MARY R. SAWYER*

Efforts at Black Church Merger

Of the 21 million Blacks estimated to be formally affiliated with one church or another, over eighty percent are accounted for by the seven largest black denominations. These, in turn, represent only three different orientations: Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal. Even these divisions are substantially structural in nature, and neither the structural nor the doctrinal demarcations have ever succeeded in shattering the transcendent ethnic identity of Blacks that was fired in the crucible of slavery and tempered in the cauldron of Jim Crow segregation. Still, the divisions exist, and united action predicated on the full resources of the Black Church is impeded accordingly. That reality has not been lost on constituent members of the Black Church who have initiated action to overcome division since the early days of denominationalism.

Although the history of black religious organization is dotted with instances of small bodies joining together, the more significant merger efforts are those involving the major denominations. At both levels, explorations of organic union generally are restricted to one orientation or another; that is, the conversations do not extend across the boundaries of denominational "families." Discussions are held among the Methodists, or among the Baptists—and mostly the former.

Such efforts at times have succeeded, a case in point being the creation in 1895 of the National Baptist Convention out of three predecessor bodies. In another instance, the AME Zion Church, which split into two factions in 1852, was reunited in 1860.[1] But the continued existence of separate denominations is its own evidence that the initiatives to overcome structural fragmentation have enjoyed less than total success.

An editorial headline in the July 12, 1939 edition of *The Christian Century* proclaimed, "Negro Methodists Consider Union." Again in the February 19, 1964, issue the headline announced, "Negro Methodists Consider Union." These identical headlines spanning a quarter of a century are testimony to the perseverance and enduring vision of those

---

* Dr. Sawyer teaches in the Religious Studies Program at Iowa State University.

[1] William J. Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: Reality of the Black Church* (Charlotte, N.C.: AME Zion Publishing House, 1974), pp. 172-183.

Methodist leaders who keep the issue of union alive year after year, decade after decade. They also point to a certain intransigence on the part of their colleagues.

The quest for union dates from 1864, which not incidentally was the year of the first Quadrennial Sessions of the General Conferences of the AME and AME Zion Churches following Emancipation. If the antebellum period was a time of personal antagonisms and competition between these two Methodist bodies, the antipathies were at least partially ameliorated by "the struggle for freedom, which had united both groups in bonds of affliction."[2] The successful culmination of that struggle provided an occasion for joining forces in other respects as well.

On the initiative of the AME Church, committees from the two denominations met together in May of 1864 at Bethel Church to discuss consolidation. These committees proposed that a convention of representatives from both Churches be convened to prepare an agreement for submission to their annual conferences. This convention of fifty delegates was held in Philadelphia in June of the same year. The resulting "platform for consolidation" was ratified by the AME Zion membership and confirmed by the General Conference of the AME Zion Church in 1868. Not all AME annual conferences were provided opportunity to consider the platform, and while those who voted did so affirmatively, the General Conference of the AME Church rejected the platform on grounds of dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the agreement. The AMEs then proposed a meeting to formulate a new plan, but the AME Zions declined, tabling the matter until 1872.[3] The reluctance of the AME Zions to negotiate further issued in part from their stronger emphasis on lay participation; the concern was that the AMEs' willingness to act in the absence of adequate expression from their membership would portend problems in the event union was accomplished.[4]

The issue of union was acknowledged at the 1872, 1876, and 1880 General Conferences, but the matter was not seriously addressed again until 1884. That it was taken up then Bishop William J. Walls has attributed in large part to the "organization and protracted growth of the CME Church."[5] Both of the older Methodist bodies appointed committees on organized union which held serious discussions over the following nine years.

At the first meeting of the two committees held in Washington, D.C., in 1885, the name "First United Methodist Episcopal Church" was pro-

---

[2] Ibid., p. 461.

[3] Ibid., pp. 461-464.

[4] Roy W. Trueblood, "Union Negotiations Between Black Methodists in America," *Methodist History* 8 (July 1970): 21.

[5] Walls, pp. 467-468.

posed for the new body, along with fourteen articles of agreement. But at a meeting in Philadelphia the following year, disagreements arose concerning the name and one of the articles pertaining to the episcopacy. This meeting was adjourned without the differences being resolved. When it reconvened the next year in Atlantic City, New Jersey, only one AME Zion representative appeared, in consequence of which the discussions were again tabled.[6] The interest of the AME Zions was strongly reaffirmed at their 1888 General Conference, however. Meeting once more in Washington, D.C., in 1891, 23 of the 24 members of the joint committee agreed on the necessity of unification, but could not come to terms on a name.

The following year, the AME Zions proposed that the AMEs join with them in constituting a Commission on Organic Union to "arrange a basis of union." The AMEs accepted, and the resulting meeting of the Commission at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in May 1892 resulted in a plan which received the approval of the AME Zion General Conference and won the overwhelming support of their annual conferences as well. However, once again voting by the AME annual conferences was erratic; nor was there consensus among the AME bishops.[7] A major point of contention was the proposed name, "The African Zion Methodist Episcopal Church," which Bishop Henry M. Turner rejected, averring he would accept no name other than "African Methodist Episcopal Church."[8]

Disillusioned with the union project, the AME Zion General Conference of 1896 was silent on the subject for the first time since 1872, but four years later the idea of union was revived—only this time with the CME Church rather than the AME. An AME Zion Commission was appointed in 1900 in response to a suggestion of the CME representative who brought fraternal greetings to their General Conference. The CME Church then appointed a like commission in 1902. These two bodies, meeting in Washington, D.C., in October 1902, prepared "Articles of Agreement" for union for consideration by their respective General Conferences. Meanwhile, in 1904 the AME Church once again approached the AME Zions, proposing preparation of a joint hymn book and catechism, the outcome of which was the historic joint meeting held in Washington in 1908 of all the bishops, save two, of all three Methodist denominations. This meeting resulted in a "plan of federation among the chief pastors of these energetic branches of the great Methodist family, and the adoption of an agreement which provide[d] for a common

---

[6] Trueblood, pp. 21-22.

[7] Walls, pp. 468-470.

[8] Trueblood, p. 22; Walls, pp. 469-470; Dennis C. Dickerson, "Black Ecumenism: Efforts to Establish a United Methodist Episcopal Church, 1981-1932," *Church History* 52 (December 1983): 482.

hymnal and catechism and a uniform service . . ."[9] Reflecting some years later on this event, Bishop Othal Lakey wrote: "The creation of this Council and the enthusiasm which all the bishops seemed to have shared about their coming together indicated that the animosities and conflicts among these independent Black Methodist bodies during the post-bellum days had been overcome."[10]

A second meeting of this body, which came to be known as the Tri-Federation Council of Bishops,[11] was held in Mobile, Alabama, in 1911, and a third in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1918. This meeting led to the appointment of a commission whose charge was to formulate plans for effecting union. Convened in Birmingham, Alabama, in April 1918, the result of this commission's deliberations was the "Birmingham Plan of Organic Union," which recommended that the three denominations "unite organically into one body under the denominational title of The United Methodist Episcopal Church."[12]

The strategy was for the Plan to be considered by the General Conference of the CME Church in 1918, and by the General Conferences of the AME and AME Zion Churches in 1920, subsequent to which it was to be submitted to a vote of the annual conferences of all three denominations.[13] Accounts differ as to what action actually was taken. According to some records the CMEs, after approving the Plan in General Conference, submitted it to their annual conferences for a vote before the AME and AME Zions had an opportunity to act. That vote proving negative—"it was found that at the annual conference level the feelings and attitudes toward organic union [were] far different than the emotional, highly charged climate of a General Conference"[14]—the AMEs and AME Zions determined it futile even to consider the Plan.[15] Other accounts, however, indicate that in fact the Plan was considered and approved by the General Conferences of all three denominations and voted on by the annual conferences of each denomination, with the CME churches alone dissenting.[16] At any rate, union efforts were once more

---

[9] Walls, pp. 471-472.

[10] Othal Hawthorne Lakey, *The History of the CME Church* (Memphis: The CME Publishing House, 1985), pp. 419-420.

[11] This body is also referred to in the literature as the Tri-Council of Colored Methodist Bishops, Federated Council of Bishops, Triennial Council of Colored Methodist Bishops, Federated Negro Bishop Council, and Tri-Commission of the AME, AMEZ, and CME Churches.

[12] Lakey, p. 420.

[13] Walls, pp. 472-473.

[14] Lakey, p. 421.

[15] See Lakey, pp. 420-421 and Trueblood, p. 25.

[16] See Walls, p. 474; Dickerson, pp. 482-483; and Calvin S. Morris, "Reverdy C. Ransom: A Pioneer Black Social Gospeler" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1982), p. 84. Morris writes: "Reporting about the 1920 A.M.E. General Conference in the pages of the *Re-*

defeated.

Despite this setback, the Tri-Federation Council of Bishops reconvened in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1922; representatives from the three denominations also met later that year in Washington, D.C. Both meetings were marked by vituperative exchanges and an apparent resurfacing of long-harbored grievances toward one another; the three-way dialogue was effectively silenced.[17]

The AME Zions and AMEs nevertheless persisted, meeting in Pittsburgh in 1927 to revive the Birmingham Plan. The so-called Pittsburgh proposals were ratified at the 1928 General Conferences, but not submitted for a vote of the annual conferences by the AME Zions until after the 1932 General Conference. Once more the Zion conferences approved the plan, while AME voting results—to the extent voting took place—were mixed. Union was frustrated yet again.[18]

Bishop Walls records that from 1936 on, "the three churches made only sympathetic expressions of organic union, keeping up compatible relationships through continuous fraternal association and messages, but not enlivening union ideas again until 1964."[19] The factors favoring union certainly did not dissipate; the argument as to why "organic union . . . should be effected," summarized in the 1920 Episcopal Address of the AME Zion Board of Bishops, became no less persuasive:

> First, because our doctrines are the same, and the little difference in polity can easily be adjusted.
>
> Second, because in a very large measure we cover the same territory, and thus it would obviate the overlapping of areas.
>
> Third, for economic reasons in running the machinery of the church.
>
> Fourth, because of the increased efficiency it would add in the crystalizing sentiment politically in favor of our race.
>
> Fifth, for the salutory effect it would have upon the economic, religious, and business life of the Negro in America, in the Isles of the seas and in Africa.[20]

But the impediments to union nevertheless prevailed.

The persistent inability to agree on a name clearly was an obstacle to achieving union. But as Bishop Lakey points out, "Seldom if ever did merger advocates address the matter of preserving the *traditions* which the names had come to symbolize." All of the efforts "failed to address

---

view, [Reverdy] Ransom expressed the thrill of seeing men sing, laugh, cry, and shout for joy when they heard that the three church bodies of independent Methodists had voted for organic union. He was now persuaded that the three denominations were sufficiently prepared to accomplish the task of racial uplift. The proposal for union was sent to their Annual Conferences for approval, but in April, 1922, the plan was defeated."

[17] Dickerson, pp. 484-485.

[18] Dickerson, pp. 486-489; Walls, pp. 474-475.

[19] Walls, p. 475.

[20] Cited in Walls, p. 473.

the differences of size, histories, and emphases existing between the three denominations. The reason was the assumption that identical doctrine, polity, practice, and race were sufficient basis for union. But [the opponents of merger] knew that commonality cannot cope with the emotionality that is based on individuality." A critical factor in the failure of the Birmingham Plan, Lakey suggests, was that it "resulted from the cordiality of the bishops of the church rather than the mutual interaction of the churches in mission or social action in which union was perceived as beneficial."[21]

There were other obstacles—ego, ambition, and territorial imperative among them. The Black Church was a significant arena for self-expression and for acquisition of power and prestige; persons holding or aspiring to the available positions of leadership and authority were understandably reluctant to reduce those opportunities in real terms, or to expand the boundaries of competition.

Circumstances external to the denominations were factors as well. Beginning in 1929, efforts at union were impeded by the Great Depression.[22] An equally serious intrusion on discussions among black Methodists undoubtedly was the union in 1939 of the white Methodist bodies and the attendant perplexity with regard to the disposition of their black contingents.[23] Creation of the all-black "Central Jurisdiction" ultimately was settled upon as the solution—but not without consideration being given by the black members themselves to other alternatives. One of the options weighed at a meeting of 250 black Methodist leaders in Chicago in February 1938 was the establishment of a separate, new denomination; another was union with the "Colored Methodist Church."[24] The exercise of either of these options surely would have added a new dimension to the union negotiations of black Methodists;[25] as it was, the prolonged uncertainty about their fate merely helped keep union deliberations on hold. As much as anything, however, the inability to achieve union between 1864 and 1940 may have reflected a reluctance to relinquish the comfort of the familiar in an unpredictable world during a hostile era.

Still, the idea was not permitted to die.

AME Bishop Reverdy Ransom was among those who continued to advocate union throughout the decades of the 1930s and 1940s. Speaking

---

[21] Lakey, p. 423.

[22] Walls, p. 475.

[23] Trueblood, p. 26.

[24] "Will Negro Methodists Set Up a New Church?" *The Christian Century*, February 23, 1938, p. 229.

[25] The black membership of the United Methodist Church has steadily declined since the abolition of the Central Jurisdiction, suggesting that some measure of re-union has been accomplished, if on an unofficial and uncelebrated basis.

in 1939, Ransom voiced this lament:

> Eight years ago, there was much talk on all sides of the union of the three great bodies of Negro Methodists. It has now become almost a dead issue. Will this General Conference revive it and pursue it until it becomes an accomplished fact? Where we are weak, all of us together might be strong. It is more, then, than an ecclesiastical and/or religious question. It lies at the very roots of the economic, political, and social welfare of the millions of our people. If we cannot achieve denominational union, the day of united action along business, commercial, civic, and political lines seems far distant.[26]

That same year, the Fraternal Council of Negro Churches passed a resolution appealing not only to the Methodists—including the Union American Methodist Churches—but to the Baptists as well to "re-explore the grounds of organized union."[27]

In fact, a meeting of the African Methodists had been scheduled in August of 1938 at Kittrell, North Carolina, in anticipation of which *The Negro Journal of Religion* editorialized:

> . . . if divided Methodist bodies can, through their genius for organization, work as they have done for the growth of the Negro and the kingdom, their program under one central authority will bless the land. And, faith, we need it.[28]

A year later the *Journal*'s sardonic comment was this:

> . . . Negro Methodists . . . seem to be getting farther apart. The discussions, which they took up some months back, have died completely. At their last appointed meeting only one denomination was represented. There could be little union in that effort. Whose fault is it that the boasted intelligence of Negro Methodists is inadequate to cope with the task of union?[29]

The Star of Zion, then, responding to the criticisms being made of white Methodists for failing to include Blacks in their union, editorialized:

> Let us be fair to say that it is a very considerable strain on the imagination to suppose that the white and Negro Methodists can find a basis for workable unity, when the Negro Methodists cannot reach such an agreement . . . Zion Methodism has always had the natural fear of being "swallowed up" while the larger A.M.E. Church has not been willing to go "the second mile" . . .[30]

No progress toward union was made throughout the 1940s, despite the

---

[26] George A. Singleton, *The Romance of African Methodism* (New York: Exposition Press, 1951), pp. 150-151, cited in Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 93.

[27] The Fraternal Council of Negro Churches, "A Resolution Looking to Christian Union," *The Negro Journal of Religion* 5 (June 1939): 6.

[28] "Will Negro Methodists Unite?" *The Negro Journal of Religion* 4 (August 1938): 4.

[29] "Negro Methodists Should Unite," *The Negro Journal of Religion* 5: (November 1939): n.p.

[30] Reprinted in *The Negro Journal of Religion* 5: (January 1940): 7, 10.

calls of Bishop Ransom for the appointment of committees to consider the issue.[31] The Second World War undoubtedly proved a major distraction, but the 1950s were no more productive of action on the matter. Not until the early 1960s was a new movement for union initiated.

On January 23, 1964, a consultation to discuss union of the three Methodist denominations was held at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. This meeting, which marked the beginning of the contemporary union effort, was initiated by John Satterwhite, Professor of Ecumenics at Wesley Theological Seminary and champion of black church union for more than two decades.[32]

The 1964 meeting was attended by 88 delegates from 16 states and the District of Columbia, including bishops, presiding elders, pastors, lay leaders, and representatives of the denominations' seminaries and colleges.[33] Out of this meeting came a statement calling on the Bishops Councils to appoint or activate existing committees within their respective denominations to plan for union, and to press for creation by the General Conferences of a Commission on Church Union to prepare a plan for union. The statement, which also called for joint meetings of the bishops as well as discussion of union at the local church level, was signed by the consultation convenors, Bishops S.L. Greene (AME), R.L. Jones (AME Zion), H.C. Burton (CME), C.H. Gibbs (AME), and S.G. Spottswood (AME); Rev. C.N. Reid (CME); and Dr. Satterwhite (AME Zion).[34]

In the spring of the following year, 39 bishops of the three denominations (the "tri-council of bishops") met in St. Louis. Agreeing on the desirability of union, 1972 was designated as the time limit for its accomplishment. Toward that end, a general commission with representatives from each Church was named; it was also agreed to invite the smaller Methodist churches to participate in the process.[35] This general commission, along with the tri-council of bishops, met three times—December 1965 in Atlanta, December 1967 in Washington, D.C., and January 1969 in Chicago. In 1968, both the AME and AME Zion General Conferences expressed support for development of a plan of union to be considered at the 1972 General Conferences, but this action never materialized.[36]

---

[31] Morris, p. 84.

[32] John H. Satterwhite, interview by author, Washington, D.C., January 1985. Dr. Satterwhite taught at Wesley Theological Seminary from 1958 to 1974.

[33] Virgil E. Lowder, "Negro Methodists Consider Union," *The Christian Century*, February 19, 1964, pp. 250, 252.

[34] John H. Satterwhite, "Editorial Comment: AME Zion and CME Church Union," *The AME Zion Quarterly Review* 93 (October 1981): 46-47.

[35] Dickerson, p. 27. Also, Walls, pp. 475-476.

[36] Walls, p. 476.

The issue was taken up again later in the decade. In 1978, the CME Church voted to unite with the AME Zion Church, setting a target date of 1988 and approving the creation of a Joint Commission on Union (also called the Joint Commissions on Merger) to implement the process of union. Comparable action was taken by the AME Zion Church in 1980. The AME Church, however, which also considered the issue in 1980, declined to commit itself at that time and withdrew from active discussions.[37]

The CME and AME Zion Churches have continued to pursue the matter. The Joint Commission has met once or twice a year, while the Commission's Steering Committee, for which Satterwhite serves as the secretary, has provided oversight of the development of a unification plan.[38] At the September 1985 meeting of the Commission, the Subcommittee on Process proposed a three-phase approach, each phase requiring approval in turn by the two General Conferences. Voting commenced in 1986 and will continue until 1992.[39] Assuming approval of each phase by both General Conferences, the plan then is to be submitted to the annual conferences.

Commenting on the reasons for this strategy, the Subcommittee referred to earlier merger efforts, noting that "much of the rationale for the manner in which this design has been developed derived from careful analysis of the abortive attempts at merger between the AME Zion and CME Churches in 1918."[40] The approach taken to this most recent effort has differed from earlier attempts in other respects as well. As Satterwhite put it, "We thought we could unite churches from the top down; now we realize we have to do it from the bottom up." Toward that end, the Center for Black Church Union, organized by Satterwhite, conducted a series of workshops around the country in the early 1980s to inform local church members and clergy and to involve them in the process.[41]

Whether these preparations, made in cognizance of past deficiencies, will have an impact on the outcome of current deliberations remains to be seen. The hope is that once two of the denominations are united, others—particularly the AMEs—will join in. Whatever the final determination, the Methodists are a good way further along the road to reunion than the Baptists.

---

[37] James S. Tinney, "Merger of Black Methodists Set for 1986," *National Leader*, June 7, 1982, p. 25.

[38] Satterwhite interview.

[39] "Focus on Union—'The Process Design'," *The Christian Index*, October 15, 1985, cover and pp. 3, 10-11.

[40] Ibid., p. 10.

[41] James S. Tinney, "Black Methodist Bodies Have Another Go At Union," *Christianity Today*, May 1980, p. 46.

After the 1915 split in the National Baptist Convention, numerous efforts were made to reunite the two factions, but to no avail. In 1924 an agreement was reached between the National Baptist Convention of America and the Lott Carey Convention to administer a joint foreign mission program, and shortly thereafter an effort was made to unite all three conventions. This attempt also failed, and even the two-way compact soon disintegrated.[42]

This issue of union among Baptists has since been raised intermittently—both before and after the 1961 division producing the Progressive National Baptist Convention. In his 1957 address at the Annual Convention of NBC, U.S.A., Inc., for example, President Joseph Jackson remarked:

> I would suggest that steps be taken for the union of the two National Baptist Conventions among Negroes. Since we were separated over a publishing house forty-two years ago, it seems in this length of time we ought to have enough grace to overcome the problems of real estate, forgive the blunders of the past, and form one big family of Negro Baptists throughout the nation.[43]

An effort was made in 1972 to arrange a joint session of the NBC, U.S.A., Inc., and the NBCA while both were meeting in Texas, but that initiative failed.[44] Twelve years later, Jackson's successor, T.J. Jemison, preparing to take up the challenge anew, declared:

> Those who divided us have all long gone . . .—and we who are still here, we are still out in left field, still bickering . . . [I've] said to the unincorporated Baptists, ". . . If we can't merge, it's time to meet somewhere and let God know we're going in the same direction." And so we are going to meet in 1988 in the same city, talk about the same God, live the same truth, and let the world know we are not playing with God.[45]

Such a meeting will be a hopeful sign. And perhaps it is as much as can be expected at this time. Whether the issue is authority of bishops or autonomy of Baptists, the forces for maintaining existing structures are powerful. Partially out of deference to this reality, many church leaders have turned in recent years to cooperative endeavors rather than merger as an alternative mode of reunification. Whichever, the vision of One Church endures. Indeed, for some, unity in the Black Church is but prelude to realization of that vision for the Church Universal.

---

[42] Leroy Fitts, *A History of Black Baptists* (Nashville, Tenn. Broadman Press, 1985), pp. 95, 97.

[43] Cited in Owen D. Pelt and Ralph Lee Smith, *The Story of The National Baptists* (New York: Vantage Press, 1960), p. 105.

[44] Helen Parmley, "Black Baptists: A Thirty-Mile Gap," *Christianity Today*, October 13, 1972, p. 55.

[45] T.J. Jemison, Remarks at the 4th PIE Conference, Washington, D.C., September 1984.

Distribution of Black Church Membership

	Members	%
African Methodist Episcopal	1,700,000	8.1
African Methodist Episcopal Zion	1,100,000	5.2
Christian Methodist Episcopal	850,000	4.0
Church of God in Christ	3,500,000	16.7
National Baptist Convention of America	2,200,000	10.5
National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.	7,100,000	33.8
Progressive National Baptist Convention	1,000,000	4.8
Smaller Black Communions	1,200,000	5.7
Predominantly White Protestant Groups	1,100,000	5.2
Roman Catholic	1,200,000	5.7
TOTAL	20,950,000	99.7*

Source: Figures for the seven largest denominations were obtained from executives and published reports of the respective denominations. These figures are estimates for 1984. Sources for the other categories are James S. Tinney, "Selected Directory of Afro-American Religious Organizations, Schools, and Periodicals," 1977; "The Black Church in America," *Dollars & Sense*, June/July 1981.

*The total is slightly less than 100% due to rounding.