

LESSONS OF THE BLACK CHURCH IN METHODISM

Bishop Forrest C. Stith, Retired U.M. Bishop, July 2019



During the next several months, our great United Methodism denomination will be struggling with a number of models, and/ or structural changes to save our church. As people of color, though small in number, our voice and vote will count in 2020. Before we are seduced by various factions, we need to remember what our priorities are, and how can we achieve them.

It was George Santayana, the historian/philosopher who once said, “those who do not learn the lessons of history, are doomed to repeat its mistakes”. With that in mind, I share some reflections and suppositions based on our history.

First, I offer this brief, incomplete outline.

KEY DATES RE: AFRICAN AMERICANS IN METHODISM

1730's	<i>John Wesley, founder of Methodism, denounces Slavery system.</i>
1766	<i>John St. Society formed in New York. First black's presence recorded, one named Betty.</i>
1773	<i>Strawbridge Society in Maryland was established with a black slave named Annie Sweitzer amongst the charter members.</i>
1784	<i>First General Conference adopts strong resolution against slavery. Blacks in attendance included Harry Hosier, Richard Allen</i>
1789-90	<i>Some blacks break away – to create A.M.E. & A.M.E. Zion Denominations. Most blacks stayed in the system but began to form separate congregations; Zoar in Philadelphia, Sharp St. in Baltimore.</i>
1840-1865	<i>Underground Railroad in full operation, led by Harriet Tubman, born a slave on the Eastern Shore of Maryland where she was baptized and converted as a Methodist. Likewise, Frederick Douglass who was unrealized at Simpson Methodist in Washington, D.C.</i>
1844-45	<i>Separation between Methodist Episcopal Church, North and South. Maryland and D.C. churches were on both sides. Key issue SLAVERY.</i>
1844-65	<i>Methodist Church North and South launch separate mission movements amongst slaves.</i>
1857	<i>Dred Scott v. Sanford, a landmark decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in which the Court held that African Americans, whether enslaved or free, could not be American citizens and therefore had no standing to sue in federal court, and the federal government could not make laws abolishing slavery. It became a catalyst for the Underground Railroad and ignited a strong abolitionist movement in M.E. Church North and other churches, and the Civil War.</i>
1830-'50's	<i>Slave rebellions started by lay preachers i.e. Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, (a lay Methodist preacher, whose rebellion and death led many Methodist bodies to cease worship services for several years.</i>
1864	<i>1st Negro Conferences established by M.E. Church--Delaware Conference and Washington Conference.</i>
1864	<i>Church membership -- 984,939 total Methodist members. 238,634 black members in 26 states in M.E. North. Over 200,000 estimated in the South.</i>

1865	<i>Emancipation Proclamation - 4 million slaves freed. 207, 000 blacks, mostly in the south, leave Methodist Church; 78,000 blacks remain in Southern Church.</i>
1866	<i>AME Church had only 20,000 members but sent preachers into the South to proselytize confusion in Methodism and grew by tenfold.</i>
1870	<i>C.M.E. Church (Colored Methodist Episcopal Church), formed under auspices and financial grants of southern M.E. Church.</i>
1868-1972	<i>11 Negro Mission conferences organized by North (mostly south).</i>
1866	<i>Freedman's Aid Society informally created by M.E. North to establish schools, social programs and relief for former slaves.</i>
1866	<i>Rust College founded, followed by 11 other black institutions of higher education.</i>
1880	<i>Women's Home Missionary Conference formed, principally to aid black Methodist women, children, youth in south. First president, Mrs. Jennie Hartzell.</i>
1900	<i>Black church membership: 1,700 full clergy; 3,398 churches; 239,274 members.</i>
1906++	<i>Charles Albert Tindley, great Methodist preacher and hymn writer, recognized as bridge into gospel music, with hymns like "Stand by me", "Beams of heaven as I go", "We'll understand it better by and by".</i>
1920	<i>First elected and fully consecrated black bishops, Matthew W. Clair, Sr. and Robert Elijah Jones.</i>
1939	<i>Methodist Church re-unites, Central Jurisdiction created (Segregation formalized), blacks became the sacrificial lamb of union. (see CJ map)</i>
1939-1965	<i>CJ congregations and pastors grew in numbers and vitality. Noted for paying apportionments in full, although most were financially limited.</i>
1965-68	<i>Central Jurisdiction and official segregation abolished.</i>
1968	<p><i>Significant Happenings</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>National Black Methodists for Church Renewal organized</i> • <i>For first time, black Bishops serve inclusive conferences</i> • <i>Creation of Commission on Religion and Race</i> • <i>Black College Fund begins to support 13 U.M. Black institutions</i> • <i>Boards and agencies intentionally diverse</i> • <i>4 general agencies led by black General Secretaries</i>
1981	<i>Songs of Zion published, first supplementary hymnal aimed at Ethnic Minority/African American constituency.</i>
1992	<i>Africa University became the first and only fully accredited institution of higher learning established on the African continent by action of the General Conference of the United Methodist Church.</i>
2000	<i>2000 General Conference celebrates "those who left" that created the Independent black Methodist denominations.</i>
2001	<i>African American Methodist Heritage Center Incorporated.</i>
2004	<i>General conference celebrated "those who stayed" .</i>
2008	<i>African American Heritage Center partially funded by General Conference, and partners with Archives and History Commission.</i>
2016	<i>In a diverse Episcopacy, four African American women elected.</i>
2019	<i>Special session of General Conference rejects inclusiveness of LGBTQ.</i>
2020	<i>Uncertainty of future of the denomination.</i>

more specifics see John Graham's book "Black Methodists Retrospect and Prospect," available through Heritage Center.

What are the lessons we have learned from this historical outline?

First, the greatness of our American story is also a story of a nation infected with a great Sin, which is Racism. Like a disease of the body, it is ever present in our political and social life. It can be confronted, affected, reduced or accepted, but from the inception of our nation, racism came out of Slavery. The perpetuation of slavery demanded a justification and a rationale so that the economic strength of the nation could continue.

This rationale or justification was based on two foundations:

**PSEUDO SCIENCE AND
SELECTIVE BIBLICAL LITERALISM**

To understand current white supremacy activities or even the ever-present white privilege, we cannot underestimate the impact on the infectious impact on all aspects of our country, especially the church.

PSEUDO SCIENCE

The pseudo-science approach was represented by a few legitimate scientists like the noted physician Samuel Cartwright, who on March 12, 1851, A. Cartwright reported to the Medical Association of Louisiana that he had identified the uniqueness of Africans as inferior; which he developed from two Greek terms, called: Drapetomania. The research writer, Michael Ruane suggests this is the real beginning of false science to justify slavery.

According to Cartwright, this malady was completely curable. "Negroes, with their smaller brains and blood vessels, and their tendency toward indolence and barbarism", Cartwright told fellow doctors, "had only to be kept benevolently in the state of submission, awe and reverence that God had ordained. "The Negro is [then] spellbound, and cannot run away," he said. Cartwright's presentation a decade before the Civil War was part of the long, insidious practice of what historians call scientific racism — the spread of bogus theories of supposed black inferiority in an attempt to rationalize slavery and centuries of social and economic domination and plunder.

"What black inferiority meant has changed in every generation . . . but ultimately Americans have been making the same case," said historian Ibram X. Kendi.

This pseudo-scientific approach became the model modern civilization uses to justify all kinds of oppression and exclusion. Adolph Hitler adopted this model to persecute Jews and justify the Holocaust. Likewise, it became the model for Apartheid in South Africa, and the 20th century rationale for the century's long oppression in India of the "Untouchables".

SELECTIVE BIBLICAL LITERALISM

However, since most Americans in the 17th and 18th centuries were not well read, and more likely to be religious, the second rationale was equally important. The Selective biblical literalism approach was in two dimensions.

I -- First, the Curse of Ham. Because Ham was supposedly the father of black people, and because he and his descendants were cursed to be slaves because of his sin against Noah, some Christians said, "Africans and their descendants are destined to be servants and should accept their status as slaves in fulfillment of biblical prophecy." (4)

This so-called prophecy raises a myriad of questions, of the stories of Noah, including modern scientific disciplines of cosmology, geography, anthropology, archaeology (homo sapiens origin in East Africa 1.5 million years ago), along with the practical aspects of culture, language, and travel.

The second was Paul's admonition for slaves to be obedient to their masters. Again, never mind that Paul also states in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

It is important to note that these two rationales/ pillars became the model in modern civilization to justify oppression or exclude people based on race, color, gender religion or any conspicuous difference. In America, it became the rationales that denied women full equality, persons from foreign countries, Native Americans, Japanese Americans during World War II, etc. It is currently the rationale for denying Full equality to LGBTQ persons.

II -- The second lesson is how blacks in Methodism have survived and thrived in a predominately white denomination, which itself was undergirded by these two foundations of racism. In simple terms, the old spiritual put it best, "Dere's no hiding place down here... Oh I went to the rock to hide my face, the rock cried out no hiding place".. that is to say, to live as a minority in a majority world, one has to find ways and means to retain one's authenticity while simultaneously receive the fruits from the majority world.

Zoar Church in Philadelphia set the model for Black Christians. It left Old St. Georges church to form its own congregation, while, unlike Richard Allen, who jumped ship, retaining its relationship and support from the Methodist denomination. That model of separate worship and fellowship while remaining a part of the denomination, is still the pattern of all Christian churches in America; leading Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to say, "eleven a.m. Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America". Amid the manifold expressions of racism in our denomination, we have persevered, while "keeping our eye on the prize".

The uniqueness of John Wesley was his ability to seamlessly walk in personal holiness and social holiness. Thus, while he was a great evangelist, he and the denomination stood strong against slavery. Pastors and leaders could therefore support the elimination of slavery, and actively participate in the Underground Railroad. No black denomination has been able to affect people of color in our society, like the United Methodist Church.

While others are strong on pageantry and lip service, it is United Methodism who established dozens of academies, schools, and relief operations for blacks following the Civil War, of which 13 black colleges and institutions remain today, and have been continually supported by the entire church. From our beginnings we have reaped the benefits of a major Publishing house, replete with outstanding curriculums, books and worship materials, including the first song book created for African Americans, called "Songs of Zion." Nor can we forget the support of clergy, including pensions, medical insurance, continuing education, and a guaranteed appointment. This support is balanced by an accountability system to assure local congregations of effective pastors. The old informal adage is still our goal: "an effective pastor for every church and a church for every pastor"?

Only a denomination like ours, in addition to sending missionaries to Africa and other countries undergirded those places with education institutions, medical and other support systems. The highlight was the establishment of Africa University, the only such institution, governed by Africans, taught by Africans and able to serve Africans.

As we ponder the future of Methodism, let us be careful lest we lose what our ancestors sacrificed and dreamed for; an inclusive church.

It was Frederick Douglass, a Methodist, lecturer and abolitionist who reminded us of the cost of inclusiveness in an exclusive world”

“If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle.”

III -- The third lesson relates to the period before the end of the former Central Jurisdiction. Though there were many limitations during the era of the Central Jurisdiction, segregation caused a strong sense of identity and solidarity in segregated churches and the communities. Clergy and lay recruitment came primarily from church parsonages, Sunday schools, youth groups and the immediate neighborhood. We raised our own Clergy who were not just committed to Jesus Christ but loyal to Methodism. Today we are relying on recruits from other denominations or no church backgrounds. While helpful, we cannot assume a background and loyalty to our denomination. How can we recruit our own clergy, with dwindling Sunday Schools and youth groups?

2020 may well provide a test for current black churches who do not have such solidarity and identity. Can we find ways and means to be together or will we be pulled by divisive forces, which will weaken us and possibly destroy us? We need a strong BMCR, which can help us prioritize inclusiveness over exclusiveness. Such would seem natural for those who have suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous exclusion and oppression.

How can we recruit, train and empower more young clergy to commit to follow the call of ordained ministry? Historically, the itinerant system unofficially offered promotions and increased support. In the current circumstance of so few large appointments, and with cross racial assignments not attractive to most, what options can we offer for encouragement, except to “BUILD WHERE YOU ARE ?” How do we avoid brain drains by assigning very effective pastors to administrative positions?

IV -- The fourth lesson is, since African Americans have championed Africa churches over the years, we have a key role in the future of the global church. The recent apparent support of the Traditional Plan by most African delegates at the special session, put the African church at odds with many of their primary supporters, those who talked little but gave sacrificially. Any new structure of the church will affect the African church.

--How do we grow into being a Global church, in polity, organization and spirituality, considering the following obstacles:

-- Exorbitant costs of supporting fast growing churches in Africa while American churches are declining in numbers and income ?

--Multiple languages which places non-English-speaking persons dependent on imperfect translations.

--Unique cultural and political differences, which affect decision making at General Conference.

--Huge geographical distances affecting communications, travel, clergy training and program development

Finally, whatever our conclusions and/or strategies, let African Americans not run from the struggle, or stay on the sidelines. We've come too far to turn back now. Let us be in concert with Paul in Philippians 3:12--

¹² “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal;^[a] but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own”.