, by making “race intrinsic rather than irrelevant to religion, fusing religious and racial identities into an inseparable

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>27</sup> Joint Commission, *Proceedings vol. 1*, 155. I am indebted to Professor Robert J. Norrell’s recent biography of Booker Washington, *Up From History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Harvard University Press, 2009). His interpretations of Washington and African American historiography have encouraged me to think about differing and often conflicting ideologies and methods of protest against racism. August Meier’s examination of African American ideology and identity in the late nineteenth and twentieth century shaped much of my understanding of how black leaders like Robert E. Jones could both flatter whites and indirectly protest racism. Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963). While my thoughts differ, Kevin Gaines scholarship forced me to consider how whites interpreted their own changing racial attitudes in relation to their black counterparts. *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

whole.” Rejecting exclusively black churches, they saw interracial congregations as the best path toward racial equality and thought of themselves as bearers of a less racially biased and more enlightened Christian tradition. This difference between MEC black communicants and the AME and AMEZ Churches influenced how Robert E. Jones portrayed his brethren’s role in Methodist unification. When Jones moved to New Orleans in the 1890s the city’s Methodist churches were in the midst of segregating their congregations. By the time he assumed the editorship of the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* in 1904, the churches, like the civic institutions which surrounded them, had fully succumbed to Jim Crow. Thus, when he addressed the *Evanston Conference* in 1916, Reverend Jones had already witnessed the decline of interracial Methodism. Nonetheless, he defended the late nineteenth-century MEC interracial legacy and sought to convince whites that blacks were an important voice in American Methodism.<sup>28</sup>

Speaking on the panel “The Problem: The Negro,” Robert E. Jones carefully chose his opening words. “No one deprecates the existence of sectional and race lines in our common Methodism more than the Negro,” he began. Then, perhaps attempting to avoid finger-pointing between his white colleagues, Jones accepted that “Negroes were largely responsible, although involuntarily so, for sectional feeling and sectional lines between the North and South.” Nonetheless, he assured them that “the Negro has all to gain and nothing to lose” in a reunited Methodism. Where whites saw African Americans as an obstacle to unification, Jones suggested

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<sup>28</sup> James B. Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2005), 15-28. Bennett’s focuses on the establishment of interracial Methodist and Catholic churches in New Orleans and their eventual segregation. Bennett writes that Jones “could draw upon both Washington and DuBois to construct a strategy that would best advance the interests of black M. E. church members” (p. 109). Jones was firm when addressing southern whites. Still, he always called himself a “conservative” and a disciple of Booker Washington on all things racial, and he never protested segregated in individual churches.

that blacks were merely victims of historical circumstances. Indeed, the panel he spoke on assumed that African Americans were “the problem” in Methodist unification. This fact only amplified existing disagreements among northern and southern whites. Jones chose not to aggravate this tension, and conceded that blacks and whites, while under the restraints of Jim Crow, could solve racial hatred together.

Translating this observation to Methodist reunification, Jones argued that blacks and whites could benefit from a united church, while maintaining racial and regional boundaries. As he had surely done many times before, Jones positioned himself between the conflicting racial ideologies of northern and southern whites. Should the churches unite, Jones told his white colleagues, “there is no need of mixed congregations or society except in very rare cases. Mixed societies are not desired even by colored people. The Negro desires his own church, whether it is ideal or not.” Black Methodists might have very well wanted separate congregations. At the same time, their success in creating an educated and largely middle class following was the direct outcome of contact with northern whites. If northern whites were to write racial segregation into their polity, Jones needed to convince them that Methodist Episcopal blacks were now capable of autonomous leadership. He also had to convince southern whites that black representation would never trump white authority.<sup>29</sup>

Jones used his position as a native southerner and black leader to his advantage. Just as Booker Washington claimed to understand American race relations better because of his southern upbringing, so too did Robert Jones chastise northern whites for making rash judgments about the South. Jones also used this southern perspective to remind MECS clerics that he and other blacks benefited from northerners, and that the MEC posed no threat to southern racial

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<sup>29</sup> *A Working Conference*, 233.

mores. True, this might have been a practical tactic to assert his opinion among both regional churches. But, Jones likely understood the necessity to both appeal to southern white racial attitudes, with a well reasoned assessment of the past. He told of the MEC's successful missionary campaigns among southern blacks, but added: "We do not know," Jones said, "of a single [interracial] marriage that has grown out of this, but we do know of thousands of persons who have been helped." As such, MEC missionaries had carried out a "socialistic program" among southern blacks, without crossing the taboo racial and sexual boundaries and becoming "sociable" with black women. Speaking from his own southern experience, Robert Jones explained that American Methodists could reunite, without crossing well-established racial boundaries.<sup>30</sup>

Next, Jones turned his attention to the global reach of Methodism and the potential for a reunited, organic, and racially tolerant American Methodism. Referring to a recent speech by John R. Mott, founder of the YMCA and eventual Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Jones warned of "unprecedented dangers in race relations due to the shrinkage of the world by improved means of communication, the multiplication of friction points between races and peoples on account of more intimate association, a marked relaxation and weakening of the sanctions and restraints of social customs." Advising the American people on these perilous times John Mott had said, "Some still appeal for a policy of segregation. They insist that the only hope of averting these alarming dangers is by separating the races from each other. Even though such a course might have been practicable in other days, it is so no longer. The only program which can meet all the alarming facts of the situation is the world-wide spread of Christianity in its purest form." Because John Mott was widely respected among white Americans, Jones' decision to use Mott's

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 224.

observations on race relations brought to the forefront the patriotic virtue of a reunited American Methodism. Jones then quoted Booker Washington: “The whole world is looking to the United States to set the example in the solution of racial problems.”<sup>31</sup>

Although the world might have been watching the United States, few clerics were willing to compromise their understanding of Methodist doctrine to fulfill John Mott’s quixotic missionary impulse or respond to Booker Washington’s prophecy. Robert E. Jones spoke plainly about the need to move reunification talks beyond arguments about race and region. Speaking for African American Methodists, he said, “We assert, therefore, that the union of Methodism should be a union upon bases of the purest Christianity without regard to race or sectional lines. So far as I know, this is the first attempt in the history of the movement for organic union to have the two races come together in this frank way. Such a gathering is more fundamental to the success of the movement for union than any commission or federation that exists.” Significantly, Jones observed that “one of the most important factors contributing to the success of this meeting (The Evanston Conference) is that the Negro is being consulted as to what he desires in the readjustment that is to take place.” As previous reunification negotiations had included only whites, the Evanston Conference was both the first time African Americans were invited into the debates and an ideal opportunity for Jones to outline his vision of a reunited organic Methodism.<sup>32</sup>

Expanding on his earlier observation of the United States as a global model of race relations, Jones argued that whites could benefit from union. After all, he said, “the white man is today the world’s master; he is the custodian of the large program for the evangelization of the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 224-226.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 226.



world. In fact, if not in theory, he has in large measure apostolic leadership; he must be big enough to not belie the spirit and purpose of our common Master.” Contemporary observers likely find this argument as yet another concession to white authority; in the context of his time, Jones confirmed the popular belief that respectable white Christians had a moral responsibility to extend a hand of brotherhood to “inferior” races. While many southern whites half-heartedly embraced brotherhood with blacks, Jones preached that “If the church is to have a world-wide program, it must be big enough to include all men in the brotherhood or else, as the darker races come to race consciousness, they will resent discriminations.” To his northern colleagues, Jones warned that the MEC “cannot turn out its Negro members without doing violence to its best traditions. There never was a time when the Negro was not in the church in as large or larger ration than he is today and the brightest chapter in American missions is the chapter that tells the story of the upward path of the Negro.” There were, Jones argued “only disadvantages if we separate the Negro, but there are advantages to the white man when he comes into the closest contact with the Negro in his church relations.”<sup>33</sup>

Though some whites might dismiss these apparent advantages to interracial cooperation, Jones reasoned that the “colored churches” had done well in building churches and evangelizing, “*But* it is paying the Negro too great a compliment to say with his present development he can do better by himself.” Jones then turned his attention on a simmering debate between black leaders who supported racially segregated churches and those who denounced them as preventing racial development. Drawing the color line between the churches, he warned, necessarily invoked the “caste spirit” and fostered the “social club” environment propagated by the black churches. With organic interracial contact, whites could rest assured that blacks “would feel that Christianity

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 228-229.

gives him the only shelter from proscription and segregation which he meets everywhere in practice and imbedded in the constitutions in many States.” For Robert Jones and other MEC blacks, the autonomy of racially separate congregations only amplified the color line. An interracial Methodism might serve as the only significant respite from Jim Crow segregation.<sup>34</sup>

Yet, even as he warned against the color line, he proposed a path toward reunification that accepted, and seemingly embraced racial segregation. Knowing full well the significance of his presence, Jones bluntly stated his idea of a reunited Methodism. “Now I state in one sentence the program: *The largest possible contact of the Negro with the white man with the largest possible independence of the Negro.*” He preached “The day is passing when the white man is to work over the Negro. Maybe the day is waning when the white man is to work among us, but the day is at sunrise when the white man is to work through the Negro for the uplift of the millions and this latter program for stimulating the ideals of civilization can be carried forward.” This prophetic vision, perhaps simply a rhetorical flourish by a seasoned preacher, still appealed to white Methodists’ evangelical tradition. By signaling a revival in interracial cooperation and promoting the civilization of “the races,” Jones cast reunification as a Christian and patriotic virtue. But, he also catered to southern white racial attitudes, which disapproved of “social” contact between the races. He concluded that there was room for whites and blacks in American Methodism, but blacks could control their own affairs, while maintaining contact with whites.

Should any of the brethren wonder what degree of interracial contact Jones was proposing, he provided an answer that likely appealed to most of his colleagues. “It was often alleged that Booker T. Washington received his credentials of leadership at the hands of friends outside the race-but he used that leadership for the good of his own people throughout the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 230.

country. In the life of this one man we have an example of what may be accomplished for the Negro through proper leadership, that is native, but a leadership that has the confidence and moral support and unselfish cooperation of all forces.” To whites fearful of black representation in the General Conference, Jones explained that in the MEC “the white membership as compared to the Negro is nine to one and there is no chance for Negro domination or intimidation.” After all, he surmised blacks and whites already maintained essentially separate affairs. “He [the Negro] has his separate churches, his separate Conferences and the only points of contact are, on the general committees and at the General Conference. To us who live in the South this point of contact does not alarm.” With the approval of whites, black Methodist leaders could oversee their fellow African Americans, without compromising white control of the General Conference. Like Booker Washington’s political strategy, Robert E. Jones’ proposal for Methodist unification promoted black leadership, but did so without threatening white dominance. Jones ultimately accepted segregation, but asked for black annual conferences, which had already voluntarily segregated, to maintain “absolutely equal in every regard to any other areas or districts in the church.” Interracial contact would take place “in the General Conference, where we [African Americans] are to be on absolutely equal footing, to vote and to be voted for. From this upper chamber, we would each go down to our task to which we are related and adapted.” As such, whites and blacks would never have to worship together in the local parish. And, the minimal black representation in the General Conference would never achieve enough power to trump white dominance.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 233-234.

Bishop Wilbur P. Thirkield reiterated many of Robert E. Jones' points on the fate of black Methodists. Also speaking on the panel titled "The Problem: The Negro," Bishop Thirkield represented the social activism of progressive white northern Methodists. Born in 1854 in Franklin, Ohio, Thirkield attended Ohio Wesleyan University and earned a doctorate from the Boston University School of Theology. Like other young clerics during Reconstruction, he moved south to minister among freed African Americans. After a brief pastorate in New Orleans, Thirkield relocated to Atlanta and served as the first president of Gammon Theological Seminary from 1882 until 1900, when he was appointed General Secretary of the Freedman's Aid Society. The young cleric married the daughter of Gilbert Haven, a radical Reconstruction-era northern Methodist prophet of racial equality. Thirkield also served as president of the Congress on Africa, a Protestant missionary association formed to promote the redemption of Africa through aggressive Christian missions. In 1906 he became president of Howard University, where he befriended Booker Washington and appointed W. E. B. DuBois to the faculty. Already an accomplished educator, writer, administrator, and orator, in 1912 Thirkield was elected to the MEC episcopacy, where he returned to New Orleans and continued to preach racial uplift and cautioned whites against portraying African Americans as innately immoral.<sup>36</sup>

Few Methodist clerics wore clerical collars, but Wilbur Thirkield had since the beginning of his ministry. Always sporting the high white collar and a Prince Albert coat, the Bishop surely looked more like a cosmopolitan Yankee cleric than a humble circuit riding parson. When

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<sup>36</sup> Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 177-180. For an article illustrating Thirkield's prominent role in the "redemption of Africa" movement and the accompanying black "double consciousness" see Paul W. Harris, "Racial Identity and the Civilizing Mission: Double Consciousness at the 1895 Congress on Africa," *Religion and American Culture*, vol. 18. (Summer, 2008): 145-176.

Thirkield stood to address his brethren, they undoubtedly anticipated a spirited and likely controversial examination of American race relations. Like other speakers at the *Evanston Conference*, he spoke of the diverging paths taken by the MEC and MECS, particularly in their approach to newly freed slaves. Unlike his black colleague, Jones, Thirkield was less kind to southern whites and used history to remind them that the MECS had permanently marred interracial relations. Where Jones had to craft his speech so as not to offend southern whites, Bishop Thirkield's white skin gave him leeway to chastise southern whites. Unlike other northern whites, Thirkield had lived and fought Jim Crow in the South for three decades; if anyone could be both an astute observer of southern race relations and a critical voice, it was Bishop Thirkield.

While most Methodists emphasized the evangelical zeal of their founders, Wilbur Thirkield contextualized the history of American Methodism through the role of African Americans. For him, the legacy of American Methodism, told through the perspective of blacks, illustrated many of the nation's differing regional, political, and racial ideals. Thirkield observed that, before the Civil War "the Negro worshiped in churches with whites; heard the best preaching; got the rudiments of religious thought; and was brought in touch with God...the seed fell into good ground." Yet, following the war came "the tragedy of reconstruction," when southern Methodists "*broke off* the old relations between whites and blacks and a gulf was made between the races." Southern Methodism "set off its colored members" into the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church and lost its "obligation for the religious care of the Negro, finding expression of the missionary work, was largely lost." "On the threshold of freedom," newly freed slaves were left in the care of an uneducated black clergy and would have "drifted into

barbarism had it not been for the thousands of missionaries who reached and uplifted them.” Under these circumstances black progress had been “one of the miracles of history.”<sup>37</sup>

If racial uplift had been a miracle, Thirkield sought to remind his brethren ending organic contact between blacks and whites could undermine Methodist unification and be detrimental to the future of American race relations. Just as Robert E. Jones had alluded to a different class of African Americans in the MEC, Thirkield urged southern whites to “keep in view the type of Negro Methodists that the Methodist Episcopal Church has produced as the outcome of fifty years of education and Christianization, as a constituent part of the church.” Though many southern whites likely assumed all blacks were the same, Thirkield suggested that MEC blacks were different. Northern Methodists had extended a hand of Christian brotherhood to freedmen, “made him a brother; through school and church lifted him out of the impersonal into a realization of not only the individual but also into the growing sense of personality.” Thirkield charged that many whites still thought of “the Negro in the mass.” The achievement of racial uplift pulled blacks “out of the herd” and brought to the forefront individual pious Christians. When considering the fate of MEC blacks, whites needed to consider their achievements under the burden of Jim Crow. This did not mean African Americans were social equals. The bishop explained that “men are not equal, but every man has a right to a footing of equality of opportunity.” The church could not bestow social equality, but whites could use their higher standing in society and help their less fortunate brethren.<sup>38</sup> Thirkield explained that interracial

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 247-248, 250. Upon Thirkield’s election to the episcopacy one paper observed, “One of the chief characteristics of Dr. Thirkield is said to be his positive aggressiveness for the right of the negro whenever the question arises in the council of the church. For that reason it is felt that the negroes have a friend in the elevation of Thirkield to the College of Bishops.” *New Orleans Times Picayune* (June 8, 1912): 7.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 250-251.

contact “through participation in the General Conference, through membership in committees and boards, through the church press, through Sunday school literature—above all, through the broadening influence of the church—has developed a religious consciousness, standards and ideals that have lifted multitudes of colored ministers and members of our church to a high level of experience, Christian morality, and efficiency.” Delegates should consider these developments when deciding the fate of blacks in a reunited Methodism. Thirkiel believed that the current proposal “*set off*” blacks into a separate body and would “lose an unmeasured opportunity for the continual elevation and Christianization of the race. Our work among the masses is only well begun.” In time, African Americans would reap the benefits and become self-sufficient. For the time being, though, African Americans still needed the extended hand of their white brethren.<sup>39</sup>

Where Bishop Thirkiel saw the opportunity for blacks to become self-sufficient, several MECS clerics warned that blacks would have little incentive to raise their own funds, if they received white support in an organically reunited church. Thirkiel countered their assumption with several statistics. Interracial Methodism “does not pauperize,” he preached, “but develops self-support in the colored membership of the church.” Since 1896 the colored conferences had modestly increased their annual apportionments and missionary offerings, and by 1916 the black Washington and Delaware Annual Conferences were self-sustaining. Most revealing was the fact that black MEC missionary offerings surpassed the AME, AMEZ, and Colored MEC combined, and he proudly proclaimed “It is not equaled even by the Negro Baptists, with a million members.” Thirkiel’s observations confirmed Booker Washington’s pragmatic strategy of black economic independence. Though the majority of southern blacks still toiled under the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 251-252.

economic oppression of Jim Crow, Thirkield's statistics were real indicators that MEC blacks had actually benefited from organic contact with whites.<sup>40</sup>

Though northern white Methodists' paternalism could be seen as merely another form of aggressive evangelism, Wilbur Thirkield and his contemporaries believed interracial contact was vital to the future of American democracy. He rejected racial segregation in American Methodism, preaching that "such separation would sever the only actual bond of union now maintained between the races in America. Snap this bond of union between the races, and for all time they must walk apart in separate and even divergent paths." The bishop's voice thundered as he dramatically claimed that "the only bond of union in any large way, either civil, political, educational or religious," which existed in the country, was through the MEC. Thirkield surmised that "if through the past fifty years the Church South could have shaped the intellectual, moral, and religious methods and ideals of such a body of colored people, the outcome would have been of immeasurable advantage to both races throughout the South." Should blacks be placed into a "fraternal" relationship, without the benefit of "organic contact," Thirkield warned "we sever the only moral and religious and ecclesiastical link that joins the Church to the Negro—the white race to the black race, and *we drop the burden on the South.*" Just as Robert E. Jones touted the benefits of organic union for both whites and blacks, so too did Thirkield suggest the South could redeem itself. Interracial contact could renew a spirit of Christian brotherhood in the MECS, and whites and blacks could cooperate on moral reform campaigns.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>41</sup> *A Working Conference*, 246-247; 257-258.



In the bishop's judgement, Southern Methodism had "never fully grasped the seriousness and possibilities of this problem," but they could redeem themselves if they followed the example of the MEC. "For the sake of our brothers of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, our Negro membership should be held as a part of the organic body of a reunited Methodism," Thirfield pleaded. If race was the central issue that separated the two Methodisms, Thirfield preached that "the Negro membership should be a part of the organic body on the theory that the united church, acting on and through such a body of ministers and laity, can best help in the peaceful solution of the social and moral reform problems before the South." Emphasizing the opportunity to reform society, rather than debate the role of ecclesiastical authority, Thirfield painted organic reunification in a way that might appeal to southern whites. Indeed, the "problem for the South is the presence of ten million black people, the masses of whom have only been touched by the higher moral and religious life of the church. It is the old story of Edom hanging on the borders of Israel, a menace ever to the safety and moral life of God's people." Though MECS clerics were less enthusiastic toward the plight of the Negro, many likely agreed with Thirfield that blacks were undeserving of racial hatred. Southern Methodists were also wholly committed to a variety of moral reform programs, which might explain why Thirfield emphasized prohibition legislation. He explained how African Americans in the MEC, through "close contact" with whites, had embraced the "moral and educational value" on the evils of "King Alcohol." While northern and southern racial attitudes were starkly different, both churches could agree on Methodism's central role in reforming American morality. For Thirfield, southern whites needed to consider how blacks could become valuable allies in these reform movements; organic union was one way.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 257-259.

Bishop Wilbur Thirkield concluded his address with a discussion on the redemption of Africa. He preached “For the sake of Africa and its redemption, I plead for this organic relation in our reunited Methodism.” Following Robert E. Jones’ lead, Thirkield explained how Methodist reunification had a global reach. Just as YMCA founder John R. Mott warned of the nations awakening to “race consciousness,” Thirkield preached that “God is girding himself for the accomplishment of his ultimate redemption of the millions of the sons of Ham, who in Africa’s dark land have been stretching out their hand unto God.” Indeed, he reminded his southern brethren that their own Bishop Lambuth and the black cleric and educator A. E. P. Gilbert had gone “afoot into the wilds of Africa to found a mission there in the name of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South!” He concluded, “O, that we may see in the picture of these two men, white and black, hand in hand, as they walk through the jungles of Africa—may we see in this the vision of a coming united Methodism, ultimately white and black together, hand in hand with God, seeking to accomplish God’s purpose to redeem American and Africa and all the nations unto our Christ.”<sup>43</sup>

John Moore, Robert E. Jones, and Wilbur Thirkield each made known their vision of a reunited American Methodism. Moore’s insistence on a supreme General Conference was largely ignored by his fellow southerners. As the Evanston Conference was not an official unification meeting, MECS leaders probably did not take Moore’s suggestions seriously. In fact, the church periodicals barely commented on any of the speeches made at the conferences. Robert E. Jones reprinted portions of his address in the *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, and

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 260-261.

praised his white colleagues for their cordiality. Even Wilbur Thirkield's blistering attack upon Jim Crow segregation went largely unnoticed. Southern whites were already familiar with Thirkield's condemning assaults on the region. The absence of controversy raised the question of why John Moore's later interpreted the Evanston Conference as a significant turn in the unification movement.

Moore's belief that the Evanston Conference was a milestone in the unification movement was likely influenced by events that followed the meeting. Four months after Evanston, the northern General Conference was scheduled to consider a list of "suggestions" for union drawn up by an independent Joint Commission on Federation. These were explicitly mere suggestions and not an actual working plan of union. The southern Methodists had reviewed the legislation two years earlier and consented to unification upon two conditions. First, the conference overwhelmingly favored unification through ecclesiastical *reorganization*. By reorganization, southerners were refereeing to the proposed regional jurisdictions, which would protect southern interests. Secondly, James Cannon Jr., a Virginia cleric and eventual bishop, submitted to the Commission's suggestions a recommendation that "the colored membership of the various Methodist bodies be formed into an independent organization holding fraternal relations with the organized church." The southern Methodists unanimously adopted the suggestions, with the attached stipulations for a jurisdictional model and fraternalism with African Americans. After the Evanston Conference, the northern Methodist General Conference would review the commission's suggestions toward union. Here, a quiet southern supporter of unification lent his voice to John Moore's efforts to democratize southern Methodism.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Moore, *Long Road to Methodist Union*, 112-115.

## Chapter Two

Following the Evanston Conference, northern and southern Methodist continued official negotiations toward reunion. While southerners remained largely suspicious of northern whites' intentions, a small but vocal group of MECS clerics began to challenge southern orthodoxy and encouraged their brethren to democratize the church. This emerging schism in southern Methodism threatened episcopal authority, but it was unsuccessful in defeating the traditional interpretation of MECS polity. Northern white Methodist did not endure such division, but their attitudes toward reunification also showed signs of change. Where MEC clerics had previously warned of allowing blacks to maintain their own leadership in the MEC, by the early 1920s, northern whites believed a segregated jurisdiction was a practical way to empower blacks in the white establishment. Both MEC blacks and whites still referred to the ideology racial uplift, but the actual point of contact between blacks and whites shifted from the local congregation to the General Conference. Northern Methodists still maintained an interest in the welfare of African Americans, but acknowledge blacks' requests for their own leadership. From 1916 through the mid-1920s, American Methodists intensely debated a path toward union that would accommodate whites and blacks. Even as attitudes changed in both churches, ultimately the MEC and MECS could not agree on a plan that settled southern whites' anxiety over organic contact with black Methodists.

In May of 1916 the senior MECS bishop, Eugene Russell Hendrix, boarded a train for Saratoga Springs, New York. The bishop had been invited by several of his northern colleagues to deliver an address at their General Conference. Like the majority of conference speeches, the nature of his address seemed fairly insignificant. The northern Methodists Board of Conference

Claimants had contemplated establishing a pension fund for retired clergy, and they hoped that northerners and southerners might agree, once again, to some type of fraternal cooperation. Bishop Hendrix cordially accepted their invitation. When Hendrix stood behind the lectern, however, the subject of his speech drifted away from the proposed pension fund. The bishop spent most of his time explaining how a reunited American Methodism would consolidate bureaucratic structures, thus making the church more economically efficient. Southerners had made the same argument since the late 1870s. Bishop Eugene Hendrix, though, went much further. He announced to his northern brethren that southern Methodists were ready to unite organically under a single General Conference. He lamented, "What fools we mortals be! What power we have lost for service the world has lost because we have been so slow of heart to believe." Hendrix prayed that northern and southern Methodists "cross over this Jordan and go up in our Lord's name." He urged the conference to endorse the Joint Commission's suggestions. Why Bishop Hendrix chose this occasion to champion reunification is unclear. Though he was senior southern bishop, Hendrix had remained virtually silent on the unification. Regardless of his intentions, Eugene Hendrix held a very different view of ecclesiastical power than most of his southern brethren. He plainly observed that "the bishops of the MECS have the power to veto over the General Conference," but the veto had only been used two or three times since 1844. Why, he wondered, had southerners clung to such a seemingly insignificant ecclesiastical authority? As Hendrix downplayed the episcopal office, he also gave the impression that northerners and southerners had similar racial attitudes. The bishop, speaking for all of southern Methodism, lent support to Robert E. Jones' moderate position, which placed blacks in a segregated jurisdiction but permitted full representation in the General Conference. This pronouncement went completely against the 1914 MECS General Conference's recommendation

to separate blacks into a fraternal relationship. For most southern white Methodists, it seemed their senior bishop had gone north and consented to union at any price.<sup>45</sup>

His northern brethren, however, responded with great enthusiasm. The conference journal remarked, “We have with us today the inspiration of our dearly beloved Bishop, Eugene R. Hendrix, [who] inspired we believe by the Holy Spirit, that this historic quadrennium might see union a fact, without delaying that final action until 1920.” The conference took decisive action on the Joint Commission’s “suggestions.” Claiming to accept the southern Methodists amendments to the “suggestions,” the conference actually amended the suggestions. Inserted in the legislation, they subtly responded to southern whites request for racial segregation. Instead of accepting James Cannon’s amendment to place African Americans into a “fraternal” jurisdiction, the MEC accepted racial jurisdictions as long as blacks had organic representation in the General Conference. The conference voted unanimously in favor of the resolution. Amid the excitement of a rare unanimous decision, senior MEC Bishop Earl Cranston invited Eugene Hendrix to the stage. The two senior bishops of American Methodism exchanged warm handshakes and posed for several photographs. A southern Methodist periodical mocked the scene. “Our senior bishop was escorted to the stage amid wild manifestations of joy and enthusiasm. Bishop Earl Cranston dramatically took the hand of Bishop Hendrix, and the two stood with clasped hands, and some thoughtful camera artists happened to think of getting a

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<sup>45</sup> *Address of Eugene Russell Hendrix to Board of Conference Claimants, Methodist Episcopal Church, Saratoga Springs, New York, May 19, 1916* [pamphlet], (Chicago: Board of Conference Claimants of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1916), 10-12; “Bishop Hendrix on Church Union,” *NCA* (June 30, 1916): 25; “Interview with Bishop Hendrix at Saratoga Springs,” *NOLACA* (June 29, 1916): 2. One cleric summed up southerners discontent, charging that Bishop Hendrix “belittles and treats as trivial the differences between the governments of the two episcopal Methodisms.” Quoted in “Bishop Hendrix vs. Bishop Hendrix,” *NOLACA* (June 29, 1916): 2. Ivan Lee Holt, *Eugene Russell Hendrix: Servant of the Kingdom* (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1950), 115-128.

picture of the two senior bishops.” The faithful northern Methodists, delighted by this apparent breakthrough, left their General Conference wholly confident that union was on the horizon.<sup>46</sup>

Southern Methodists, however, were cautious about Hendrix’s prediction of a coming union. Upon hearing of Hendrix’s speech, one southern Methodist editor complained that “I am very weary of Bishop Hendrix posing as the whole ‘cheese’ in our church. Look at his record: He organized the Vanderbilt trustees (or assisted in doing so) into a fighting body and backed them up; and, now on top of this, comes his effort to wipe out the Southern Methodist Church by this proposed merger.” The editor was refereeing to Hendrix’s role in a prolonged legal battle between the Vanderbilt University board of trustees and the MECS College of Bishops. For over a decade, Vanderbilt’s Chancellor Kirkland and the trustees attempted to gain autonomy from the bishops, who held a veto power over the board. Bishop Hendrix was in a precarious position, as he was president of the trustees. When the College of Bishops filed suit against the board of trustees in the Tennessee State Supreme Court, Hendrix resigned from the board and refused to support his fellow bishops. In 1914, the court ruled in favor of the trustees and southern Methodism lost control of its primary educational institution. Because Eugene Hendrix was the only bishop to abstain from the fight against Chancellor Kirkland, most of his colleagues saw him as a traitor to southern Methodism. This betrayal created permanent animosity among most of the southern bishops toward Eugene Hendrix. Needless to say, the bishop’s actions at Saratoga Springs only exacerbated the personal hostility.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Address of Eugene Russell Hendrix to Board of Conference Claimants*, 11-12; “The Climax,” *NOLACA* (June 29, 1916): 3.

<sup>47</sup> Robert A. Meek to Warren Candler, May 31, 1916, Candler Papers, Box 33, Folder 8. “Shall We Appoint Professors to Vanderbilt,” *NOLACA* (September 17, 1914): 8; Elijah Embree Hoss “A False Doctrine Exploded,” *NOLACA* (October 15, 1914): 2. Edwin Mims, *History of Vanderbilt University* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1946), 291-318. Mark K. Bauman, *Warren Akin Candler: The Conservative as Idealist* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press,

Beginning in the summer of 1916, Hendrix's actions at Saratoga Springs spurred a division in southern Methodism. Just months before Hendrix's highly controversial 1916 pension speech, John M. Moore received little public criticism for endorsing a supreme General Conference. Even when Moore strayed from southern orthodoxy, his brethren embraced him for his apparently agreeable personality. However, when the senior bishop publicly rendered the MECS episcopal office a trivial matter, southern Methodists confronted a visible sign of dissent within their church. The MECS had weathered its share of internal disputes, including the Vanderbilt crisis, but the church had remained, at least publicly, opposed to organic union with a supreme General Conference. Over the course of unification debates, southern Methodists confronted increasing proponents who believed a more democratic polity was the only way to confront the challenges of modernity.

Initially, southern opponents to unification reacted differently to Hendrix's speech. Some clerics wanted to wait before they denounced the bishop, while others jumped on the opportunity to proclaim unification an impossible and damnable task. Robert A. Meek, the passionately conservative editor of the *New Orleans Christian Advocate*, was one such individual who believed southern Methodism was incompatible with the modern and politicized Methodist Episcopal Church. Two weeks after Hendrix's Saratoga Springs address, Meek sat in his office on the corner of Poydras and Camp Streets. The young editor complained about the

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1981), 101-108. John O. Gross, "The Bishops Versus Vanderbilt University," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 12 (March 1963): 53-65. Robert Watson Sledge, *Hands on the Ark The Struggle for Change in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1914-1939* (Lake Junaluska, N.C.: Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church, 1972), 30-37. Warren Candler confided that "the pro-Vanderbilt men are advocating [union]. This is very natural in them, for they wish to get from under the odium of having stolen the church's university." Quoted in letter from Warren Candler to J. A. Harmon, June 6, 1916, Candler Papers, Box 34, Folder 1.



unseasonable humidity as he pounded on his manual typewriter. Since Meek had received word about Bishop Hendrix's support of organic union, he had publicly criticized the bishop's actions in his editorials. Even MECS Bishop Warren Akin Candler, no friend to the unification stalwarts, worried that Meek's vituperative commentaries would exacerbate internal conflict within southern Methodism. Ever the old-fashioned gentleman parson, Candler scolded Meek for attacking a fellow southern bishop and encouraged him to wait until a clearer picture of Hendrix's motivation could be established. Meek, however, did not take Candler's remarks to heart. In his reply, the editor defended himself. "I have no apologies to make for my strictures upon his [Eugene Russell Hendrix's] course. He deserved all and more than I gave him. As I see it, it is no time for a *circuitous and hesitant* method of opposition to be adopted." Meek complained that Bishop Hendrix was currently dominating the MECS College of Bishops, and he accused Candler of permitting the situation. "It has always seemed to me *that you* have specially endeavored to protect this characterless man who unfortunately happened to be elected one of our chief pastors." The editor warned Candler that "Hendrix has not hesitated to speak and is trying to rush us pell-mell into a joint General Conference." Meek wondered why Candler had judged it "harmful to call attention to the donkeyishness of Southern Methodism's betrayer." In conclusion, the editor told Bishop Candler he had resolved "to fight this union movement; which, in my opinion, threatens the disruption of our Church and menaces social conditions in the South, to the full extent of my ability, sparing no one who I think deserves criticism, *no matter how high the place he holds.*"<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Robert A. Meek to Warren Candler, May 30, 1916, Candler Papers, Box 33, Folder 8. I have chosen to rely on the *New Orleans Christian Advocate* to narrate southern Methodists backlash against Bishop Hendrix and the broader opposition to union. Previous studies have used the larger *Nashville Advocate* to contextualize southern opinion. However, the editor of the Nashville edition, Thomas N. Ivey, was favorable to union and supported Eugene Russell

Robert Meek's reactionary criticism was tempered by more measured appraisals of Bishop Hendrix. Just as Bishop Candler cautioned against emotional attacks, other MECS leaders assumed the situation was more complicated than Meek's editorials indicated. They too were concerned that an internal schism might permanently hurt the church. E. G. B. Mann, editor of the Louisville based *Central Methodist*, suspected the whole situation was a "Yankee trick." For Mann, Hendrix was less a rebel against southern Methodism and more a "stalking horse" for the MEC. He portrayed northern Methodists as skillful political actors who had "switched the plan around to suit their ideas of 'Hamiltonian Federalism.'" Dying from cancer, another southern Bishop Alpheus W. Wilson, was still lucid enough to confirm Mann's beliefs. "This is an evident purpose on the part of our Northern Methodist brethren to try to put through their scheme with haste and hurrah." Wilson suggested that the MEC "used Bishop Hendrix to promote this tide of blind sentimentality through which they hope to sweep us into unqualified organic union, or else make a division in our church to take advantage of that division to get as large a part of our members as possible."<sup>49</sup>

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Hendrix throughout the Vanderbilt affair. Warren Candler observed that "Our dear brother Ivey shows more and more that he is for unqualified organic union. I think he and Dr. John Moore are headed for *union at any price*." Warren Candler to A. J. Lamar, August 12, 1916, Box 43, Folder 8. Thus, the *Nashville Advocate* represented a moderate position and only occasionally gives historians a sense of southern opposition. The *New Orleans Christian Advocate* was distributed over a relatively small region of Louisiana and southern Mississippi, but the editor Robert A. Meek was undoubtedly the staunchest opponent of reunification. One example of Meek's attacks on the *Nashville Advocate* accused one cleric of "yield[ing] to the seductions of the editor of the *Nashville Christian Advocate* and join[ing] him in imperiling the vital interest of Southern Methodism." Quoted in "Dr. Chappell and Union," *NOLACA* (July 20, 1916): 5.

<sup>49</sup> E. G. B. Mann to Warren Candler, May 31, 1916, Candler Papers, Box 33, Folder 8; Alpheus W. Wilson to Warren Candler, June 1, 1916, Box 34, Folder 1. C. D. Harris, *Alpheus W. Wilson: A Prince in Israel* (Louisville: Board of Church Extension of the M. E. Church, South, 1918).

The suspicion that northern Methodists were maliciously seeking to absorb southern Methodism quickly spread among southern leaders. Just days after he accused Robert Meek of overstepping his editorial reach, Candler was swept into the frenzy. Having conversed with other clerics, Candler now suspected the MEC scheme “proposed to break up the South into several sections. They have built up the bee hives, and now they are undertaking to hive as many bees into them as possible.” Candler’s prediction could have been uttered by a folksy politician, but for him the situation was no joking matter. Having spent much of his career criticizing the northern Methodists presence in Dixie, Candler truly believed northern Methodists were trying to bring southern Methodists into their membership. After Hendrix’s bold stance against a supreme episcopacy, it was clear that a group of southern Methodists hoped to eliminate the College of Bishop’s veto power. Candler believed southerners were united, but ominously warned that “quietly, Bishop Hendrix, John Mott, and John M. Moore and others will seek to promote it. It will divide Methodism in the South if not destroy it, and it will weaken all religion in this section of the country. It is a Trojan horse full of evil.” Comparing the impending Joint Commission on Unification’s negotiations to the Civil War, Candler warned, “we shall have war-fare ecclesiastical like the war fare which prevailed in East Tennessee during the war. Strife will reign, Methodism will waver, and the sum of Christianity in the South will be less than before. May God save us!”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Candler to J. A. Harmon, June 5, 1916, Box 34, Folder 1; Candler to A. J. Lamar, June 3, 1916, Box 34, Folder 1. Though church warfare never erupted in East Tennessee, one Knoxville Methodist challenged Bishop Candler’s assumptions. P. L. Cobb pleaded, “Please for our sake here on the border, stretch up a link or two and hook up the two Methodisms arrayed all over this country with altar against altar.” Knoxville was contested territory during the Civil War, but Cobb believed “there will be no trouble here on the border unless some of the men living in the past bring it on.” Quoted in letter from P. L. Cobb to Warren Candler, August 23, 1916, Box 34, Folder 9.

Warren Candler and his allies clung to the traditional southern Methodist polity. Whether they believed Bishop Hendrix abused his power or that he was simply a victim of the northern Methodist “scheme,” the southern Methodist opposition believed a democratic church was more susceptible to rapid change and the sentiment of the masses. Southerners argued that the schism of 1844 had resulted from an emotional and thoughtless appeal from laymen. As such MECS leaders contended a centralized leadership, one capable of making informed and rational decisions, was better equipped to lead American Methodism than a democratic lay-oriented General Conference. W. D. Bradfield, editor of the *Texas Christian Advocate*, observed that the MEC “proposed to put in the hands of the General Conference the legislative, judicial, and execute power, and this is to be unrestrained by any constitutional limitations. Upon that very issue we separated in 1844, and there is greater reason to decline union on such a basis now than there was to separate from them in 1844.” Bishop Elijah Embree Hoss who had spearheaded the MECS lawsuit against Vanderbilt’s trustees, seconded this observation. Frustrated by northerners refusal to compromise the supreme General Conference, Hoss exclaimed, “Talk about making up the past! They have gone back to 1844, dug up the most offensive feature of Hamlinism, and ‘recommended’ it as a chief cornerstone of the reorganized church.” Hoss was referring to Leonidas Hamline, an ardent opponent of slavery who wrote the plan of separation in 1844. The bishop concluded that “the plan for union proposed to us is simple, as little to be tolerated as a Congress of one House having also the functions of the Supreme Court and the President. We cannot accept it. The suggestion of the supreme General Conference is like asking us to put Hamline’s speech into the law.” For southern opponents, a reunited church

necessarily needed protection for white representation, but any plan of union also needed to accommodate the episcopal authority which had been a cornerstone of MECS polity.<sup>51</sup>

Northern Methodists showed little willingness to compromise to their southern brethren's requests. On the contrary, they continued to democratize their church polity. While southern Methodists tended to avoid meddling in secular politics, the MEC leadership frequently made political statements in their General Conference proceedings. In step with secular political progressives, the 1916 MEC General Conference voted overwhelmingly in favor of a proclamation supporting women's suffrage. This action only exacerbated southern whites' suspicions of northern Methodists, who they believed were harming, rather than improving the church. When southerners heard of northern Methodists' support of women's suffrage, they incorporated it into their fight against union. The historical circumstances of the 1844 schism served as a convenient way for southern whites to legitimize their fear of unequal representation, but suffrage raised a deeper question about *who* would be represented in the General Conference. Commenting on the issue, one southern Methodist grumbled that his northern brethren were "injecting into their proceedings a political issue and adopting the measure which means the enfranchisement of the negro women of the South, and with it the inevitable consequences of evil." As a result, the northern Methodists "come dangerously near approving Color unionism. With the unrestrained General Conference and a disposition to adopt measures like these they would run over the Southern people roughshod. They propose also that the Negro Conferences shall be represented in the General Conference, and thus legislate for the whole church. Among

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<sup>51</sup> W. D. Bradfield to Candler, June 2, 1916, Box 34, Folder 1; E. E. Hoss to Candler, August 29, 1916, Box 34, Folder 9. See also "Saratoga Scheme Would Be Ruinous," *NOLACA* (June 15, 1916): 6. "Shall the Church Be Reduced to a Province?" *NCA* (November 10, 1916): 7-8. "Unification-The Two Issues Upon Which It Hinges," *NCA* (June 20, 1919): 22-23.

the negroes would be negro women delegates, and they would be legislating for Southern Methodists. Does any sane man suppose for a minute our people would stand for that?" Another southern cleric confided that "I do not believe it best for the negro to advance him too far along any line of equality. I would give him a limited relationship in the General Conference, possibly granting him the right of a seat and speech, but not a vote."<sup>52</sup>

While all southern whites opposed black voting rights, there were some Methodists who warned against racial exclusivity. These moderates believed that southern Methodism had been controlled by a powerful minority, who perpetuated the churches' white supremacist establishment and traditional autocratic polity. S. H. Werlein, senior pastor of First MECS, New Orleans and a proponent of unification, offered a critique of his fellow southern brethren. Werlein believed that "a respectable and influential minority in the Southern Church have declared they will resist union unless the negro withdraws or is removed from the Methodist Episcopal Church. They are taking the position that the Southern Methodist Church is exclusively a white man's church." Though the prominent New Orleans cleric realized an African American presence in the General Conference was unacceptable for southern whites, Werlein confided that he personally "[has] no fear that if the negro is allowed to be a part of the new organizational representation he will not be any more offensive to the Southern section than he is to the Methodist Episcopal Church now." Another southern Methodist echoed Werlein's sentiment. Commenting on southern white's anxiety that "the negro would have too much

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<sup>52</sup> W. D. Bradfield to Candler, June 2, 1916, Box 34, Folder 1. See also "The Unification of American Methodism," *NCA* (July 6, 1916): 2. T. D. Ellis to Candler, November 16, 1916. George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). *Hands on the Ark*, 138-164. Donald G. Matthews, "Christianizing the South: Sketching a Synthesis," in *New Directions in American Religious History*, eds. D. G. Hart and Harry S. Stout (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 84-115.

political and social power in the General Conference,” he asked, “Is there any ground in history for such anxiety? After fifty years of citizenship how large a place does the negro fill in Congress? There are many eloquent negro preachers: are any of them settled over a white congregation?” In line with these dissenting voices, John M. Moore lamented the racism which pervaded southern Methodism. He wrote: “the anti-unificationists lay much store by the negro as the one unfailing hope of defeating this great movement. If only the people can be made to believe that their white churches will soon be overrun with negroes and that negroes will be dictating the laws for the white conferences, then of course all is up with unification, for Southern people will declare secession from Methodism before they submit to such a unification. Would it not be a pity, yea, a shame, even a blot upon the reputation for intelligence if good people were to allow themselves to be hoodwinked into such absolutely false views?”<sup>53</sup>

Moderate southern Methodists also challenged the tradition of the episcopal authority. Throughout the Joint Commission on Unification’s proceedings, northern Methodists refused to grant southern bishops a veto over the General Conference. Northern Methodists reasoned that regional jurisdictions were a sufficient protective measure and would allow southerners to elect

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<sup>53</sup> “The Question of Unification,” *NCA* (October 12, 1917): 14-15; Karl P. Harrington, “Unification And The Negro,” *The Methodist Quarterly Review*, 68 (July, 1919): 470; “Objections to Plan of Unification Reviewed,” *NCA* (April 9, 1920): 14-15. Another moderate southerner wrote: “As to the Negro, we are in danger of feeding the fires of racial prejudice on the fuel of sectional hate. It must be repeated and reiterated with the utmost emphasis that the Negro needs our help and we need to help him, and that he, better than we, can suffer the wrong of neglect. The final test of Christian character is the attitude of the strong toward the weak.” Quoted in “Unification Will Not Let Us Alone,” *NCA* (April 12, 1918): 398. See also Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 231-245. New Orleans had a concentration of MEC and MECS congregations, but it appears both regional churches desired unification. Robert Meek commented: “Poor Louisiana! We have had no loyal men in our leading pulpits in New Orleans in so long that our laymen have largely been weaned from our church. Werlein had to blow off publicly on church union at the Millsaps [College] Commencement. It did not elicit a single clap, however.” Quoted in letter from R. A. Meek to Warren Candler, June 14, 1916, Box 34, Folder 2.

their own bishops and maintain power over all regional affairs. The Joint Commission's final plan also included a "judicial council." Usually compared to a supreme court, the council would serve as a check on the powers of the General Conference and the College of Bishops. Though the MEC had established its own judicial council in the nineteenth century, they used it as a one way to appeal to southern whites' fear of absorption. To southerners still unsure of the General Conference's role, John Moore argued forcefully against their rejections of the plan. "To say that the General Conference has been Hamlinized is to speak in illusive terms. Hamline's ghost has been made to stalk across the stage so often that it no longer produces a thrill or excites fear. Neither Hamline or Soule can control modern Methodist polity. The discussion in both churches of the powers of the General Conference, and the unified and diverse executive have come to the fore, not because of negotiations for unification, but because of the present temper of the church." Moore suggested that southerners perceptions of episcopal authority were blurred by their near obsession with tradition. While the early years of Methodism had been defined by a centralized College of Bishop, Moore believed the General Conference had essentially trumped the episcopacy by the early twentieth century. Where northern Methodists had recognized and embraced this democratic impulse, southern Methodists ignored it and reiterated their supposedly orthodox polity. The MECS propagated the *idea* of episcopal authority, but Moore suggested the General Conference had essentially trumped episcopal oversight in the MECS by the early twentieth century. Moore wrote: "The General Conferences have carved out of the large executive domain once supervised, if not controlled, by the bishops large territories and erected them into departments, with boards in control; and today neither church has a unified executive." Moore's critics rightly suggested this reasoning was not well founded. Concerned with modernizing southern Methodism, Moore's argument did not engage the sophisticated history of



MECS polity. Rather, he approached the matter through the contemporary leadership issues facing the church.<sup>54</sup>

One particularly salient crisis facing American Protestantism was the nation's entrance into World War One. As the Joint Commission met to deliberate a path toward unification, the United States entered the war in Europe. The commission frequently addressed the issue of American democracy, and for southern Methodists this meant a sometimes sobering analysis of their ecclesiastical leadership. Fortunately, for John Moore and his allies, the war lent support to the efforts to modernize southern Methodist polity. One of Moore's colleagues pleaded with his southern brethren on the Joint Commission to remember the threat of war on American religious life. "Episcopal Methodism in America ought to be able to present a united front at this great crisis in the world's history. The tragic cataclysm we are witnessing is breaking up the social and economic structures which we have been slowly building. Social life in all its manifold aspects will have to be reorganized when this war is over. The big question for our country is: What are to be the dominating forces in this reorganization?" Another southern cleric contended

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<sup>54</sup> "Objections to the Plan of Unification Reviewed," *NCA* (April 9, 1920): 15. Charles Battle, senior pastor of First MECS Baton Rouge, offered a blistering critique of John Moore's opinions on the episcopacy. "In northern Methodism the General Conference may guide the destiny of affairs largely as it pleases, while in Southern Methodism the bishops have been made the overseers of 'spiritual and temporal affairs of the church.' Bishop Moore has sounded a revolutionary note in the southern church when he attempts to place the episcopacy and the general secretaries of the various boards upon a practical parity. If Bishop Moore could carry his ideas of the episcopacy into effect, he would violently transgress the past and present spirit and purpose of the law of the church." Quoted in "Bishop Moore and the Episcopacy," *NCA* (February 4, 1921): 8. Robert Meek commented on Moore's advocacy of a supreme General Conference, "...sounds very much as if he were the Pope of Southern Methodism and that things will go as he says. If we are to have a Pope, I hope he will be of a larger intellectual and spiritual mold than Doctor Moore. Oh, how weary I am of the assumed leadership of such men as Moore and company!" Meek to Candler, August 24, 1917, Box 37, Folder 9. Another MECS cleric complained about Moore. "It has been a mystery to me how Brother John M. Moore [has] come to be leader in our church. I have known Moore since he began his career. He is wooden-headed and ambitious, completely impracticable." John W. Lee to Candler, December 31, 1917, Box 38, Folder 9.

that “Despotisms, autocracies, oligarchies, even benevolently exercised, have prevented the people from feeling their own responsibility; and without responsibility people do not develop either character or interest.” Concerning the episcopal office, he admitted “we have certainly saved our system. No doubt of that. But we have almost certainly lost our people; and the great business of Methodism is not to develop and save a system of church government. Our great business has been to save and develop a people.” Though he did not call for a complete overthrow of the episcopacy, the southern cleric sarcastically noted “that the incumbents of an office (bishops) may be counted on to contend for its perpetuity, and are generally the least competent judges of what should be done to the office or to its holder.” Another southern critic was more candid and accused southern bishops of amassing too much power. “There are certain changes and clarifications needed in our polity. Our episcopacy needs to be set free from the trammels of a tyrannical traditionalism not sanctioned by the ideals or practices of the great fathers of American Methodism. We need to rediscover the ideals of primitive American Methodism as to the episcopacy and at the same time to modernize the office by defining its functions more clearly and by marking out its sphere of service and obligation.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Joint Commission on Unification, *Proceedings II*, 212; “Why Democratize the Church,” *NCA* (November 16, 1917): 14; “The Immediate Future of the Church,” *NCA* (December 3, 1920): 11. For other articles favorable to a more democratic polity see “The Larger Lay Activity,” *NCA* (March 30, 1917): 2-3. “A Plea for Unification,” *NCA* (April 12, 1918): 399. “The Democratization of the Church,” *NCA* (September 28, 1917): 18. “Some Needed Changes in Our Episcopacy,” *NCA* (September 28, 1917): 6-7. “The Mind of the Church Concerning Episcopacy,” *NCA* (April 16, 1920): 8-10. For articles rejecting the supreme General Conference see “If a Bishop Has Any Right to Speak,” *NCA* (October 19, 1917): 8-9. “Democracy and Authority,” *Alabama Christian Advocate* (Birmingham, July 18, 1921): 4. “Episcopal Methodism and Its Triumphs,” and “The ‘Address’ of the Laymen” *NCA* (October 12, 1917): 8-9, 15. “Legislative Suggestions,” *NCA* (April 12, 1918): 399. For articles on World War One and the democratization of the church see “Making Democracy Safe,” *NCA* (April 11, 1919): 9-10. “The American Nation and International Responsibility,” *NCA* (August 20, 1920): 8-9. “The Great War: The Church’s Unpreparedness and How It Should Be Met,” *NCA* (March

While these southern Methodists recognized a need to modernize the church after the Great War, Robert A. Meek sought to preserve southern Methodist tradition. Fearful of a progressive social gospel, democratic leadership, and interracial Christianity, Meek believed any further negotiations toward union would result in the destruction of southern Methodist orthodoxy. “As I see it, the skies are darkening above our beloved Southland, with a political party being organized to enfranchise the Negroes, with the woman suffrage amendment being pressed, with the talk that is in the air about the government ownership of railroads, and with the certainty that many Negro soldiers will soon be coming back into the Southern States, the outlook is far from being reassuring. It certainly does not seem to me to be a time when Southern Methodists can afford to break with the ideals of Southern people and deliver our Church into the hands of the Northern Methodists.” The stakes were high for Meek and Candler. While John Moore cast reunification as a positive advancement for the South and a return to the spirited origins of American Methodism, Meek saw the movement as nothing short of evil.<sup>56</sup>

Northern whites never suffered the same internal schism as their southern brethren. From their acceptance of a racially segregated jurisdiction at the 1916 General Conference, through the entire Joint Commission’s proceedings, northern whites never compromised their concern for African Americans. There was certainly a small minority of clerics who opposed the African American jurisdiction, arguing that it drew the color line into church polity. Still, the MEC consistently defended “organic” relations with black Methodists throughout the Joint Commission’s negotiations, and they never entertained the idea of “fraternal” interracial relations. Instead of compromising their commitment to African Americans, northern

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21, 1919): 8-9. “Methodism Dying at Its Own Altar,” *NCA* (February 25, 1921): 8-9. See also Sledge, *Hands on the Ark*, 124-132.

<sup>56</sup> R. A. Meek to Candler, March 13, 1918, Box 39, Folder 6.

Methodists took decisive action to elevate black Methodists stature in the church. In 1920 the MEC elected Robert Elijah Jones and his black colleague Matthew Wesley Clair to the episcopal office. Though the two African American bishops only oversaw the voluntarily segregated all black conferences, they still had full rights in the MEC General Conference. Both Bishops Jones and Clair were paid the same salary as their white colleagues and they were permitted to preside over sessions of the northern Methodist General Conference. The same year Jones and Clair were elected to the episcopacy, the MEC also changed the name of the Freedmen's Aid Society to the Board of Education for Negroes. Nearly six decades after emancipation, many blacks believed the word "freedmen" an outdated word to describe their role in American Methodism. This measure was both a sign of black's changing racial attitudes and northern white Methodist's continued interest in racial uplift. Finally, in reaction to Robert E. Jones complaint of being segregated at a meeting in Michigan, the 1928 MEC General Conference passed a resolution which prohibited the church from meeting in segregated venues. Though black annual conferences were still segregated in the deep South, the General Conference would remain integrated.<sup>57</sup>

Though Wilbur Thirkield was skeptical of his brethren's endorsement of a racially segregated jurisdiction, he also realized the need to both protect and empower his black brothers. On one such instance, Bishop Thirkield took the liberty of stopping by Robert Meek's New Orleans office. Meek and Charles A. Battle, senior pastor of First MECS, Baton Rouge, were

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<sup>57</sup> Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow*, 109-111. Jones had been pushing for black episcopal representation for several years. As early as 1912 he suggested the best path toward racial harmony was the appointment of a black bishop who would only exercise authority over black Methodists. He warned: "The next fifteen years shall determine the status of the Negro for the next two hundred years. Shall the radicalism and oppression and tyranny of men like Vardaman, Tillman, Dixon and other men of their kind succeed?" "Representation of Our Colored Membership in the Episcopacy-The Why and How," *SWCA* (March 14, 1912): 1, 8-9.

sitting in the office discussing how to combat pro-union sentiments in the MECS, when Thirkield knocked on the door. The conversation that followed was likely awkward, as Meek and Battle detested the liberal Yankee bishop's prominence in the Crescent City. Conveying his support for organic union, Thirkield expressed concern that the proposed plan would only incorporate black Methodists belonging to MEC congregations. Though his primary concern rested with his black brothers in the MEC, Thirkield worried about those blacks who had been forced out of southern Methodism. He suggested to Meek and Battle that southern whites, for the sake of alleviating obvious white supremacy, eliminate the "fraternal" Colored Methodist Episcopal church and merge black southern Methodists into the segregated jurisdiction of the reunited church. The bishop reasoned that bringing blacks outside the northern Methodist membership into an organic reunion was one way to expand the African American presence in Methodism. Over the course of his ministry, Thirkield had witnessed the demise of Reconstruction-era interracial churches. As Jim Crow swept across the South, the ideology and practical application of racial uplift necessarily changed to conform to institutionalized racial segregation. And, while Thirkield did not wholly lend support to a segregated jurisdiction, he surely rejected the white supremacy of southern Methodism. He and his colleagues never gave the impression that they would compromise the plight of black Methodists for the sake of union. If anything, northern whites pressured their southern brothers to accept a reunion that would encourage more blacks to enter the membership and leadership of American Methodism. Needless to say, Robert Meek and Charles Battle patiently heard the bishop's plea, but his preaching fell on deaf ears. Most southern white Methodists could hardly imagine an interracial Methodism.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *NOLACA* (June 15, 1916): 9. The article on Thirkield's visit to Meek's office has no

Wilbur Thirkiel's black colleague in New Orleans found himself, once again, in a precarious situation. Robert Elijah Jones had always accepted the desirability of racially segregated congregations. When rumors of black domination in the General Conference whipped southern whites into an emotional frenzy, Jones was forced to defend himself and black Methodists against complete segregation in an organic union. In response to Robert Meek's ranting editorials on the supposed evils of black representation, Jones replied that "there is one thing that all our friends can count upon: the Negro will not accept any exclusion from the general law making body of the church and if union comes, and we pray that it may, it will come with the right of the Negro preserved." Jones' black colleague, I. Garland Penn, appealed directly to Bishop Warren Candler. Frustrated by southern white's stereotype of black inferiority, Penn was "much chagrined over the persistent attempt to prove that the colored people in the Methodist Episcopal Church as compared with the distinctively Negro Methodist Churches, have not made numerical progress equal to theirs." He suggested southern Methodists incorrectly intimated MEC blacks as "so miserably dependent, we ought to agree to anything that is proposed as to our place in the reunited church." Penn offered to write an article against such

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title, but is under the heading "church news." The article is unsigned, but was written by Charles A. Battle of Baton Rouge. Meek commented on the article. "That was a good shot Battle gave Bishop Thirkiel. He is a fine young fellow." R. A. Meek to Candler, June 17, 1916, Box 34, Folder 6. In 1918 Charles Battle and the Board of Stewards at First MECS, Baton Rouge Stewards passed a four-page resolution against unification, specifically warning against black representation and the reduced power of the episcopacy. "The tentative constitution leaves the Negro in the church and gives him vital hold upon the machinery of the new organization. This is the reverse of the policy any church of much size operating in the South, for it is a well-known fact that no partly Negro-governed organization could ever hope to thrive among the white people of any section where the Negro race is largely represented. The tentative constitution means that everything stood for since 1844 by the Fathers of Southern Methodism is to be thrown to the forewinds; the Bishops may be removed from office at the whim of the General Conference (and to this office our church is practically indebted for its existence); and the Bishops are no longer to constitute the Judiciary of the church, which office they have filled so fairly and satisfactorily in Southern Methodism in the past." FMC Board of Stewards Meeting, Minutes, March 4, 1918, in *Minutes of the Board of Stewards*, 25, FUMC Archives.

“unfounded” claims. Like Robert Jones, he warned against hinging the unification debates solely on the role of black Methodists. “Our colored people in the [MEC] have had enough to undergo in keeping themselves steady without break, while being discussed as the “crux” of the Unification question. They shall not at the same time be victims of an argument of a humiliating character, which is not supported by indisputable facts.”<sup>59</sup>

Where Jones conceded the color line at the local parish, he forcefully defended black voting rights in the General Conference. Jones’ position was supported by most whites in the MEC. Northern Methodists had urged organic interracial contact in the local parish in the nineteenth century. Yet, beginning in the twentieth century, with the consent of black leadership, they willingly conceded segregation at the congregational level. This did not reflect an increasing racism among northern whites or indifference toward black Methodists. Rather, there was a generational change and an accompanying ideological shift. The quixotic missionary zeal of the post-Reconstruction era simply lost momentum as other pressing issues weighed on northern Methodist’s moral conscience. When negotiating reunion with southerners, MEC blacks and whites agreed that a segregated jurisdiction, with full black representation in the General Conference, was a suitable arrangement for both races.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> “As to the Negro in the Methodist Episcopal Church,” *SWCA*(July 20, 1916): 1; I. Garland Penn to Candler, March 30, 1918, Box 39, Folder 7. It should be noted that I. Garland Penn, like Robert Jones, was a firm supporter of Booker Washington. Penn worked closely with Washington and served in 1895 as the chairman for the Negro Exhibition at the Atlanta Exposition. He later became a corresponding secretary for the Freedmen’s Aid Society. For more on Penn’s career as a racial reformer see Alessandra Lorini, *Rituals of Race: American Public Culture and the Search for Racial Democracy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999).

<sup>60</sup> James Bennett contends that the MEC marginalized African Americans as Jim Crow segregation swept across the South. Bennett correctly traces the demise of idealistic interracial contact which prevailed during Reconstruction. While the institutionalization of Jim Crow was

After the 1916 MEC General Conference amended and adopted the Joint Commission on Federation's "suggestions" for union, southern Methodists had two options. They could either completely withdraw from negotiations, or they could attempt to find a reasonable compromise that would not result in a complete absorption of southern representation. Extremists like Robert Meek believed Bishop Eugene Hendrix's betrayal signaled a foretaste of things to come and sought to prevent any further division within the southern church. If Meek's prayers were answered, the MECS would halt reunification talks and preserve the insular MECS from progressive unification supporters. Yet, his prayers went unanswered; southern Methodists decided to continue reunification talks. Because pro-unification sentiment seemed to be growing among southerners, conservatives like Warren Akin Candler, thought ending negotiations would only further divide southern Methodists. And, because anti-unification voices still outnumbered progressives like John M. Moore, Candler and his allies assumed they could defeat the MEC scheme.<sup>61</sup>

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certainly tragic, this account does not fully ponder how changing white and black racial attitudes shaped MEC polity. Moreover, historians must consider that the MEC white membership was concentrated in the North. Until the great black migration after World War One, most MEC blacks lived in the South, where laws and social customs necessitated the shift toward racial segregation. As such, racial segregation in southern MEC congregations was motivated as much by local secular customs as by northern white Methodist's racial attitudes. Future scholarship should situate MEC congregations *within* the culture of racial segregation, not as insulated interracial bastions. Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow*, 101-135. For a comprehensive account of the black religious experience during the great migration see Milton C. Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>61</sup> There were, of course, some MECS clerics who threatened to leave Methodism altogether. S. A. Steel wrote that he would "stay with the old Southern ship as long as she floats; but neither [Bishops] Mouzon, nor Cannon, nor Moore, nor all of them together... can drag me on the Northern ship. One Episcopal Bishop has promised me I shall have a job the day I will



Between 1916 and 1920 the responsibility for transforming the Joint Commission of Federation's "suggestions" into a final plan of union was delegated to the Joint Commission on Unification. This body included bishops, clergy, and laymen from the northern and southern Methodists. The body met six times over the course of its existence, where commissioners debated a proper course for organic union. Though private correspondence revealed bitter hostilities and rivalries amongst some clergymen, these public debates were almost always cordial. Hymn singing, lengthy prayers, and a spirit of Christian brotherhood prevailed.<sup>62</sup>

Several scholars have quoted lengthy passages of one of the most doggedly racist speeches given in the unification negotiations. In 1918 H. H. White, an attorney and judge from Alexandria, Louisiana, gave a cold appraisal of the prospects for union at a Joint Commission meeting in Savannah, Georgia. Like most southern whites, Judge White argued in favor of complete Jim Crow segregation. Though other southern clerics explained their views in well-reasoned and tempered discourses, White was more candid. He bluntly asserted that "the color line must be drawn firmly and unflinchingly, in state, church, and society, without any deviation whatever; and no matter what the virtues, abilities, or accomplishments of individuals may be, there must be absolute separation of social relations." Even if African Americans were able to rise through society, White disregarded their ability to serve in ecclesiastical leadership positions

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take it; and the Lord knows I would rather wear a surplice than contract the disease of Lincolnitis, which is a part of the Northern Methodist religion." Sledge, *Hands on the Ark*, 94.

<sup>62</sup> The subject of Morris Davis' scholarship analyzes the Joint Commission's three volume printed proceedings. Davis, by his own admission, takes an anthropological interpretation. His analysis is the only full length study of the Joint Commission on Unification and focuses on how Methodists discussed race and nationality. Ultimately, he concludes their discourse provides insight into America's racial, religious, and national identity. This approach never answers how southern Methodists accepted a supreme General Conference with black representation. Relying primarily on the *Proceedings*, his interpretations do not take advantage of the substantial private correspondence.

alongside their white brethren. Alluding to secular politics, the judge predicted that “just as the presence of the negro was obnoxious to southern white men at the polls, and just as he has been an element of uncertainty and weakness in the General Conference of the Northern Church, so will he unceasingly and in increasing ratio become a source of disquietude and danger in the [MEC] as his number increases.” In conclusion, White uttered words that rippled through the church presses. “The only way in which a union of the northern and southern churches can be brought about will be by the immediate or gradual elimination of the negro membership.”<sup>63</sup>

Judge White infuriated most northerners, who saw his explanation as unfounded racism. However, the day after H. H. White’s presentation, Robert Elijah Jones seemingly validated, indeed insisted, on the same firm implementation of the color line. “As a negro, yesterday was a revelation to me and a real joy,” he told his fellow commissioners. “I enjoyed Judge White’s speech, really I did. I did not agree with all he said, but I enjoyed it. I understand you, Judge, and you understand me, and there is something about your humor and directness that I honestly like.” Perhaps impulsively acting out the rituals of Jim Crow, Bishop Jones politely bowed to his white brethren’s superiority. Though he still accommodated, even humanized, racial

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<sup>63</sup> Joint Commission, *Proceedings vol. 2*, 137-139. Judge White tended to explain church polity through his own legal experience. In one instance, he said “I was a member of the Constitution Convention of Louisiana which gave whites the right to control the state. I belong to the class of white men who believe that the relations of the races should be governed, and are occasioned, by race differences rather than by matters of racial caste. I have not been able to persuade myself that they ought to have been admitted into partnership in the political government of the country, or that it would be wise to give them such position in the church.” Quoted in Joint Commission, *Proceedings, vol. 2*, 139-140. Morris Davis suggests White’s “*explicit* [italics mine] language of white supremacy set him apart and complicated the negotiations for everyone.” Yet, Davis provides no further explanation of southerner’s reactions to White’s dogged racism. Bishop Candler’s correspondence reveals that some southern Methodist clerics were startled by White’s speech and believed he could not possibly believe what he said. R. A. Meek confided: “I do not think that Judge White is anything like as firm in his attitude as he was when he went to Savannah (This is confidential).” R. A. Meek to Candler, February 8, 1918, Box 39, Folder 3.

segregation, Jones once again warned that “the races are growing apart. It is not my fault.” Like his now deceased friend Booker Washington, the bishop tried to disprove white racial stereotypes of African Americans as inherently shiftless, idle, and immoral. “For twenty-one years in New Orleans I have been doing everything that I knew how to do that there might be peace and good will. I have preached to my people over and over again that it made no difference what a man should do to me; I should hate no man.” For someone who vigorously labored to ease racial hatred, Bishop Jones and his fellow African Americans still faced southern whites’ suspicions of racial equality. He pleaded with his southern white brethren. “Do you think we want social equality? If you do, I will underwrite a contract with you and I will split my veins and sign it in my own blood and we will build a wall so high that no negro can get over it, and so thick that no white man can go through it.” Jones’ pressed his point further. Commenting on one of Robert Meeks’s editorials warning against the “intermixture of the races,” Jones replied, “I say to them that we should drive from our midst any negro woman who sells her virtue to a white man and that sort of thing should cease.” Beyond dispelling white suspicion of racial equality and miscegenation, Jones brought up the issue of African American’s participation in the Great War. “We [African Americans] are at the front fighting, fighting to make a place for the weak nations. May I ask the question, if we colored men are willing to fight that the world may be safe for democracy, will you not make it safe for us? You white men can sleep in peace-our hearts are on the right side. There is no hyphen in my Americanism. I am a true patriot and I love the flag. You made the flag, but the flag made us and we bathed in its lines of red in our own blood and deepened the field blue by our own undivided loyalty. If the Army is to be one Army in America, may there not be one Army of Jesus Christ?”<sup>64</sup>

Robert E. Jones' pleas were successful. Though southern whites showed no sign of compromising the color line at the local parish, the Joint Commission eventually reached a plan that incorporated blacks organically with the white establishment. The commission proposed a plan of union in 1920 with five regional jurisdictions and another separate jurisdiction was reserved for African American and all foreign missionary conferences. The General Conference would have "full legislative power over all matters distinctively connectional," but it could not "change or alter any part or rule of our government so as to do away with episcopacy, or to destroy our itinerant general superintendency." An elected judicial council would have "full power to review upon appeal on constitutional grounds the acts of the General Conference." Finally, each jurisdiction would elect its own bishops, so that white southerners would never have a northern white or African American as a bishop. Where northern Methodists had previously insisted on an interracial "point of contact" in the local congregation, they now shifted organic contact to the quadrennial General Conference. Once the 1920 plan was drafted, it was scheduled for discussion in the MEC and MECS General Conferences.

Upon receiving the plan, the 1922 MEC General Conference heartily supported it and voted overwhelmingly in favor. While many northern whites expressed concern over the presumed weakness of a jurisdictional model, they believed it was one way to appeal to southern white's demands for home rule. However, the 1924 southern Methodist General Conference rejected the plan. Opponents to the plan, particularly Bishops Warren Candler and Collins Denny suggested the whole plan was unconstitutional and broke from traditional Methodist polity. The reduced episcopal authority and the potential for black voting privileges in the

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<sup>64</sup> Joint Commission, *Proceedings II*, 163-165. It should be noted that in one section of his speech, Jones quoted from his Evanston speech. "Now, I state in a sentence the program: *The largest possible contact of the negro with the white man with the largest possible independence of the negro.*" Quoted on p. 165.

General Conference were wholly unacceptable to southern white Methodists. The unification proceedings ended abruptly, and from this point the negotiations toward reunification halted and did not recommence until the 1930s.<sup>65</sup>

Regardless of the stalled negotiations, there were signs that northern and southern whites were making progress toward union. The schism within the MECS, illustrated how a small but vocal contingent of southern Methodists were distancing themselves from an autocratic polity. This democratic impulse proved a formidable threat to opponents of unification, and in the future it would eventually alter the fabric of southern Methodism. A similar but less pronounced democratic impetus among northern Methodists established greater African American leadership and autonomy. The election of Robert E. Jones and Matthew Wesley Clair to the episcopacy in 1920 finally brought African Americans into the highest ranks of the MEC. Though the bishops only oversaw black annual conferences, their presence in the General Conference was a significant advancement in the presence of blacks among the white establishment. When Methodists eventually reconvened unification discussions, this trend toward democratization of church leadership and broad distribution of the ecclesiastical powers would come to the forefront. For the time being, however, both churches waited for another opportunity to begin negotiations anew.

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<sup>65</sup> Moore, *Long Road to Union*, 149-160.

### Chapter Three

Though unification talks ended abruptly in the mid-1920s, supporters of union remained hopeful that the churches might put aside their differences and reunite. Where previous negotiations were spurred by a desire to bind the sectional division wrought by slavery and the Civil War, the Great Depression provided a new and perhaps more practical impetus for union. The bleak economic condition fostered a broad ecumenical movement in the 1930s, which emphasized shared theological beliefs and fostered missionary partnerships between the mainline Protestant denominations. Methodists similarly revived an ecumenical spirit within their churches. In 1931, the sixth World Ecumenical Methodist Conference convened in Atlanta, Georgia, where Bishop John Moore delivered an impassioned speech for unity among American Methodists. Igniting an interest among his peers, Moore worked behind the scenes to reconvene the Joint Commission on Unification. The committee met several times and drafted a plan of union in 1935, which was virtually identical to the 1920 plan. In 1936 whites and blacks passionately debated the issue of racial segregation, but the General Conference eventually accepted the plan. The MEC passed the plan onto their southern brethren, who in 1938 discussed African Americans' voting rights in the General Conference. While some native southern whites still warned of a "Negro invasion," southern Methodists voted overwhelmingly in favor of unification. With both the MEC and MECS approving the plan, the two churches met in 1939 for a final unification ceremony. After nearly a century apart, the two regional Methodisms became The Methodist Church in America.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Carter, *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel*, 183-200. Samuel McCrea Cavert, *The American Churches in the Ecumenical Movement, 1900-1968* (New York: Associated Press, 1968).

The economic depression and ecumenical spirit spurred several different Methodist bodies into considering a form of unification. The AME and AMEZ churches had considered union, but in 1932 abruptly ended their negotiations. That same year, however, the British Wesleyan, Union, and United Methodist churches combined to form the Methodist Church of Great Britain. Fearful of increasing disunity among European political powers, British Methodists believed ecclesiastical unity might lend support to the nation's political solidarity. Back in the United States, the Methodist Protestant Church also expressed interest in rejoining the Methodist Episcopal Church. Barely able to fund its bureaucratic structure, Methodist Protestants were willing to accept an episcopal polity. They resolved in 1932 that, "the differences in the practice of democracy and in methods of administration which existed in 1830 have so changed through the processes of time that there no longer remains any sufficient justification for these two groups of Methodists to be other than one in organization as well as in spirit." Such a pervasive ecumenical spirit lent fervor to the reunification movement in American Methodism.<sup>67</sup>

In October 1931, Methodists from around the world gathered in Atlanta, Georgia for the sixth Ecumenical Methodist Conference. It, like most ecumenical gatherings, was intended to promote the common Wesleyan heritage among Methodists. The event was more a celebration of Wesleyan heritage, than a bureaucratic denominational meeting. Talk of union among American Methodists was largely ignored, although several Methodists found an opportunity to mention reunification. John R. Mott, the founder of the YMCA, delivered an address entitled "The World Task of Methodism." Long a supporter of ecumenical Protestantism, Mott warned

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<sup>67</sup> Dennis Dickerson, "Black Ecumenism: Efforts to Establish a United Methodist Episcopal Church, 1918-1932," *Church History*. No. 4 (Dec., 1983): 479-491. John Kent, *The Age of Disunity* (London: Epworth Press, 1966), 1-43. Moore, *The Long Road to Methodist Union*, 181-184. See also Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 159-184.

of “rising tides of nationalism and racial patriotism,” which he had, “found surging and overlapping the banks in nearly all parts of the world.” Congratulating the coming union of British Methodism, he asked that “God may grant to the still divided bodies of Methodism here in America like leadership, statesmanship, mutual consideration, capacity to sacrifice, and superhuman wisdom, love, and power to effect similar triumphant unity!” For Mott, Methodist unity was not simply a matter of sectional reconciliation, it was also an expression of America’s national religious unity. Mott’s friend John M. Moore echoed the same plea for union. Moore gave an impassioned address, where he praised the democratic impulse of American Methodism. The churches “have demonstrated their sense of freedom by division,” but each branch became “obsessed and dominated by a superiority complex.” Reviewing the history of Methodism since the schism of 1844, Bishop Moore found many reasons to applaud the evangelism of the MEC and MECS. But, he concluded that “Protestantism is suffering badly by reason of its multiplied divisions.” Like John Mott, Moore congratulated British Methodists for uniting, and then he turned his attention to the reunion of American Methodism. He exclaimed, “The cause is no dead; it only sleeps! The lines are all fading out. The spirit of mutual regard, brotherly love, and friendly cooperation now prevails among all these Methodist bodies.”<sup>68</sup>

Moore’s passionate address was well received; the audience jumped to their feet in applause. Though he did not immediately spark a new round of unification talks, Moore’s impressive oratory caught the attention of his colleagues. Several unnamed Methodist Episcopal and Protestant clergymen approached him after his speech and confided their interest in reconvening negotiations. Having learned from their previous failed attempt at union, Moore

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<sup>68</sup> *Proceedings of the Sixth Ecumenical Methodist Conference in Atlanta, Georgia* (Nashville: Lamar and Whitmore, 1932), 223-225, 26-35; “Methodist Unity Receives Impetus,” *NYT* (October 18, 1931): 41; “Unification Plea Widely Applauded By Methodists,” *The Atlanta Constitution* (October 18, 1931): 1, 9.



and his colleagues concealed many of their discussions, so as to avoid further debate in the church press. Supporters of union urged their respective churches to appoint commissioners to a new Joint Commission, and in 1932 the committee met and began legislating a new path toward Methodist union.<sup>69</sup>

In 1935, after four lengthy meetings the new Joint Commission proposed a plan of union, which it intended to send to the ME, MECS, and Methodist Protestant Church for final amendments and approval. The plan was virtually the same as the 1920 plan, and distributed ecclesiastical power among five bodies: the General Conference, jurisdictional conference, annual conference, the judicial council, and the College of Bishops. Moore suggested this arrangement “set up a commonwealth of balancing bodies wherein no one shall be supreme, except in its own field, but all shall have responsibility, in cooperation and coordination, for the welfare of the entire church.” Local congregations would remain essentially autonomous, while the annual and jurisdictional conferences would oversee administrative duties of the church bureaucracy. The General Conference would act as the supreme legislative body, with an elected judicial council acting as a check on all legislative decisions. The College of Bishops, which had been an important source of leadership in early American Methodism, would still maintain authority over the church. However, under the plan of union, bishops could not veto the legislation of clerical and lay representation in the General Conference. The most significant feature of the plan, were the five regional jurisdictions and one racial “Central” jurisdiction. Southern whites had appealed for these jurisdictions beginning in the 1890s, arguing they were

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<sup>69</sup> Moore, *The Long Road to Methodist Union*, 182-193. Surprisingly little evidence remains to construct the debates of the new Joint Commission on Unification. While the Commission’s reports from 1916 to 1920 were meticulously recorded and distributed, the talks in the 1930s were almost completely conducted without notes. Church periodicals offer only a few passing comments on the Commission’s meetings.

one way to prevent northerners from interfering with southern Methodists' affairs. Although many northern whites had previously warned such regional jurisdictions would fracture the church bureaucracy, they eventually concluded that such an arrangement was a reasonable distribution of ecclesiastical duties. The point of contention, however, shifted to the racially segregated central jurisdiction, which allowed African Americans organic representation in the General Conference but segregated them from whites in the local parish and annual conferences. The debates over the 1935 plan of union were less heated than a decade earlier, but the issue of race still defined much of the disagreement between whites and blacks.<sup>70</sup>

In 1936 the northern Methodist General Conference debated the final plan of union. Where blacks had accepted, even embraced, the segregated Central Jurisdiction in the previous decade as a protective measure for black autonomy, by the 1930s most African American Methodists saw it as obvious racial segregation. Northern white Methodists, like their black brethren, had supported the jurisdictional model in the 1920s as one way to keep organic contact with blacks and to empower them with new opportunities in the church. Yet, whites faced new pressures in the 1930s from African Americans, who saw Bishop Robert E. Jones' accommodation of segregation as simply another sellout to white authority. At the 1936 General Conference, this tension between black and white Methodists came to the forefront. During the previous unification discussions, white and black leaders cooperated peaceably to protect blacks against southern white supremacy. In the 1930s, white supporters of unification reminded their black brethren that a racial jurisdiction would protect them against southern whites and allow black Methodists to control their own churches. Of course, many black Methodists' believed

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<sup>70</sup> Moore, *The Long Road to Methodist Union*, 192-193.

such reasoning was merely a compromise among northern white Methodists, who relinquished their racial ideals for the sake of union.

Some Methodists perceived unprecedented opportunity for blacks in the General Conference, while others contended that the segregated Central Jurisdiction was an obvious expression of racial segregation. A white clerical representative from the New England Annual Conference, Lewis O. Hartman, confided that, “we are faced not with a clear-cut choice between an absolute good and an absolute evil; rather we, are presented with two “goods,” one the great desirability of unification and the other the equally great desirability of keeping clear of the very appearances of the evil of race discrimination.” Hartman supported unification, but argued that the Central Jurisdiction “represents, not only no progress, but a definite backward step in the field of race relations.” One of Hartman’s colleagues seconded his objection to the segregated Central Jurisdiction. Echoing the language of nineteenth century organic interracial relations, Ernest Tittle admitted that “by segregating Negroes in a Negro Conference we give them political opportunities which they would not possess as minority groups within our white conferences; but we take away from them the experience of Christian brotherhood which, in my judgment, is far more important than is political opportunity.” Tittle and Hartman remained in the minority of northern white Methodists. On the question of a Central Jurisdiction, Hartman’s observations about the two “goods” of union illustrated the paradox of racial segregation at the local congregation, but racial empowerment in the General Conference, that in the end became the church’s policy.

Supporters of unification contended that the Central Jurisdiction promoted racial solidarity and the General Conference allowed blacks and whites to work together closely to chart the course of American Methodism. The prominent Methodist theologian and Boston

University professor Albert C. Knudson supported unification and suggested racial segregation was a reality of American religious life. “If we were to attempt a merger of all separate Negro congregations with white congregations, we all know that it would mean the practical elimination of our Negro membership.” Knudson humbly admitted that “neither our Negro, nor our white members are at present sufficiently Christian, or sufficiently like each other, to make such a merger possible.” He told his brethren, “many of you have not thought through this problem of race relations. The only social basis for denouncing all social separation or segregation as un-Christian is to be found in the theory of racial amalgamation.” Those who favor “think God made a mistake in creating different races or that he had nothing to do with their creation. The theory of racial segregation is not a Christian theory. The Christian theory is the theory of self-respect, racial respect. It holds that God created the different races, that he had a purpose in so doing, and that each race has its contribution to make toward the total life of mankind, not through racial elimination, but through racial education and self-improvement.” Prejudices of all forms, he argued, were simply a reality individual Christians and the Methodist church could never escape. Knudson believed unification, despite all its racial implications, was one reasonable path toward eliminating racial injustice in America. The professor’s conclusions were supported by several of his academic colleagues.<sup>71</sup>

Lynn H. Hough, dean of Drew Theological Seminary, believed opponents to union were too idealistic. Just as his academic colleague Reinhold Niebuhr had imbued progressive Christians with a heavy dose of reality and humility, Hough urged his colleagues to consider the tragic but practical limitations of American race relations. “I think the time has come when it is

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<sup>71</sup> “A. C. Knudson Examines Objections,” “Absolute Merger Impossible,” “Thinking Through,” “Unification is More Christian,” *DCA* (May 5, 1936): 89-90.

necessary for us to speak very frankly. The Utopian, who substitutes an undisciplined and uncritical idealism for a cool and clear analysis of the practical elements of the situation has been for centuries, the greatest threat for the on-going of the Kingdom of God.” Though opponents rightly highlighted the issue of racial segregation, Hough believed the plan of union provided more opportunity for black Methodists than anything since Reconstruction. His cautious pronouncements on unification were supported by a New Jersey cleric. “I would not be a member of a white man’s church. My soul is too catholic to be white.” The minister went on to argue that blacks and whites “are going to sit together in the General Conference as equals. Does that not prove by that very one circumstance that we are not discriminating against any race?” Where opponents cast the Central Jurisdiction as wholly racial, Hough contended it “is not a race discrimination, but an effort to provide a race that is a minority group in Methodism with enlarged opportunity. Why not face it that way? I believe that [the Joint Commission on Unification] wants to give our Negro minority the opportunity for the largest leadership. I look upon it, not as discrimination against the Negro, but discrimination in favor of the Negro.” To validate his position, the northern white Methodist reminded his fellow brethren that the majority of black MEC churches were still located in the South. Even if his own Northeastern Jurisdiction were “the most favorable in point of numbers to the Negro,” black Methodists “will be outnumbered sixteen to one by white men in that section.” As such, African American’s “opportunity for leadership in the Methodist church would almost be terminated.”<sup>72</sup>

The cleric’s argument was supported by one of the senior northern Methodist bishops. Francis J. McConnell, a former theology professor at Boston University and president of the

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<sup>72</sup> “Time to Speak Frankly,” *DCA* (May 5, 1936): 87; “The Report Is Favored by H. P. Sloan,” “Why Raise the Race Question?,” and “Greater Opportunities Offered,” *DCA* (May 5, 1936): 86.

Federal Council of Churches, also contended that the union was a progressive measure, one that gave black Methodists unprecedented authority in American Methodism. Though he did not speak during the debate at the 1936 General Conference, his memoir presented his thoughts on the unification debate. He plainly acknowledged that race was the central obstacle to unification. “If the Negro problem was from any angle the corpse of slavery, it has proved the liveliest corpse the nation has ever known.” He lamented the fact that black Methodist ministers under unification were not permitted to serve outside the Central Jurisdiction. Yet, McConnell believed “the Central Jurisdiction gives the Negro church more power. Negro Conferences can send their own men to the General Conference, and not men elected by white men. They can influence the general policies of the church. They are in a position to make demands of the church as a whole and ultimately to get them granted.” McConnell and his fellow supporters of unification were cautiously optimistic about the racially segregated Central Jurisdiction. They believed that the Central Jurisdiction insulted blacks from southern whites’ racial attitudes. Because most MEC blacks lived in the South, it allowed blacks to control their own affairs, free of white intervention.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Francis J. McConnell, *By The Way: An Autobiography* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), 199-207. Previous interpretations of unification, which have argued northern whites simply compromised their racial views for the cause of union, have paid little attention to how northern whites debated the color line. McConnell’s own claim that unification was a progressive measure, illustrates these subtle ideological differences among liberal northerners. Gary Dorrien places McConnell and Albert Knudson squarely among liberal Protestant social gospel theologians of the early twentieth century. While there is no direct evidence to suggest they were arguing in favor of “Christian realism,” their discussion of race relations is reflective of periods’ theological trends. See especially chapter entitled, “The Real is Personal: Albert C. Knudson, Francis J. McConnell, Edgar S. Brightman, and the Boston Personalist School” in *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 286-355.

Silent during the 1936 MEC General Conference were Reconstruction-era clerics, who had championed organic interracial Christianity. Bishops John Hamilton and Joseph Crane Hartzell were dead; Wilbur Thirkield attended the conference, but was too weak to participate in the unification debates. Having retired from the episcopacy, Bishop Thirkield permanently left the South and spent his last years living in New York City. It was his final church conference; Thirkield died just two months later. Thirkield and his brethren had preached a paternalist gospel of racial uplift, but their justification of interracial Christianity was founded upon a moral inclination to improve the plight of the underprivileged. Beginning their ministerial careers during Reconstruction, they assumed the nation's civic and religious destiny hinged upon a mutual brotherhood among blacks and whites. By the 1930s, such language seemed archaic and out of touch with the current political and ecclesiastical dilemmas. Northern white Methodists were still sympathetic to the plight of African Americans, but the language of racial uplift had faded from their discussion of unification. Francis McConnell, Albert Knudson and their contemporaries did not see a need to "develop" the race. They entrusted African American leaders to secure and promote themselves within the larger body of American Methodism. Northern white supporters of unification admitted imperfections in the proposed plan, but their sense of the realities of American race relations led them to cast it as another step in the evolution toward black equality.

Some black Methodists also saw the potential for political advancement and lent support to the plan of union. Matthew Davage, a native of Louisiana and then president of Clark University, approved of the Central Jurisdiction. Contending that the plan of union promoted black leadership, the preacher reminded his black brethren that "the proposed plan is not something that was ruthlessly thrust upon us." Davage alluded to the paradoxical nature of the

Central Jurisdiction. “The very thing which more than anything else guarantees [our] rights is the very thing which is the occasion of our fears and the object of our bitterness.” Despite the emotional objection by many black Methodists, he reiterated the same points as white proponents of the plan. The jurisdictional model, he argued, “guarantees as a minority group we shall always have proportionate representation in the General Conference, that we shall have fair representation on the boards, that we shall have bishops. We shall not lose anything, but we shall gain much.” Significantly, Davage was a native black southerner who, like Robert E. Jones, tailored his argument within the acceptable boundaries of Jim Crow segregation. Specifically answering the concerns of northern white opponents to unification, he argued that under the plan of union “we shall be the only members of our race having a real organic relationship with influential whites in the South; and in these days, when vast social and economic changes are impending, who can estimate the value of such a relationship?” In a somewhat paternalistic tone, the native southerner asked his black brethren to lay aside their politicized protest of the Central Jurisdiction. “We need to be shocked out of complacency and apathy and become once more the advancing shock troops of religion. The yielding of selfish group interests in the interest of the whole communion of saints will lead us to new victories.”<sup>74</sup>

A black Methodist from Washington, D. C. also supported the terms of union. He asked, “Are we being discriminated against? Does a jurisdiction for the Negro provide in principle something new or different from [what] we have heretofore had?” He did not answer his

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<sup>74</sup> “Plan is Defended by M. S. Davage,” “Negro Rights Are Guaranteed,” and “Summary of Advantages,” *DCA* (May 5, 1936): 88. It is significant that some southern black Methodists were vocal supporters of the jurisdictional model. Historians need to pay close attention to these differing regional attitudes among African Americans. Though I am certain southern blacks were accommodating southern white’s racism, their language was still a political tool used to attain a degree of representation.



proposition, but presumed that black Methodists who opposed unification were concerned solely with racial segregation. Although this was a valid concern, the cleric observed, “there are many things besides color which make for group coherence.” Though the exclusively black Central Jurisdiction was founded upon the color line, the cleric contended the regional jurisdictions “are also predominantly social in division. The same principal obtains in the creation of the Central Jurisdiction. We, like other groups or jurisdictions, must be defined racially because we cut through several Jurisdictions.” In conclusion, he surmised that Methodist unification would continue to improve American race relations. As a southern black, he observed that “we have a supreme opportunity to approve a plan which will link the Negro up with the finest element of the Southland. We need the friendships of the people among whom we live, especially in that far Southland of ours, to better interpret us.”<sup>75</sup>

Although some southern blacks gladly accepted the plan as one step toward racial equality in American Methodism and as recognition of black achievement, other black Methodists protested on grounds of racial segregation. Mary McCleod Bethune, the prominent southern black educator and civil rights leader, did so quite vividly. Like other African Americans, Bethune had relied upon MEC dollars to fund Bethune-Cookman Institute. Indeed, her success at gaining the confidence of northern whites, illustrated both her political acumen and the acceptance of black women into the leadership ranks of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Just fifteen years earlier, when formal unification negotiations began, women were wholly excluded from the meetings. So, when she took her place behind the lectern, Bethune’s presence signaled those gradual changes that had taken place in the MEC. Her distinct alto voice

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<sup>75</sup> “William A. C. Hughes Appeals for Plan,” “Nothing Essential is Changed,” and “A Supreme Opportunity,” *DCA* (May 5, 1936): 90-91.

resonated through the auditorium. “I approach this stand with great sacredness, and with a very heavy responsibility resting upon my heart and my shoulders.” Challenging the audience to consider for a moment the burden of racial segregation, Bethune asked every person in the room to “turn black for just a season. I think possibly there might be a little sensitiveness in your hearts that you do not have today to see a sign here and there, ‘Negroes; white folks sit here. You can’t sit there.’” Criticizing the MEC tradition of organic interracial relations and gospel of racial uplift, she observed that “for seventy years you have been developing us.” She forcefully argued that this approach to the “negro problem” was an outdated form of evangelism, as many African Americans were at least one generation removed from slavery. Indeed, it was her own commitment to young African Americans that spurred Bethune to denounce Methodist unification. “I have not been able to make my mind see it clearly enough to be willing to have the history of this General Conference written, and the Negro youths of fifty or a hundred years from today read and find that Mary McLeod Bethune acquiesced to anything that looked like segregation to black people.” Equating the Central Jurisdiction with Jim Crow segregation, she concluded that “to set up a special program for Negro people at this stage of development, I am very sorry that I shall not be able to give my vote to the united effort that we all so much desire. What would Jesus do? Answer for yourselves.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> “A Check-Up on Emancipation,” *The Christian Century* (June 17, 1936): 869-870; “A Woman’s View” and “Not Able to Vote for Union,” *DCA* (May 5, 1936): 90. See also “Methodism and the Negro,” *Christian Advocate* (New York) (May 19, 1938): 461-462. See also Barbara Diane Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 128-131. John B. Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era: Liberalism and Race* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979). The black MEC periodical, the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* supported Bethune’s claims and took a strong position against racial segregation. When Robert E. Jones was elected to the episcopacy in 1920, his successor Lorenzo H. King became editor of the paper. Over the course of two decades the tone changed from accommodating segregation to protesting Jim Crow. For articles protesting segregation see “Is the Southern White Man the Negroes’ Best Friend,” *SWCA*

Robert E. Jones also addressed the issue of race at the General Conference. Like Bethune, Jones had benefited from the Christian charity of northern whites. Once the premier black leader in the MEC, Jones confided, “the most gratifying report that I could make would be a report on the growth of better race relations in the deep South. Reporting race relations is a rather difficult and intangible something, but there are high signs of growth and a better day to be seen.” Jones concluded with a remark by Edwin M. Poteat, “There is no longer any respectable or considerable religious opinion that regards one race or another as the particular favorite of God.” Bishop Jones’ hopeful assessment of American race relations ignited rage among other African Americans. One AME clergyman was critical of black Methodist leaders, particularly Robert E. Jones, who he accused of “stand[ing] by, happy in the thought the he is God’s beloved as much as any, and that without regard to the amount of debating or the decisions to which the Methodists come as to his position in the reunited church, it will in no way affect his place in “the kingdom.” The cleric concluded, “Curtly, I am suggesting to the Negroes in the white church that they get out.” *The Pittsburgh Courier* fumed that, “the venerable prelate [Jones] sold out his race to appease the demands of the rabid South.” Jones’ commitment to interracial Christianity had been interpreted by many of his black colleagues as simply another accommodation to white supremacy. Jones was fully aware of the dark side of Jim Crow, but having benefited from interracial cooperation, he still preached that racial exclusivity would only further drive a wedge between blacks and whites.<sup>77</sup>

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(August 1, 1929). “Does the Color-Line Reach to Heaven?” *SWCA* (July 30, 1930): 583. “Injustice to Negroes Winked at By Churches,” *SWCA* (July 4, 1929): 531. “Race Problem Challenging Church and School,” *SWCA* (March 21, 1929):223-224. “The Negro in Better Light,” *SWCA* (January 15, 1931): 35. “The Next Great Movement In the Progress of the Negro,” *SWCA* (July 2, 1931): 451-452.

Despite the debates among blacks and whites over the Central Jurisdiction, the 1936 MEC General Conference adopted the plan of union. Among black ministers and laymen to the General Conference, 11 voted in favor of unification; 36 representatives voted against the plan. Whites voted overwhelmingly in favor of unification, with 470 in favor; and only 83 against. Once the affirmative vote was announced the audience erupted into applause. Much like in the camp meetings of early Methodism, the brethren joined to sing Isaac Watts' hymn "We're Marching to Zion." As the majority of northern Methodists celebrated the coming of a new American Methodism, most African Americans remained seated and silent. For black Methodists who had been loyal to the predominantly white Protestant establishment, the unification represented a schism in a long established interracial alliance. An editorial in *The Christian Century* captured the moral dilemma facing white Methodists. "It becomes increasingly evident that the white majority in that denomination has assumed a rather terrifying responsibility. It is one thing for a majority to overrule the mere wishes of a minority; it is quite another for that majority to force the minority, however small it may be, into what that minority considers a morally untenable position." For white northern Methodists the path toward union, despite all of its imperfections, was seen as another step taken toward political autonomy for African Americans. Though black Methodists legitimately scorned the Central Jurisdiction's racial implications, most northern whites saw it an imperfect but morally tenable organic interracial polity.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> "Should the Negroes Leave the Methodist Church?" *The Christian Century* (March 11, 1936): 403; "Bishop Jones Advocates Jim Crowism," *The Pittsburgh Courier* (August 24, 1936): 1; *Journal of the 1936 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Methodist Book Concern), 767.

<sup>78</sup> "The Report Is Favored by H. P. Sloan," "Why Raise the Race Question?," and "Greater Opportunities Offered," *DCA* (May 5, 1936): 86; "Negroes Vote Down Unification,"

With the northern church having embraced union, southern white opponents to union spent the year before the next MECS General Conference protesting unification as an illegal breach of church polity. Warren Candler's strongest allies, Bishop Collins Denny and his son Collins Denny, Jr., a prominent Richmond attorney, published a thirty page pamphlet in 1937 warning of a presumed "Negro invasion" of white churches. Bluntly establishing their claims upon white supremacy, the Denny's believed they and every white southerner "hold it destructive of the Anglo-Saxon race, to accord to the negro the privilege of social equality. The question, therefore whether we should have negroid church congregations in the South is not a question of right or justice, nor a question for the 'conscience' of others, it is a question of the preservation of our racial integrity. We do not believe we deal unjustly with the negro organizations or with the negroes themselves, nor do we believe that we violate the principle of moral law, when we refuse to accord to the negroes the intimate social relationship which inevitably and properly exists between the members of a church congregation." Just weeks before the 1938 General Conference, Bishop Denny waged one last public campaign against unification. Denny warned that granting blacks voting privileges in the General Conference would lead to integration, thus compromising the region's white supremacy. If northern opponents saw the plan of union as a compromise to southern whites and a move toward racial segregation, Denny and his colleagues believed the plan conciliated to northern egalitarian racial views. Denny addressed several white audiences across the South, warning about the racial integration of American Methodism. In Augusta, Georgia he preached that, "If the churches are united we will have to accept Negroes in our church. Social equality will be taught in our church schools." To a packed church in Birmingham, Denny claimed union would bring a "Negro

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*Zions Herald* (March 12, 1937): 585; "Negro Methodists Resort to Courts," *The Christian Century* (February 17, 1937): 204.

invasion of southern white churches.” For Denny and his fellow opponents, the moral dilemma of unification rested, not upon rights and opportunities for African Americans, but for the preservation of what they considered to be racial integrity. The essence of American Methodism, they preached, lay not in the transformation of society or bringing justice to the oppressed, but in the salvation of the individual soul. Drawing upon a long evangelical tradition, southern Methodists preached a sophisticated Christian interpretation of racial segregation over the course of a century. Despite all of the illustrations of Christian charity between southern whites and blacks, the thin veil of reason never quite covered the injustice of white supremacy. Denny and most brethren of his generation simply could not imagine a moral society where white and black Christians could be considered social and political equals.<sup>79</sup>

In the spring of 1938, the MECS General Conference met in Birmingham, Alabama, to discuss the plan of union. Fully aware that 1938 would be the final MECS General Conference, some clerics surely arrived in mourning; others rejoiced in the opportunity to begin a new chapter of American Methodism. Even though Bishop Denny and his allies continued to warn of a “negro invasion,” many southern Methodists were not persuaded by their ruminations. In fact, the delegates overwhelmingly supported the plan of union. The final vote was 334 in favor and 26 against unification. Such support for union gave the impression that southern whites had finally relinquished their segregationist attitudes. But, other non-racial factors contributed to southern whites’ eventual acceptance of African Americans in the General Conference. One

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<sup>79</sup> Collins Denny and Collins Denny, Jr. “An Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion Concerning Methodist Unification,” [pamphlet] (n.p.: Richmond, 1937): 24-25; “Methodists Clash in South on Unity; Bishop Denny Says It Compels Equality with Negroes and Raises Vote Question,” *NYT* (March 20, 1938): 8; “Methodism Unites,” *CC* (May 11, 1938): 584; “Reunion of Methodists Clouded by Secession Threat of Southern Dissenters,” *Newsweek*, *II* (May 9, 1938): 25. Collins Denny Jr. was an assistant Attorney General of Virginia in the 1930s and served in 1956 as lead counsel for a white supremacist group opposing school desegregation.

church editorial suggested that long held regional distrust had simply faded into the past. This allowed for the ecumenical spirit of the 1930s to finally penetrate southern Methodism. Most importantly, the editorial argued that the growing influence of the Third Reich in Germany necessitated a unity among American Protestants. If the coming of one warn split American Methodism, many believed the crisis in Europe necessitated an ecumenical Protestantism and a united Methodist church. Still, these influences could not wholly compensate for southern whites' prevailing racial attitudes. Even while they tolerated blacks as political equals in the General Conference, whites did not extend the same courtesy in local congregations and annual conferences. If the national church was defined by racial equality, the regional southern Methodist churches would still be defined by Jim Crow.<sup>80</sup>

There were, of course, the elders of southern Methodism, who rejected the plan of union. They objected to African Americans in the General Conference. Bishop Collins Denny and his beloved friend Warren Candler were so opposed to unification, they refused to sign their names on the 1938 episcopal address. They chose to write their own minority address. For the first time in the history of southern Methodism, the MECS College of Bishops issued two reports on the state of the church. The venerable bishops warned, "Brethren-we say it advisedly-you have no right and you would not be justified in saddling this new, novel and dangerous arrangement on a great people from whom information has been kept and who, in so far as they have had an opportunity to express an opinion, have expressed their opposition." Their one last attempt at

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<sup>80</sup> Moore, *The Long Road to Methodist Union* 194-203; Untitled article, *SWCA* (May 19, 1938): 5.

keeping southern Methodism alive failed. When the conference ended, southern Methodism came to an end.<sup>81</sup>

After the southern Methodists voted in favor of unification, a group of black Methodists fought to exclude themselves from the merger. In February 1938, Robert E. Jones and Matthew Wesley Clair, the two senior black bishops, called a meeting of black MEC clergy. Over two hundred African American Methodists gathered in Chicago to discuss and respond to the creation of the racially segregated Central Jurisdiction. Though Bishops Clair and Jones had been of the same mind in the early years of unification, Clair now took a more pronounced stand against racial segregation. Though he had been elected one of the first black bishops in the MEC, Clair encouraged his fellow African Americans to withdraw from the church if the Central Jurisdiction was implemented. Bishop Jones, on the other hand, still supported union, as long as blacks were represented in the General Conference. At one point during the meeting, a younger Methodist rose to the floor and requested Jones be replaced by an elected chairperson. Bishop Jones quickly asserted that he was chairperson of the meeting and would not be hastily ousted from authority. Ultimately, however, the meeting did little to ease factionalism. The conference issued a report: "Sentiment was divided as to whether this group should recommend to the colored conferences to withdraw from the Methodist Episcopal Church and set up a distinctive Negro church, or whether these Negro Methodists should now seek union with the Colored Methodist Church." Such a division among African American Methodists within the larger white establishment illustrated the generational changes that had taken place since Bishop Jones

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<sup>81</sup> *Daily Christian Advocate* (MECS General Conference, 1938): 12; "Methodist Union Is Voted in South," *NYT* (April 30, 1938): 17. A native of Virginia, Denny received support from his friend Senator Carter Glass. As the General Conference discussed unification, Senator Glass reiterated Denny's position that the plan of union "would bring the Negro into our Southern churches." "Methodists' Unity Stirs Southerners," *NYT* (April 29, 1938): 18.



and Clair were first elected to the episcopacy. Most blacks confirmed Mary McLeod Bethune's insistence that anything resembling segregation was simply immoral. One could not, they believed, uphold an ecclesiastical polity that perpetuated racial segregation. At the time, though, they could not stop it.<sup>82</sup>

In 1939, after nearly a century apart, northern and southern Methodists officially reunited. Meeting in Kansas City, Missouri, lay and clerical delegates gathered to celebrate the union of the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. For many blacks, the unification testified to American Methodists unwillingness to address racism in American society. One historian has suggested that the creation of the Central Jurisdiction "capitulated to the countercurrents of American racist proclivities, and yielded to the prevailing morality of the society." As a whole white Methodists simply compromised their Christian principles to "those temporal pragmatic considerations of the world rather than the eternal claims of justice." Those individuals who protested union, spoke from a moral conviction that seemingly transcended the boundaries of church polity. This observation, however, does not recognize how the tension between individual moral conscious and the larger religious establishment had always shaped the course of American Methodism. Methodists, despite their quest for Wesleyan perfectionism, could never escape the perplexing and divisive issues of their day. Black Americans were

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<sup>82</sup> "M. E. Body Faces Split: Discontent Over Union Cause Rift," *The Chicago Defender* (February 19, 1938): 1; "Will Negro Methodists Set Up a New Church?" *CC* (February 23, 1938): 229; "ME Church Ripped by Race Issue: White South Fears Worship Beside Blacks: Say Step Leads to Social Equality of the Races in America," *CD* (March 26, 1938): 2.

justifiably offended by the moral offence of racial segregation, but white Methodists undoubtedly understood the imperfections of their polity.<sup>83</sup>

On May 8, 1939, over twelve thousand people crowded into the Kansas City auditorium for the unification ceremony. After an opening sermon, the bishops of the MEC and MECS churches, and the leaders of the Protestant Episcopal Church were asked to stand if they approved of unification. All stood in favor. Bishop John M. Moore took his place behind the pulpit, and with tears streaming down his face exclaimed “the Declaration of Union has been adopted! The Methodist Church is! Long live The Methodist Church!” The brethren sprang to their feet in applause and sang “O God, Our Help in Ages Past.” White northern and southern Methodists shook hands, and for the first time since 1844 delivered a single episcopal address. The address reflected their desire to energize Methodists’ authority in American society. It declared that “eight million Methodist communicants stand at attention today-throw[ing] wide the gates to a new era in American church life.” The union was a “culmination of the most outstanding and far-reaching union movements which the Church of Christ” had ever witnessed. Confronting the “home task” of the address realized that “Methodism must seek new powers and enter upon new processes for taking the Christian Gospel to the people of our country,” including the racial divisions that plagued every section. With a hopeful and providential conclusion, the bishops exclaimed, “The prophet of the long road is speaking. Let us unfurl the banners and sound the trumpets and speak unto the children of Methodism that they may go forward.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> William B. McClain, *Black People in the Methodist Church; Whiter Though Goest?* (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing, 1984), 85.

<sup>84</sup> *Daily Christian Advocate (1939 Uniting Conference)* (May 11, 1939): 464-471; *The Episcopal Address of the Uniting Conference of 1939* [pamphlet] (n.p, 1939), 3, 14, 20-21.

## Conclusion

Methodism had never been immune to the nation's racial dilemma. Since the Methodism's inception, preachers had proclaimed individual piety but, outside the walls of the church, they confronted the stark realities of slavery and Jim Crow. The 1939 reunification of Methodism dramatically altered the polity of American Methodism, but the regional jurisdictions were lingering reminders of the nations' sectional and racial divisions. The contentious Central Jurisdiction was an expression of white racial attitudes that existed not only in the South, but throughout the entire nation. While most black Methodists believed it was overtly racist, the Central Jurisdiction had not always been the subject of black criticism. Since Reconstruction, African Americans in the MEC had positioned themselves within a majority white church. Whether a conscious political decision or simply a loyalty to the MEC, blacks were gradually granted leadership and privilege in the church. Representing the largest interracial denomination in the United States, black and white MEC members committed themselves to providing a model of racial cooperation. By the 1930s, African Americans had become increasingly frustrated by northern whites' gradually changing racial attitudes. The Central Jurisdiction represented both the practical limitations of church polity and a schism in interracial Methodism.

For southern whites, the reunification was the last step toward bringing the church into the nation's mainstream religious life. The largest denomination in the South, southern Methodism had been a powerful force in shaping the moral imagination of southern whites. Born nearly one century earlier upon the moral justification of slavery, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South legitimated its existence upon the myth of the Lost Cause. While this ideology proved powerful, white supremacy was the most important component in distinguishing between the regional Methodisms. Like the civic institutions which surrounded them, local southern

Methodist parishes preached a gospel of racial segregation. And, while most white brethren preached Christian charity, their sermons legitimated racial segregation. Claiming to be the rightful inheritors of Methodist orthodoxy, MECS polity centralized ecclesiastical authority in the hands of a few powerful bishops. Suspicious of democratic impulses in the church, these bishops resisted change and preached an old-time gospel of individual salvation. Reunification was the culmination of a modernist impulse which had divided the church in the second decade of the twentieth century. Where southern whites had been solidly against any type of organic relationship with African Americans, they eventually accepted blacks in the General Conference. This move, however, did not wholly erase the white supremacist attitudes of southern whites. In the coming decades, as the civil rights movement swept across the South, southern white Methodists upheld racial segregation at the local parish and annual conference. Southerners had embraced a more democratic polity in 1939, but such a break from tradition did not include a change in racial attitudes. Even while the national church preached a gospel of racial equality, the white supremacist doctrine of the MECS still influenced southern Methodist congregations.

Not surprisingly, the Central Jurisdiction remained a point of contention between white and black Methodists. In the early 1950s Paul Carter, a prominent church historian, found reason to critique racial segregation in American Methodism. Still, he believed “the southern members of the Council of Bishops have been uniformly courteous to the Negro bishops; racial equality prevails at the General Conference and on the administrative boards.” In 1948 the Southern California Annual Conference elected a black cleric, Alexander P. Shaw, to become its bishop. And, the same year the Methodist General Conference legislated that “the principle of racial discrimination is in clear violation of the Christian belief in the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the Kingdom of God. We therefore have no choice but to denote it as

unchristian and to renounce it as evil. *This we do without equivocation.*” Such a resolution was welcomed by African American Methodists. By 1956, the General Conference passed a measure which permitted local black congregations to voluntarily withdraw from the Central Jurisdiction and join the local annual conference and regional jurisdiction. This action allowed gradual integration, but only in those places that did not challenge southern segregation. The differences between the denomination’s position on race and the sentiment of local congregations, brought to light the division that had always been in American Methodism. In 1966, faced with growing pressure from the civil rights movement, the church absolved the Central Jurisdiction. This legislation met criticism in the deep South, and in 1973 several annual conferences were finally the last to integrate their meetings. The General Conference and Bishops of today’s United Methodist Church are reflective of the unification’s democratic polity, and each makes it a priority to include African Americans and women in leadership roles. Still, the racial divisions that defined many local congregations and annual conferences remain intact. The conflicting racial ideologies of the unification debates highlight the difficulty of negotiating church polity. In binding up the nation’s regional divisions, a majority of white Methodists went against the hopes of a minority of black brethren.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Carter, *The Negro and Church Union*, 67. David W. Wills, “An Enduring Distance: Black Americans in the Establishment” in *Between The Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960*, ed. William R. Hutchinson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 182-184. Peter C. Murray, *Methodists and the Crucible of Race, 1930-1975* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004). James R. Wood and Mayer N. Zald “Aspects of Racial Integration in the Methodist Church: Sources of Resistance to Organizational Polity,” *Social Forces* 45 (1966). Raymond c. Rymph and Jeffrey K. Hadden, “The Persistence of Regionalism in Racial Attitudes of Methodist Clergy,” *Social Forces* 49 (Sept., 1970): 41-50. David Chappell suggests “thoughtful segregationists” could not maintain persuasion over southern white Protestants insistence on white supremacy. This argument, however, does not take into account the pervasiveness or intensity of mass-resistance against racial integration. *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 153-155, 176-178.

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## **Vita**

Blake Barton Renfro received a Bachelor of Arts in history from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He is a native of Oak Ridge, Tennessee.