Pride, Shame, & Pain:  
Methodism’s History with Racism and Efforts to Dismantle It  
Heritage Sunday 2021

General Commission on Archives and History of The United Methodist Church

1 Logo borrowed from the General Commission on Religion and Race. Kelly Fitzgerald, ed. Racism: The Church’s Unfinished Agenda, a Journal of the National Convocation on Racism (General Commission on Religion and Race, 1987).
"The formidable task of The United Methodist Church is to understand and embrace its Mission as a Spirit-sent body placed in the bowels of racist policies, politics and programs wherever they are found. The Convocation logo attempts to describe this Mission. The Spirit is depicted by the doves and their flaming wings. The colors of the doves represent the colorful peoples of Methodism who have been charged with a continuing mandate to overcome the evils of Racism. The word ‘RACISM’ is rendered in bold, white letters signifying that Racism is still a blatant reality in our society and is overwhelmingly White. The cracked letters symbolize that the specter of Racism has been around a long time and is nothing new! The informal script of the ‘agenda’ is like a memo to the Church. It is a call from the people to the Mission and not a formal, finished program. The doves have penetrated part of the ‘sign’ but only a part. There is much yet to do which is the church's unfinished agenda.”
Historical Documents

Methodism has a long history of discussing race. The following documents depict some of the major turning points in the way Methodists have discussed race in the past. This is not an exhaustive list, but an attempt to show some of the lesser-known examples of when Methodists have had this discussion. As you read, we encourage you to think about how far our conversations on race have come. What rhetoric is the same or different? What lessons did Methodists learn? What actions did Methodists take in response to these? More importantly, what lessons did we not learn? What actions have we yet to take?

Figure 2: 1832 Petition to General Conference from “People of Colour in the Philadelphia Charge”
Records of the General Conference Collection, General Commission on Archives and History, Madison, NJ 07940
1832 and 1848 Petitions to General Conference

General Conference meets every four years and is the legislative body of the denomination. This has been the case since the days of Wesley. In the first half of the nineteenth-century, Black Methodists were ordained as deacons but not as elders, meaning that they could preach but could not administer the sacraments. This is largely a way to ensure white control over baptism. Many Methodists (and other Protestants) believed that if Black, particularly enslaved Black persons, were baptized that they then could not be owned for that would violate the will of God (as if that weren’t already the case). White persons were also scared that if enslaved Black persons were spiritual equals, they might assume that they could also be political or social equals and thus would seek equality at all levels. It is vital to note that Wesley was a staunch believer in the universality of the Gospel and the redemptive work of Christ. This means that Wesley believed that Christ’s death on the cross meant that all persons were equal, baptized or not, Christian or not, enslaved or not.

Below are two petitions to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The first, written in 1832 by Black Methodists, asks for Black preachers to be in charge of Black congregations. It states that given the large number of Black Methodists, it only seemed reasonable that the Bishops have the power to “appoint Ministers of colour to coloured congregations.” Congregations were typically led by white ministers. White ministers, when they were preaching to all-Black or racially diverse congregations, emphasized docility in spirit and obedience to masters instead of the liberatory, empowering message of the Gospel.

It is important to also note that this petition comes from the ministers in Philadelphia. Black Methodists in Philadelphia had been battling white control of their congregations for over fifty years. Absalom Jones and Richard Allen left St. George’s MEC of Philadelphia in the 1790s after they were pulled from their knees during prayer and told that it was the white members turns to pray. They formed the Free African Society, purchased a plot of land in Philadelphia, and formed Mother Bethel. White MEC clergy tried to attain control over Mother Bethel by tactics which included trying to seize the land from Allen. After multiple law suits, Allen was able to maintain control of his property and eventually formed an independent denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church. This historically Black Methodist denomination still exists today and was born out of white racism.

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13 The below two petitions are transcribed from the original. The original 1832 petition is on the preceding page.
To the General Conference [sic] in Philadelphia assembled

Gentlemen:

We the undersigned [sic] being Deuly [sic] Sencilbe [sic] of the
great increase both [sic] in membership and congregation in our
churches and consequently [sic] our Ministers in many places from the
Press of Business among the whites[ sic] they have not time to Devote
to the Sattisfaction [sic] and general Benefit of the coloured Congres-
sgulations—And as thier [sic] are many of our coloured Bretherin [sic]
in the ministry [sic] of a congregation.---and many of them where it is
Practicable would be willing to Receive such [sic] an appointment.

Therefore your humble petitioners sincerely [sic] pray that you
would add to the Disciplino [sic] so as to give the Bishop power to
appoint Ministers of colour to coloured congregations when asked for
and when it is Practicable to Remain with such [sic] congregation
as long as the discipline [sic] may Direct—they being held amenable
[sic] as you in your wisdom may Direct.

Believing [sic] as we do that such [sic] an alteration would be
conducive to such [sic] good to many of our congregations and our
Brethren [sic] having such [sic] a field of labour opened to them
would be Induced to seek for that knowledge so necessary for the gospel
Ministry [sic] and we have too no doubt that it would be a final pro-
ventive [sic] to such [sic] a seacon [sic][i.e., secession] among the ministers as hertofo [sic] all of which we respectfully
submit to your honours.

signed on Behalf of the Peopel [sic]
of colour in the Philadelphia charge,

Simon Murray, Pres.,
attested Cyrus B. Miller Secret.

Philadelphia April 23, 1832

ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT in General Conference papers, Drew University Library
In 1848, Black Methodists in Baltimore made a request similar to that of Black Methodists in 1832 in Philadelphia. In Baltimore, however, instead of wanting to have more Black preachers appointed to serve Black congregations, these Methodists were asking General Conference to form a Black Annual Conference within the confines of the Baltimore Annual Conference.

They state their reasoning in the third paragraph. Methodism had grown drastically in the first half of the nineteenth-century (from approx. 58,000 in 1790 to approx. 1,186,000 by 1850). This growth was consistent with both Black and white membership. However, the denomination was still largely run by ordained white ministers. Both Black and white Methodists decided that Black Methodists would have their own houses of worship. Some Black preachers were appointed to serve these churches but they did not have any authority outside of these congregations. In other words, Black preachers did not enjoy the same privileges that white ordained clergy enjoyed particularly when it came to administering the sacraments. Only through full ordination rights would Black Methodist preachers have a voice at the table of white Methodism. Not wishing to separate from the MEC and join one of the Black Methodist denominations in existence (the AME or AMEZ), these Black Methodists thought of a different solution. Giving Black Methodists within the MEC full episcopal power over their own congregations via their own annual conferences. This did not come to fruition in 1848, nor in 1856 when the petition was again brought to the General Conference. Only in 1864, after the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation, did the MEC agree to form separate annual conferences and give Black Methodists full clergy rights. In other words, white Methodists decided that once Black Methodists were free according to federal law, then and only then, were they worthy of full ordination rights, but these full rights would only exist in separate annual conferences. This is white supremacy. When the same request was made by Black Methodists for Black empowerment, it was denied. When it was made by white Methodists to “deal with” newly freed Black Methodists, it was granted. This was not the first nor the last time that institutional segregation would be a part of Methodism.
Black Methodists in Baltimore Petition General Conference to organize Black Pastors into a Black Annual Conference, 1848

[Source: Proceedings of the General Conference, Friday May 12, 1848, Christian Advocate (May 24, 1848) p. 81. Emphasis in original.]

J. A. Collins presented the following petition from the colored people of the Sharp-Street and Asbury charges in the city of Baltimore.

To the bishops and Members of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Conference assembled

Respected Fathers and Brethren: Permit us, the official members of the Sharp-Street and Asbury Station in the city of Baltimore, on behalf of our colored brethren and sisters of the aforesaid Station, to address you on a subject to us of great importance, and we indulge the hope that it will not appear less important to you.

In the first place, we humbly beg that you will please accept our sincere thanks for your long and arduous services to us when in our infantile state, believing that the Great Head of the Church has and will continue to reward you—having made you instrumental in his hands of bringing us from darkness to light, and from the power of sin and Satan to himself.

In the next place, we would remark, that when the Methodist Churches in these United States were small, the colored people enjoyed comfortable [privileges in the same houses of worship]: but as the white Methodists increased rapidly, as did also the colored, the latter as it was well known, and is in the recollection of many, were deprived often of the privileges that they had hitherto enjoyed. Therefore, it was thought necessary, both by the white and colored people, that we should have houses of worship for our special benefit, where they could be obtained, in order that we might have more room to invite our colored brethren who were still out of the ark of safety, to come in; and it is well known that the good Lord has great enlarged our membership since that ever-to-be-forgotten period by owning the labors of our colored preachers in conjunction with some of the white, in the conversion of many thousands of the colored race: and quite a large number of colored preachers among us, some of whom, all things considered, had and still possess respectable talents, and have done much good in their local capacity; but hitherto they have been quite limited in their sphere of operations, having had no opportunity of being extensively useful, they being generally poor, and no provision having been made for them to go forth and dispense the bread of life to their perishing fellow men, their usefulness, has inconsequence been greatly hindered—and or colored fellow men have thereby been deprived of those blessings Almighty god would have granted through their instrumentality. And now, reverend fathers and brethren, your memorialists would say that it does not seem clear to them that the time has come when something should be done for the prosperity of the ministry among our colored brethren;
and the question arises, how shall o can this desirable object be accomplished? For we have no expectation that the ministers, the descendants of Africa, will ever be admitted to seats and voice in the conference of their white brethren, however well they may be qualified for the work of the ministry: nor do we desire to unite with any of the existing colored connections. Therefore our colored brethren in this city of Baltimore, after due prayerful consideration, have been led to the conclusion, for the reasons already mentioned, and others which might be mentioned, that a far greater amount of good would of necessity result from our being placed in a condition so that colored ministers should have the pastoral oversight of all the colored people in connection with the Methodist church in all places of the United States where the laws and usages do not forbid.

But it may be said and truly, that Africa, downtrodden, bleeding Africa proffers a field for usefulness in missionary operations. Your memorialists concede the point, and it afford us a pleasure which human language is too meager to express., that even benighted Africa has already (though very limitedly) received back not only some of her sable progeny, but the Gospel of the ever blessed God also: and we verily believe tat the period is rapidly approaching when that whole land will be enlightened with the light of life. But merit us to ask, are there not other fields of labor in which the colored preachers can be employed to great advantage to themselves and to their fellow colored men: Your memorialists humbly conceive that there are such openings: and are further of the opinion that if colored eh are employed here at home it would awaken and beget in them a missionary spirit and zeal which would prepare them for more effective service abroad. Again, your memorialists speak the truth and nothing but the truth, when they state that it has been for many years, the unceasing effort of a portion of the thinking men of our officiary to still and to keep quiet many of their brethren, both of the official and lay members, by which exertion the peace of the church has in some sort been preserved. But, as honest men, we do say, that to us it does seem clearly manifest that something should be done to prevent the occurrence of a state of things which may take place, but which we sincerely deprecate, and which, we are quite sure, would be deprecated by the General Conference. Our only object (and we speak as true men) is to prevent a schism in the Church.

Your petitioners believe that a change can be effected, and that a union may continue to exist with our white brothers.

Your memorialists need not tell your venerable body that the Discipline of our Church contemplates a healthy action therein, which we conceive is to be effected by the use of the means and the proper observance of the rules of said manual. But if classes are not attended to once in two or four years, the rules seldom read, the sick nor seen, and as for pastoral visits, they are not known among us, can a people thus circumstanced prosper? The truth is, from the past we infer what will be the future. We have no grounds to expect that matters will be different from what they have been. We verily believe that the prosperity of the colored people, both morally and temporally, imparts pleasure to our white brethren; but then it is necessary that they should have a knowledge of the fact that we regard our lot as a hard one.
It is a fact of general notoriety that we have been liberal in making provision for the comfort of those stationed among us from time to time, paying sometimes a thousand dollars per year.

Therefore, your memorialists, in view of what we have said, and believing that the number of colored preachers would justify it, pray the general Conference to organize for them an Annual Conference, within the bounds of the Baltimore Annual Conference, to be under the supervision of the [white] Bishops, who shall preside in said Colored Annual Conference.

All which is respectfully submitted, and your memorialists will ever pray for the peace and prosperity of the Church of Christ.

Signed in behalf of sixty of the official members of Sharp Street and Asbury Station.

    John Fortie
    Thomas Watkins
    Benjamin Brown
    David P. Jones
    Richard J. Chew
1939: Creation of the Central Jurisdiction

After emancipation of all enslaved Black persons in the 1860s and after the failure of Reconstruction, the MEC and MEC, South began conversations of merging. They, falsely, believed that now that slavery was no longer an “issue” to divide Methodism, that the two should re-unite. This overlooks the underlying theological and sociological understandings that are the true cause of the division.

In 1939, the MEC, MEC South, and Methodist Protestant denominations merged to form The Methodist Church. In negotiations of this merger, the MEC South wanted to create an entirely separate denomination for Black Methodists. This they had done after the Civil War with the creation of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (now called the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church). The MEC suggested doing something similar to what they had done with the creation of separate annual conferences for Black Methodists (see 1848 petition to General Conference). What ended up happening was sort of a compromise between the two. In 1939, the white annual conferences within the United States were divided regionally into our current jurisdictional system (Northeast, Southeast, North Central, South Central, and Western). All Black Methodists were put into a separate jurisdiction, not regionally bound, but racially bound. Thus, only Black bishops would serve Black preachers and Black preachers would serve Black congregations. Segregation was institutionalized.

Some might ask, how is this different from what Black Methodists had requested in the 1848 Baltimore petition? It’s different in many ways. First and foremost, the 1848 petition was sent to General Conference by Black Methodists in order to ensure that Black Methodist congregations were going to be led by Black Methodist ordained clergy who had full ordination rights, including access to the sacraments, in order to ensure that white Methodists could no longer control their faith. Second, the 1939 creation of the Central Jurisdiction was not created in order to empower Black Methodists but in order to comply with white fear of Black Methodist religious authority. It was created without the voice of Black Methodists, thus it was born out of white supremacy, and it sought to institutionalize the tradition of white control of Black Methodist faith.

In 2018, United Methodist News Service wrote a brief history of the efforts to dismantle the Central Jurisdiction. It is reprinted in full on the following pages for it engages with and quotes many persons whose ministries began in the Central Jurisdiction. As you read, think about how our current jurisdictional system still reflects many of these racist assumptions.
NOTES

Northeastern Jurisdiction—Now includes Washington and Delaware, formerly of Central Jurisdiction. They are in process of merger with geographical conferences.

North Central Jurisdiction—Now includes the former Lexington Conference, Central Jurisdiction. North Indiana and Northwest Indiana Conferences are authorized to merge at a time of their choosing.

Southeastern Jurisdiction—Cuba is expected to become an autonomous church during the quadrennium. Memphis and Tennessee Conferences are authorized to merge if they choose.
50 years on, Central Jurisdiction’s shadow looms

By Joey Butler April 18, 2018 | NASHVILLE, Tenn. (UMNS)

The April 1968 merger that created The United Methodist Church not only birthed a new denomination, it abolished a painful part of Methodist history: The Central Jurisdiction, which segregated African-Americans from their Methodist brethren.

It was an earlier 1939 merger that created The Methodist Church from the Methodist Episcopal Church, Methodist Episcopal Church South and Methodist Protestant Church. The Southern church only agreed to union after a compromise created a jurisdiction based exclusively on race — not geography.

Nineteen black annual conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church were placed in the Central Jurisdiction and the white conferences were placed in five regional jurisdictions. Seventeen of the 19 black conferences voted against the 1939 Plan of Union.

Almost as soon as the Central Jurisdiction was established, attempts began to get rid of it.

Though the episcopal address to the 1940 General Conference alluded to black Methodists’ “cordial acceptance of the outcome” and urged delegates to “attempt no radical changes” to church structure, the 1944 General Conference appointed a commission to study race relations in the church. That commission’s report to the 1948 General Conference acknowledged the problem posed by discrimination and offered hope that it “shall ultimately be eliminated from our fellowship.” The report did not specifically suggest abolishing the Central Jurisdiction.

The 1956 General Conference took probably the most significant steps toward ultimately doing away with the Central Jurisdiction. More than 4,000 petitions were submitted regarding the jurisdictional system, specifically the Central. As a result, delegates took two actions: drafting Amendment IX to the constitution and creating a study commission to evaluate the jurisdictional system.

Amendment IX provided a means for a local church to transfer to another annual conference, or for a conference to transfer out of its jurisdiction. The proposal acknowledged that when all of the Central Jurisdiction’s conferences used this process to voluntarily transfer to other jurisdictions, it would in effect be abolished.

It seems a given that members of the Central Jurisdiction would have overwhelmingly supported its elimination, but that was not the case.

“Central Jurisdiction leadership supported Amendment IX but discouraged its strongest churches from leaving, for fears it would weaken us financially,” said retired Bishop Woodie W. White. “They didn’t want the jurisdiction to be weakened by attrition.”

Despite its segregated existence, the Central elected its own bishops, was given representation on church boards and commissions, and provided leadership opportunities that blacks may not have otherwise been granted.
At a 2004 reunion of Central Jurisdiction members, some spoke of those opportunities and the sense of family that was fostered within the segregated church body.

“If there was no Central Jurisdiction, a lot of our people wouldn’t have had opportunities for real leadership,” said Mai Gray. “This is where they honed their skills, even though it was not pleasant.” Gray, who passed away in 2010, became the first African-American to lead United Methodist Women in 1976.

Mollie Stewart, former president and CEO of Gulfside Assembly in Waveland, Mississippi, called the Central a “nurturing community, where everybody was your momma and your poppa.”

But at that same reunion, the Rev. Joseph Lowery laid out the complicated choice that faced African-American Methodists if the church were to desegregate.

“In the Central Jurisdiction, blacks elected their leadership. In a larger church, blacks don’t have enough members to elect leadership,” Lowery said. “The real power to elect black leadership (in an integrated church) rests in the hands of whites. That was the dilemma.”

The State of the Church report to the 1960 General Conference declared: “There must be no place in the Methodist Church for racial discrimination or forced segregation …. We recommend that discrimination or segregation by any method or practice, whether by conference structure or otherwise … be abolished with reasonable speed.”

In its report, the Commission to Study and Recommend Action Concerning the Jurisdictional System, noted the 1956 conference placed the Central Jurisdiction “in the line of ultimate extinction.”

The commission reported that six local churches had already transferred out of the Central Jurisdiction and 36 more were in the process. The commission took a wait-and-see approach to whether voluntary transfer via Amendment IX would solve the problem.

In a 2005 interview with United Methodist Communications, the late Bishop James S. Thomas said that “if you read the (legislative proposals) of 1964, the church was intensely concerned about segregation, but there were very strong efforts to hold on to the past.”

By this time, plans were well underway for the Methodist Church to merge with the Evangelical United Brethren. The EUB, which was not segregated, made it clear that the Methodists needed to resolve the issue. They ultimately made abolishing the segregated institution a condition for union.

The Commission on Interjurisdictional Relations’ report to the 1964 General Conference cited some positives — namely that the Central Jurisdiction allowed blacks to hold church leadership positions. However, the report also noted that it made Methodists “the only church in America which segregates, by its constitution, one sector of its membership on the basis of race.”
While hoping Amendment IX would dissolve the Central Jurisdiction, the commission did ask that if there were still conferences that had not transferred out by 1967, a formal termination of the jurisdiction by the end of 1968 should be enacted.

Dissatisfied with the passive recommendations of the committee, W. Astor Kirk, an alternate delegate from West Texas, introduced an amendment that stipulated “the Central Jurisdiction structure … not be made a part of the Plan of Merger.” It became known as the Kirk Amendment, passing 464 to 362.

The following year, Southern church leaders argued before the Judicial Council — the church’s top court — that jurisdictions had the right to preserve segregated conferences. Kirk prepared the brief opposing their stance, and the council decided in his favor.

Kirk passed away in 2011 after a lifetime of advocating for a more inclusive United Methodist Church. In a 2004 interview, he said, “My hope is that we can take the past as a guide and get beyond it and really begin within the UMC to interact with people just as people, without regard to race, color or gender.”

Moving toward integration, delegates approved a $20 million Temporary General Aid Fund to assist the Central Jurisdiction in raising the levels of pensions and minimum salaries. Salary assistance was supposed to steadily decrease over a 20-year period as the post-merger conferences got their financial footing.

“The efforts of the church to respond to the gap in income, pensions and health care of the black pastors of the Central Jurisdiction and the white pastors of the geographical jurisdictions was commendable,” said the Rev. Gilbert H. Caldwell, a civil rights pioneer and retired clergy member of the Rocky Mountain Conference. “My preacher father was one of those pastors.

By the 1968 Uniting Conference in Dallas, all that remained was to make official the elimination of the Central Jurisdiction. Still, some trepidation remained.

Retired Bishop Melvin Talbert said he favored doing away with the Central Jurisdiction until the time came to vote at General Conference.

“I voted against the merger because it gave the EUB everything they wanted while the black jurisdiction got nothing but a promise. There was no commitment to having a number of delegates; they just did away with it.”

“Only one jurisdiction was closed in 1968: the one that gave people of African-American descent power around appointment, around personnel, around vote, more power in voting our episcopacy,” said Vance Ross, director of annual conference relations at Discipleship Ministries. “That segment of people — my grandmother and her contemporaries — said, ‘We will stay and cause you to have to look at us and say you don’t love us, that we’re not equal.’”

White added that there was a risk of losing representatives at the agencies. “But they felt segregation was so untenable, they’d be willing to make that sacrifice,” White said.
The Charter for Racial Justice was written by the Women’s Division (predecessor to United Methodist Women) in 1952. “On the evening of January 9, 1952, at Buck Hill Falls, the report of the committee on Racial Practices was brought to the Women’s Division by Mrs. [Louise] Oldshue, chairman. An artist had written the new Charter of Racial Policies on a large wallboard visible to the entire group. After discussion, the charter was adopted unanimously by a standing vote. …”

The BOARD OF MISSIONS OF THE METHODIST CHURCH

A CHARTER OF RACIAL POLICIES presented to the Woman's Society of Christian Service

1. We believe that God is the Father of all people and all are His children in one family.
2. We believe that the personality of every human being is sacred.
3. We believe that opportunities for fellowship and service for personal growth, and for freedom in every aspect of life are inherent rights of every individual.
4. We believe that the visible church of Jesus Christ must demonstrate these principles within its own organization and program.
5. We believe that the Woman's Division as an agency of The Methodist Church must build a fellowship and social order without racial barriers in every area it may touch.

WE WILL

1. Commit ourselves as individuals called by Jesus to witness by word and deed to the basic rights of every person regardless of cost.
2. Unite our efforts with all groups in the church toward eliminating in the Methodist Church all forms of segregation based on race whether in basic structure or institutional life.
3. Create in local churches opportunities for inclusive fellowship and membership without restriction based on race.
4. Act with other groups and agencies to involve families in new experiences with other races and cultures.
5. Share in creative plans that challenge youth, students, and young adults of all races to new understandings of the church's mission and ministries.
6. Interpret and strengthen recruitment and employment practices of the Woman's Division consistent with our belief in the oneness of God's family.
7. Open the facilities and services of all Woman's Division Institutions without restrictions based on race and make such policies clearly known.
8. Establish all schools of missions and Christian service and all leadership development and enrichment programs on a regional basis without restriction based on race.
9. Seek to change community patterns of racial segregation in all relationships including education, housing, voting, employment, and public facilities.
10. Work for national policies that safeguard the rights of all the nations people.

C. AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS, 1956

1. Join with others who seek in church and community justices and freedom for all members of the family of God.

Records of the Women's Division, General Commission on Archives and History, Madison, NJ 07940
1972 Creation of General Commission on Religion and Race

In 1967, just prior to the merger that created The United Methodist Church out of The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren, Black Methodists sought to ensure their equality within the newly emerging denomination. With the dismantling of the Central Jurisdiction, there was a need to ensure that Black (United) Methodist voices would be not only present at the table but listened to at the table. This led to the creation of Black Methodists for Church Renewal, an ethnic caucus that successfully lobbied the General Conference of 1968 to ensure that a general agency would be created within the new denomination that would prioritize race and hold white United Methodists accountable. The General Commission on Religion and Race (GCRR) was created in 1972 at General Conference.

Just prior to the creation of GCRR, the denomination began a national discussion and analysis of its own white racism. From the written record at GCAH, we can see that racism was being discussed in The United Methodist Church since its inception in 1968, largely by the Department of Youth Ministry, which created a packet on racism in 1968. There is evidence that the General Board of Global Ministry’s National Division was holding consultations in 1970 and continued to do so till at least in 1987 when the National Convocation on Racism was held.

As part of these efforts, in 1973, GCRR published the following document entitled, “Reflections on White Racism,” written by James Jones, the Associate Executive Secretary at GCRR. We asked current UMC leaders to read through this text and reflect on it. Their reflections are included on our website, http://www.gcah.org/resources/heritage-sunday-2021.
REFLECTIONS ON WHITE RACISM

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REFLECTIONS ON WHITE RACISM

Tracing the development of racism in America, one soon realizes that the mores of today’s society, in relation to problems between the races, took root with the American colonists, and continues right on through the Civil War down to the present day.

Admitting that racism is an old problem, however, suggests that the blame is not ours—the blame belongs to those who have come before us. We must see that it was their problem in their day. We have inherited their problem and compounded it by our own unwillingness to confront it in our day.

For us as white people to reflect on white racism is admittedly a difficult process for it means that we admit that we have been brought up in a society that has educated us, formally through our institutions and informally through our living, to be racist. The real tragedy is that most of the time we did not know what was happening. The fact that white is better than black was never really questioned. The subtleties of “Pure as snow” and Black as tar got transferred to the human family in many ways. That was a “Black deed” you did. “Nigger” was what you called a black person and with it came the understanding that that meant dirty, ignorant, not to be trusted, animal like. The black man was not considered a part of society. His role was not much different from the mule or the tractor. In the South he was to be taken care of like you cared for your other possessions, i.e., cattle, and work equipment.
In the north he was told "the door is open", but somehow it always got slammed just before he got in.

Today the situation is not different. A few blacks have "made it", but the larger majority are still outside of society. Capital for black business is hard to get. For example, the Church is willing to help finance individual black businesses, but not broadly based corporatives. To push black capitalism is racism. The employment practices in the boards and agencies only need to be looked at and we see racism. How many of our institutions, such as hospitals, homes for children and the aging, institutions for higher education, and, yes, conference boards and agencies have any significant representation of black people, brown people, or red people employed? What are the employment practices of the companies our Church does business with. Not to know these facts is racism. The danger that we as white churchmen face is not knowing the facts, but when we see them a deeper danger is not speaking and acting out ways to correct them.

Commenting on the possibilities of finding a solution to the racism in the United States, Frank H. Joyce, Executive Director of People Against Racism, states that:

"The first step in the solution of any problem is its correct definition. To this day whites have attempted to devise a realistic definition of the race problem. The task has been fundamentally evaded by the belief that the race problem is a Negro problem. In fact, whites do not have a white problem. Even those, such as the Kerner Commission, who have recently begun to recognize racism in the white community, direct their recommendations and solutions, not at white Americans, but at reforms for Black America. Such reforms are obviously prevented by the very racism which created the need for reforms in the first place. What is required is an analysis of white supremacy--however crude as this stage--and a strategy and program for combatting it."
Again, one major problem for individuals and/or groups, such as the Church, is to admit that we are racists. After this admission is made, we must then continue to deal with the racist psychology which engulfs us at every turn.

Mr. Joyce continues to talk about racism by saying:

"First, a distinction must be made between individual and institutional racism. Second, the main difficult differentiation must be made between what might be termed attitudinal and behavioral racism."

The following are examples of different types of racism:

A. Individual racism is represented in the bombing of a Birmingham church, which resulted in the death of four black children.

B. Institutional (systematic) racism is represented in the deaths of 500 black infants in the same city, compared to the much lower infant mortality rate among whites.

C. Attitudinal racism is defined as any action taken against people of color simply because they are not white.

D. Behavioral racism may be defined as any action, individual or institutional, which disadvantages non-whites to the advantage of whites, regardless of conscious motivation.

At this point, I would challenge us to sit for a while and ponder these definitions. Think for yourself, and see if you can give concrete examples that fit these definitions. If you have trouble thinking of examples, it may just be that this is the reason we are faced with the problem.

To those of us in the Church, the door to true confession and repentence is open. We have "allowed" blacks to come to our white church. However, in the south, we have not really even "allowed" blacks to come. No, but they came anyway, and most of the time, they were turned away.
I was once approached by a white clergymen in the South and asked if I could get some blacks to attend his church. To talk of mergers is not the same as talking about blacks coming to our white churches.

However, to purge the institutional church of racism may be possible, if we can accept all men--without regard to their color--instead of accepting them in spite of it.

To become serious about racism, in order to be the true church of our Lord is the most perplexing challenge that the institution has faced in 2,000 years--if in fact, we are facing it!

All over the United States, we must sharpen our senses, and be willing to purge ourselves of both our conscious and unconscious racism.

To create a community of people who come together as equals in order to address themselves to the problems of living and celebrating life, is not easy.

To create a community where all can affirm their past and look to the future by realizing the value of the present, is not easy.

It is to this task, of creating such a community, that we have always been called. The urgency of the call in our day manifests itself in our inability to respond to it. This exposure has come through the sit-ins, demonstrations, and various other forms of civil disobedience--all of which have resulted in the demands of the people of color. Further, these legitimate exposures are judgments which show us our possibilities.

They are judgments for us, because as a white church, we have
not made substantial efforts to meet these demands. They are possibilities because they could be our last chance to adopt and enact concrete programs which will help to rectify the failures of the past. Recognition of our racism is the first step. Confession is a second step. Acts of repentence is the third.

As leaders, we must see our role as one of creating an inclusive church. There can be no such church as long as we refuse to deal with our racism. The "Why Mary, I don’t think of you as a Negro" attitude must be dealt with effectively.

"Like much of American society, racism is a matter of subtle and not-so-subtle euphemism. An elaborate rhetoric exists to disguise it. Schools are segregated not to keep black separate, but to preserve the neighborhood school. Police are given excessive power in the ghetto not to deny basic constitutional rights to second class citizen black people, but to stop "crime in the streets". Blacks are not denied jobs because of their skin color, but because they are not "qualified". Housing integration is not opposed because people do not wish to live next door to "niggers", but because black people lower property values. Black students, it is argued, fail to learn in ghetto schools, not because the schools are inferior, but because the black students are inferior by virtue of "cultural disadvantages" and a poor home environment."

These euphemisms and other devices by which we have absolved ourselves from the responsibility for racism must no longer be allowed to blind us.

The war has been declared. We in the Church can no longer claim immunity. We must move quickly and with determined commitment to the goal of inclusiveness and community involvement.
1987 National Convocation on Racism

The below is historical background taken directly from the Journal for the National Convocation on Racism held in 1987 in Louisville, Kentucky and hosted by the General Commission on Religion and Race:

In 1980, The World Council of Churches sponsored a World Consultation on Racism to consider developing a process for churches to use in combating racism between 1980-1990 and to decide how such a process could be given a high priority by churches. Bishop Woodie W. White, then General Secretary of The General Commission on Religion and Race, disseminated recommendations from the World Consultation throughout the connectional system. His report was distributed and portions were printed in an October 1980 New World Outlook article titled, “Racism: The Church’s Unfinished Agenda.”

In 1984, the General Conference adopted a Resolution on Global Racism. One recommendation was that a national Convocation on Global Racism be sponsored by the Council of Bishops and The General Commission on Religion and Race, in cooperation with program boards, followed by five Jurisdictional Convocations.

In June 1985, a National Planning Committee, composed of representatives from these bodies, was organized to implement the Resolution. A representative from each of the four major national racial ethnic caucuses joined the Committee in January 1986.

At the same time, five Jurisdictional Chairpersons were invited into the planning process. These individuals will serve as the Chairpersons of their Jurisdictional United Methodist Convocation.

The Convocation on Racism was held September 13-16, 1987 in Louisville, Kentucky. Attending were 631 persons, including 32 active Bishops and 420 annual conference leaders. Agencies, seminaries, the Judicial Council, and racial and ethnic minority centers and caucuses were represented. Ecumenical observers were also present. Approximately 150 persons engaged in leadership roles, either as major presenters and preachers, seminar leaders or Living Unit Group Facilitators.14

Bishop Woodie W. White gave the following speech titled, Racism: The Church’s Unfinished Agenda at the 1987 Convocation. It is reprinted below. We invite you to compare this 1987 speech with his 1980 article from New World Outlook which holds the same title. Are there major differences or similarities between the two speeches?

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14 Kelly Fitzgerald, ed. Racism: The Church’s Unfinished Agenda, a Journal of the National Convocation on Racism (General Commission on Religion and Race, 1987) 2-3. Records of the General Commission on Religion and Race, General Commission on Archives and History, Madison, NJ 07940

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"RACISM: THE CHURCH'S UNFINISHED AGENDA"

Bishop Woodie W. White

God of Our Weary Years,
God of Our Silent Tears,
Thou Who has brought us
Thus Far on the Way;
Thou Who has by thy Might,
Led us into the Light,
Keep us forever in the Path we Pray
Lest our feet Stray from the Places,
Our God where we met Thee,
Lest in our hearts, drunk with the wine
of the World,
We forget Thee ...

It is important for me (and for us, I believe) in any assessment of our battle with racism as it manifests itself in the life of The United Methodist Church, to properly acknowledge some realities that might be overlooked because they are so utterly obvious.

I have this God-sense about life that causes me to acknowledge the fundamental belief that it is God's world. God's will is Good and wherever Good is evidenced, God is manifested. It is God who has brought us thus far on the way -- sometimes with the help of and sometimes in spite of the General Conference! Sometimes with the help of and sometimes in spite of the Council of Bishops! Sometimes with our efforts and sometimes in spite of our efforts!

Today my brothers and sisters I come to bring you some Good News. And some Bad News. And Some Good News. The Christian's final word is always Good News. Our preaching must always conclude with Good News. We must send our people home with Good News. They come to church with the bad news, but we send them home with the Good News.

Parenthetically, I find incongruous some organizations that call themselves organizations of Good News yet simply spread bad news. Our final word then is Good News. It does not mean we ignore bad news; it simply means that for the Christian the final report is Good News -- no matter how devastatingly awful the bad news may be.

Dr. Eddie Fox, staff member of The General Board of Discipleship, introduced me to what is called "Johnson Grass." Now, you must remember that I was born in New York City and my orientation is primarily urban. All I ever knew was plain grass. Or, more accurately, the absence of it! My agricultural knowledge and understanding of nature is best summed up in "If it crawls, kill it!" So, for me, grass is grass -- pure and simple.

But Dr. Fox says it's not so. He told me about "Johnson Grass" and its amazing qualities and characteristics intrigued me. He says that first of all, Johnson Grass is ugly. It is not one of the attractive grasses. Johnson Grass is difficult to destroy; you can't kill it. If you take the most sophisticated herbicides and spray it, it will droop, it will appear to go away, but as soon as you think you've got it under control, you'll see it growing again.

Johnson Grass, I'm told, will grow anywhere. In good soil and in bad soil and even in no soil at all. In fact, Johnson Grass will even grow through concrete. It's not regional. It will grow in the South. It will grow in the North. It will grow in the East. It will grow in the West. It seems pervasive. An interesting grass, this Johnson Grass.

Now, what we are going to address this week is like Johnson Grass -- it's called racism. Like Johnson Grass it is tough; it is stubborn; and it seems to grow in the strangest places. In fact, racism seems to grow anywhere. No, racism seems to grow everywhere.

Racism seems to be omnipresent --

It grows in the South
It grows in the North
It grows in the East
It grows in the West

It grows in the South
It grows in the North
It grows in the East
It grows in the West
You find it in councils  
You find it in commissions  
You find it in boards  
You find it in committees  
You find it in men  
You find it in women  
You even find it in children.

Racism is like Johnson Grass -- when you think you have it arrested, it will reappear. When you think you've eradicated it here -- it shows up over there. It just doesn't seem to want to die.

Racism soils everything it touches. It is not a simple sociological phenomenon. It is complex, it is deep, it is tenacious, it is diabolical. We must not delude ourselves with unrealistic expectations about combating it or eradicating it. We must instead understand the complex and endemic nature of racism.

Racism Defined

As a participant in the World Consultation on Racism held in the Netherlands in 1980, we made a number of observations about racism. I share two of them with you:

1. "Racism is still pervasive, a worldwide phenomenon. It is not confined to certain countries or continents."
2. "Racism manifests itself in a multiplicity of ways on the local, national and international levels."

In your program book you will find the following definition and description:

"White racism is the value system which assumes that one race is innately superior to all other races and that the "superior" race has the inherent power to dominate all other races. Racism may be classified as personal or institutional. Personal racism is the individual expression (attitude and/or behavior) which accepts the assumptions of a racist value system and maintains the benefits of the system. Institutional racism is the established social patterns which support, implicitly, the racist value system."

"Because white racism is systemic in nature and practice and exists throughout the United Methodist structure nationally and worldwide, the effects of racism globally must be addressed within the local churches, conferences, seminaries, agencies and other institutions."

Noted columnist Carl T. Rowan, in an article entitled "Perhaps Racism Never Went Away", observed that racism "... is an ugly word describing a sordid state of the human mind. Racism will become the great American curse. A force more destructive than anything the Kremlin or any other enemy might devise."

We examine, therefore, the context of racism in the life of the Church and seek to discover where it continues to thrive unabated and where it has been successfully confronted.

I have a daughter who, in spite of my best efforts, is a Dallas Cowboy fan! Some years ago, when the Dallas Cowboys and the Philadelphia Eagles were in the playoffs, I took her to see a game. Early one Sunday morning (after appropriate devotions, of course) we drove to Philadelphia. It was a cold, miserable day -- 15 below zero. As we sat in the stands, we met some friendly people seated next to us. They kept offering me something in a flask; they said it would keep me warm! At any rate, it was a joyful day and we had a good time with these new friends. Fortunately the Eagles won!

As we were driving home, my teenage daughter made a cutting observation. She said, "Dad, isn't it funny how nice white people are when they are not in church?" I was momentarily speechless. There is something haunting and awful about the blot of racism as it manifests itself in the life of the Church. What happens to people when they go to church? People who have grown accustomed to sitting in classrooms together, who work in offices together, who will work side-by-side on projects together, but who balk at the prospect of worshipping God together! I hang my head in shame. Isn't it strange how we behave towards each other in church.

We must first examine our theological context. Racism for the Church is an affront to God -- a scourge on the Body of Christ, the Church, and is fundamentally and unequivocally sin. Racism is fundamentally sin.

The theological assumptions are important for us as Christians. Racism is not merely antisocial behavior but is God-questioning. It seeks in its ordering of the human family to determine the value of human life based on skin color and essentially to redefine the creative act of God. The late Dr. George Kelsoy has helped me immeasurably in understanding this aspect of racism.

The Genesis account affirms that when God created humanity God declared it to be good, suggesting that henceforth all human life as the product of the creative activity of God was of inherent value. Racism redefines creation. As such, racism and the racist seek to play God. The racist denies or challenges the creative genius and wisdom of God. God willed that the human family be created in an array of hues, diverse physical characteristics and declared it good!

Those who declare otherwise say in no uncertain terms that God did it wrong -- God made a
mistake. They know better. That, my friends, is the highest expression of blasphemy. It is even more offensive than disobedience.

The World Council of Churches Consultation on Racism declared:

"Every human being created in the image of God is a person for whom Christ died. Racism, which is the use of a person's racial origins to determine the person's value, is an assault on Christ's value and a rejection of his sacrifice. Whenever it appears, whether in the individual or collective, it is a sin ..."

While the context for our discussion of racism is, in part, a mid-decade assessment of how The United Methodist Church is combating racism, one must enlarge upon that context and recall that this denomination celebrates its 20th birthday next year. While its predecessor bodies are older to be sure, and while our personal histories in the denomination vary, our common history is now but 19 years old. Consequently, we must not fail to assess what the state of racism is in that shared historical context.

A critical benchmark in that history is the constitution of the new United Methodist Church which sought to define its ordered life as one free of racist structures, i.e. institutional expressions. Article IV, Division One of that Constitution declares:

Inclusiveness of the Church

"The United Methodist Church is a part of the Church Universal, which is one Body of Christ. Therefore, all persons, without regard to race, color, national origin, or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, to participate in its programs, and when they take the appropriate vows, to be admitted into its membership in any local church in the connection. In The United Methodist Church no conference or other organizational unit of the Church shall be structured so as to exclude any member of any constituent body of the Church because of race, color, national origin or economic situation."

Combating Racism

I believe that efforts toward combating and eliminating racism must always be pursued on three levels:

- **Attitudinal** - what one thinks and believes.
- **Behavioral** - how one acts and reacts.
- **Institutional** - the manner in which ideas, beliefs and values are systematically perpetuated.

If we don't successfully and faithfully address all three -- not one, not two, but all three -- we will never come close to seriously confronting the pervasive, systemic and tenacious character of racism. Therefore, any assessment of our success or lack thereof must examine all three manifestations of racism.

Attitudinal racism cannot be considered unimportant even as we address the important issue of institutional racism. I agree with Sister Carolyn Osiek, a Roman Catholic nun, who has written a most provocative and helpful book entitled "Beyond Anger: On Being A Feminist in the Church." She says:

*I am a firm believer that forced structural alteration does not of itself produce lasting change (my emphasis) precisely because it does not convince those who hold power that the new way is better. ... (such things as) Affirmative Action ... are but temporary solutions unless there is a conviction on the part of those in authority and power to implement them and that these policies will indeed in the long run benefit all concerned.*

Make no mistake about it, combating institutional racism is crucial. Affirmative action, employment and Board membership goals are necessary and important. The considerable progress made in the denomination would not have been made without such commitment. But, if we have learned anything these past few years, it is that such structural changes do not assure permanent or lasting change.

Thus my brothers and sisters, we must confront not only institutional racism but attitudinal racism and behavioral racism as well. For unless we seek to change the racist mind, it will simply find a way to circumvent changes in institutional racist structures. Like Johnson Grass which appears to be eliminated, it will appear elsewhere, sometimes in more subtle and sophisticated forms.

The Good News is that our efforts to eradicate institutional racism have been significant in The United Methodist Church. The bad news is that before I could announce the good news, indications suggest that the gains are not permanent but only temporary. Thus, the Bad News!

The United Methodist Church ethnic minority constituency numbers 419,000. The breakdown by racial/ethnic groups is as follows: Blacks 330,000; Hispanics 40,000; Asians 36,000; Native Americans 13,000. These numbers represent 4.5% of a total membership of approximately 9.2 million members. One measure of our effectiveness at eradicating racism is determined by evaluating how inclusive we are in the organizational structures of the denomination at the General Church (National), Annual Conference and local church levels.
Dr. James M. Shopshire, professor at Wesley Theological School, Washington, D.C., has done an exhaustive research analysis of racial and ethnic minority participation at the Annual Conference and General Church levels. His study details data which reveals by the statistical measure that the denomination has made significant strides in becoming a racially inclusive church through the elimination of racially discriminatory policies and practices, especially at the national or General Church level. This is good news. The quantity and quality of inclusiveness varies. There is, nonetheless, at least an anti-racist institutional posture.

However, Dr. Shopshire's caution must be heeded. What he says regarding some of the data might well be applied to the overall study.

Careful study (of the data) is required if the United Methodist Church is to be thoroughly in touch with what it is saying to racial-ethnic minorities. If ... viewed with a feeling of self-righteous accomplishment ... then they are seriously flawed. On the other hand, if the patterns are seen as indicative of what the Church ought to be doing, the constructive consequences of certain trends are to be acknowledged and encouraged.

However, there is concern that the pattern is inconsistent, that the gains may not be permanent even at the national levels of the church, and that the commitment to such a policy is not uniformly strong, even at the General Church level. But even this is not the whole story. My observation has not changed over the years -- and the data supports me in this claim -- that the closer one gets to the local church, the more obvious are expressions of racism. And if, as we are prone to say, "It hasn't happened until it happens at the local church," then the bad news is that we have not begun to seriously address the issue of racism until it is addressed at the local church level. The data at the Annual Conference level reveals considerably less inclusiveness and the local church level is almost nil. Sadly, eleven o'clock Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour of the week!

A recent Consultation on an Inclusive Church sponsored by the Consultation on Church Union produced a report that contains words I believe are relevant to us in our predominantly white denomination:

*The hard reality that COCU itself faces is that any failure to commit itself to an emerging church that forsweares racism in its own life and*...

*struggles with racism in American culture will result in its demise.*

Indeed, the credibility of predominantly white churches will be determined by the level of integrity in confronting racism. It is both an institutional and evangelization issue.

The bad news in this mid-decade assessment is that we have done very little as a denomination to address attitudinal and behavioral racism and the commitment to combat racism has been largely ignored at Annual Conference and local church levels. To ignore the racist heart and the racist mind and believe that one will eliminate permanently racist structures is pure folly. This is theologically unsound as well, for we are called first and foremost to save persons, not institutions!

Lerone Bennett, a noted historian, said years ago something that rings true today:

"It is fashionable nowadays to think of racism as a vast impersonal system for which no one is responsible. But this is still another evasion. Racism did not fall from the sky; it was not secreted in insects. NO -- racism in America was made by men (and women), neighborhood by neighborhood, law by law, restrictive covenant by restrictive covenant, and deed by deed."

Seven years ago I called for a twenty-year program that would commit the denomination to an intentional effort to combat and overcome racism; to touch every level of the church and address racism in all its forms -- attitudinal, behavioral, institutional. An effort that would reach every local church, theological school, hospital, home for children and the aged, college, annual conference and General Church agency, as well as the leadership from the local church down to the Council of Bishops! I still make that call today. Without such intentional and comprehensive efforts, gains made will be lost and we can foresee the emergence of a stronger, more entrenched, albeit subtle, racism throughout the life of the Church.

The bad news is that in many places in the church we are already taking giant steps backwards. While a decade ago we were seriously grappling with racism, there is now only an effort to evade it. Where honest, but painful, dialogue was taking place a decade ago, there is little or none today. Where there was a commitment to broaden the racial and ethnic presence, there is less today. Where there was genuine excitement about the value of inclusiveness, some agencies and institutions have not moved beyond where they were five or six years ago. Where there was a willingness to examine racism, attitudinal as well as behavioral, there is a growing sense that we have done it all and no longer need examination.

And almost nowhere do we hear racism
preached as sin. How can our people be convicted if they do not know the nature of the beast within them and in our structures?

_The Good News_ is that Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. Christ died for the racist and the anti-racist. The good news is that we must share Christ, Christly. That is to say that in our efforts to eradicate racism we must not reveal the spirit of discord while trying to establish harmony. In our efforts to erase racism we are fundamentally trying to help all to see Christ more fully. Christ will more likely be seen if we are more Christ-like in our efforts and methods; we must remember that our object is to destroy racism, not the racist. For the racist is but a brother or sister who has lost the way. And what we say to these brothers and sisters is "Come home!"

Some of you have heard me talk about Will Campbell, an earthy, profound man. His most recent book is entitled "Forty Acres and A Goat." It is a kind of personal reflection on the Civil Rights Movement. Some of you would be proud to see the names of prominent United Methodists like James Lawson, Joseph Lowery -- and my former roommate, Ed King, the most committed anti-racist I have ever seen and one who today bears the physical scars of that commitment, a white Mississippian like none I've met before, who is present at this Convocation.

In the book there is a powerful episode about racism and the relationship of the racist to his/her victims. Will Campbell said that in his reading he found the following quote by John Ross which perhaps explains the reason the racist finds it difficult to acknowledge racism: "The perpetuator of a wrong never forgives his victims."

Will Campbell says to Jim Lawson: "Is that what makes white folks behave like white folks? We can't forgive them for what we've done to them? ... By the accident of birth, I can't forgive you for a wrong I never did to you. And you have to forgive me for not forgiving you for something you don't need forgiving for."

My brothers and sisters, the Good News is simple. Go from this place and tell white people everywhere the Good News:

Your sins are forgiven go and sin no more!
Sharon, your sins are forgiven go and sin no more!
Joe, your sins are forgiven go and sin no more!
Mary, your sins are forgiven go and sin no more!
Bill, your sins are forgiven go and sin no more!
Nancy, your sins are forgiven go and sin no more!

And I looked and saw a New Earth.
And I looked and saw a New America.
And I looked and saw a New United Methodism.

And I looked and there was racism no more.

Rev. Joseph Agne

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14 Kelly Fitzgerald, ed. _Racism: The Church's Unfinished Agenda, a Journal of the National Convocation on Racism_ (General Commission on Religion and Race, 1987) Records of the General Commission on Religion and Race, General Commission on Archives and History, Madison, NJ 07940
During the week of June 16-21, I, along with several other United Methodists attended a World Council of Churches Consultation on Racism in Noordwijkerhout, Lance-laan (Holland). It was my first experience in a conference to examine the phenomenon of racism as a world issue.

Participants from across the world, representing every continent, were present. I was reminded in a most dramatic way of the pervasiveness of racism. Indeed it was out of this observation that I found myself embroiled in a debate with a representative from the Soviet Union.

I have become convinced that racism has the power to transcend all forms of barriers. Racism can be found in different countries, among different races, religions, and political ideologies. There are those who adhere to the position that racism can only exist in a capitalist system. I disagree! While I recognize the historic relationships of racism to colonialism and capitalism, I have seen racism raise its ugly head in some places where it “theoretically” is not supposed to be found. Even more alarming, we are becoming aware that today’s oppressed may be tomorrow’s oppressors!

The World Consultation on Racism observed:

“1. Racism is still a pervasive, world-wide phenomenon. It is not confined to certain countries or continents.”

“2. Racism manifests itself in a multiplicity of ways on the local, national and international levels.”

As we in The United Methodist Church look to our mission in the 80’s the issue of race must still be on our priority list. It is still the unfinished agenda of the Church.

We United Methodists suffer a denominational hazard. We tend to think in quadrennia. Programmatically and organizationally we see problems and solutions operating in four year cycles. We recognize a problem, set our sights in a direction to deal with the problem, and in four years we believe the problem has been solved. So we move on to the next problem.

For the last four years, the church and the nation have placed the issue of racism on a “back burner.” Many have concluded that if you didn’t talk about racism, didn’t mention the word, it would just fade away. Even articles have been written suggesting a moratorium on the use of the word. So we have seen a nation and a church move away from the issue of racism by addressing themselves to other or related issues.

As we move into the 80’s, and draw close to the culmination of this century, it is necessary to again address the issue of racism boldly and uncompro

RACISM:
The Church’s Unfinished Agenda

Woodie W. White
This member of the Ku Klux Klan was arrested in Chattanooga, Tenn., for allegedly carrying the components to manufacture bombs.

with the resurgence of such groups as the Ku Klux Klan. We will see "Miami" repeating itself. And the church will reflect in attitude and structure a racism more pervasive and demonic than we've known.

How can the church more effectively address the issue of racism in the 80's?

Examine The Theological and Biblical Issues Which Speak To Racism

I believe we in the church have not attacked racism as sin. I have talked to church leaders, and discovered their willingness to see racism as a sociological issue—some acknowledge it as an ethical issue, but very few define it as sin. Well, that's what racism is—sin.

In our local churches, and elsewhere throughout the church, as we seek to lessen and eradicate racism, it would be helpful to underscore that racism is not just an indication of how we view other human beings, but it is also indicative of how we view God.

Racism at its core claims that some human beings are more valuable than others because of their race. Having thus established a hierarchy in the human family, privilege and disadvantage is provided on the basis of race or color. In the United States, the hierarchy has been established on the basis of race and those who are white have been defined as superior or more valuable and thereby assigned a place of privilege. Persons of other races (color) have been assigned a lesser place in the hierarchy—opportunities, privileges, and advantages have been provided accordingly.

Racism is sin because it questions the wisdom of God. It suggests that God made a mistake when creating persons who are not white—not the superior ones. Further, racism is sin because it defines some of God's children (those who are not white) as less valuable than others (those who are white). Clearly, the Christian perspective proclaims God as good, perfect, and wise. We do not serve a capricious, imperfect, bungling deity.

The World Consultation on Racism has rightly pointed out:

"Every human being, created in the image of God, is a person for whom Christ has died. Racism, which is the use of a person's racial origins to determine the person's value, is an assault on Christ's value and a rejection of His sacrifice. Whenever it appears, whether in the individual or in the collective, it is sin, and must be openly fought by all those who are on Christ's side, and by the Church as the designated vehicle and instrument of Christ's purpose in the world."

How then can we address the sinful nature of racism? First I believe those responsible for developing our church school curriculum and other resources throughout the church need to provide materials which helps the church understand racism as sin. Such materials need to be provided for every age level in the church—pre-school to senior adults.

Second, our pastors must begin or in some cases reemphasize the sinful nature of racism through their preaching and teaching. I have been appalled at the number of Christians who do not see the correlation of their faith to racism and racial discrimination. Indeed, some prominent voices in the Church Growth Movement, C. Peter Wagner and Donald McGavran, have suggested that such concerns are really "ethical issues" that often cause "overloading the gospel with all the ethical issues on the agenda of the evangelizing culture." (Wagner, Peter C., Our Kind of People: The Ethical Dimension of Church Growth in America, Knox Press, 1979.)

The acceptance and treatment of members of the family of God is not a secondary issue but central to an
understanding and acceptance of God who creates and a Lord who saves. I can't love God with all my heart, soul, and mind, and reject other persons because of the shape of their eyes, or the texture of their hair, or the color of their skin. The Christian's love of God is inextricably tied to his or her love of other human beings.

All of us need to be brought face to face with the theological and biblical foundation of our faith as they address and have application to the nature of racism.

What I am calling for is a theology against racism. The acknowledgment of racism as sin is to admit its demonic nature. Our attempts to lessen and eradicate racism can only be ultimately successful, to the extent that we recognize this is a spiritual as well as an ethical battle. It is a battle not only against institutions, but against behavior, and attitudes which create, maintain, and have need of racism.

Let's Begin a Twenty Year Program Responding to the World Council of Churches Call for a Program to Eradicate Racism During the '80's.

If the United Methodist Church through its local churches, annual conferences, general boards, agencies and councils would commit themselves to work towards the eradication of racism, significant progress toward that goal could be achieved. If for the next twenty years, the whole denomination would be sensitive to identifying and eliminating racism (attitudinal, behavioral, and institutional), what changes could take place. What I am calling for is not a new quadrennial emphasis or priority, but a new commitment by the total church to deal forthrightly with racism once and for all. Such an effort would not take the place of what the Church is doing in response to other critical issues like hunger, ecological conservation, sexism, strengthening the ethnic minority local church, or ministry to and with persons with handicapping conditions. Rather, it is to eradicate racism wherever it is found, even when it exists within these other critical issues.

Such a commitment for the next twenty years would touch every level of the churches' life—local church, theological institutions, hospitals, homes and colleges, annual conferences and general church structures, leadership—laity and clergy. I would therefore propose that:

1. All congregations, conferences and general church agencies participate in a "Service of Repentance, Self-Examination, and Commitment" as they seek to identify the evils of racism and commit themselves to the eradication of all forms of racism—institutional, behavioral, and attitudinal.

2. All conferences and general agencies and local congregations examine their structures and organizations, policies and programs, to determine if there are "Indicators of Racism" present and operative. They might review the Board of Global Ministries' program to combat institutional racism as a possible model and develop ways by which such racism can be eliminated.

UM Bishop D. Frederick Wertz expresses his support to Sioux chief Ernie Peters during "The Longest Walk" to protest anti-Native American legislation.

"We in the church have not attacked racism as sin."
“What I am calling for is a new commitment by the total church to deal forthrightly with racism once and for all.”

3. All conferences and general agencies and congregations develop procedures and programs by which racism can be eradicated and arrested. The General Commission on Religion and Race and other appropriate agencies should be utilized as resources to assist in such an effort.

4. All congregations, conferences and general agencies should study and utilize the “Charter for Racial Justice” as one means of understanding the scope of racism and determining means by which it can be eradicated.

5. All bishops, district superintendents, pastors and other church leaders participate in the program called “The Consultation on Racism” provided by the General Commission on Religion and Race.

6. Each conference and general church agency, and United Methodist related institutions, develop a clear Affirmative Action posture, policy, and program, so as to insure and reflect the rich racial and ethnic diversity of The United Methodist Church.

7. Each conference and general church agency examine and evaluate the nature of the participation in decision making by members of racial and ethnic minority groups. Where appropriate, means should be provided by which such decision making and the sharing of power can be effectively increased.

8. All writers of church publications and materials at the annual conference and general church level read and utilize the handbook entitled, The Elimination of Racist, Sexist, Ageist Language. (Available through General Council on Ministries)

9. Annual conferences, general church agencies, and local congregations provide opportunities for dialogue with persons of racial and ethnic minority groups.


11. Annual conferences and general church agencies with funding responsibilities be especially sensitive to assist those racial and ethnic minority programs and organizations which are seeking to make changes in systems which perpetuate racism and oppression.

The United Methodist Church has come a long way in its effort to become an inclusive church. We have achieved some notable victories. We have much to celebrate. But, racism is still too apparent at every level in the life of the church—and as such it still remains our unfinished agenda. It will require our Lord who is able to cleanse and forgive; change and renew; heal and reconcile.
2000 General Conference Act of Repentance

At General Conference 2000, during a worship service on May 4, United Methodists confessed to the sin of racism, particularly in the 19th c. when white Methodists sought to control Black Methodists, and called for reconciliation. Representatives from the African Methodist Episcopal church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal church were present during the service. The service did not only focus on past sins of racism but on how racism was still ever-present in The United Methodist Church. The end goal of this service was for General Conference, which is the only body that can officially speak for the denomination, to issue an official acknowledgement and apology for past sins of racism.

Below is a video of the entire Service of Repentance and Reconciliation.
2020 Council of Bishops – Repeating the Call

The Council of Bishops has been a leading force in the Methodist tradition since 1939. One of the main ways that the Council, as a whole, addresses the denomination (and the world at large) is via statements. These statements often point the denomination to certain actions and are often written in response to historical events, such as the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which led to the desegregation of public schools in the United States, or more recently to the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police. These statements are meant to present a unified response and a unified call to action. But these statements often call for action and rarely lead to it. Below are historic statements from the Council of Bishops which seek to address racism in some form.

As you read through keep these questions in mind. What rhetoric is consistent? Were these statements followed by any action on the part of the Bishops, annual conferences, local churches, or individual (United) Methodists? Do these words spur you to action or leave you wanting to see more from the bishops? What type of language or action would encourage you?
In 1954, one of the first responses from the Council of Bishops on a matter relating to race was issued after the United States Supreme Court called the segregation of public schools unconstitutional. In this ground-breaking decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*, The Methodist Church’s Council of Bishops sought to show their support of desegregation. In this response you’ll see how appalled at segregation the bishops are, and yet, they refused to recognize their own institutional segregation via the Central Jurisdiction and the harm it created.
THE MESSAGE TO THE CHURCH

adopted by the
Council of Bishops
The Methodist Church
November 20, 1954
Chicago, Illinois

The historic Decision of the Supreme Court abolishing segregation in the public school system is in keeping with the attitude of The Methodist Church. In our official pronouncements, including the Social Creed and the Episcopal Address adopted by the 1952 General Conference, our position has been clearly stated. The Supreme Court itself recognized that such a ruling brought with it difficulties of enforcement, and thereby made provision for sufficient time to implement its Decision. The declaration of the Decision was made in the magnificent home of the Supreme Court in Washington, D. C., but the ultimate success of the ruling will be determined in the hearts of the people of the nation. Thus the Church is furnished with an unequaled opportunity to provide leadership during this period in support of the principles involved in the action of the Court. We accept this responsibility, for one of the foundation stones of our faith is the belief that all men are brothers, equal in the sight of God. In that faith, we declare our support of the ruling of the Supreme Court.

The Evanston Assembly of the World Council of Churches has rejoiced our hearts and strengthened our faith. This living symbol of our Christian heritage and unity is the best hope of our time. We delight to be a part of the world-wide church and pledge to the fellowship our prayers, our loyalty, and our support. The unity of men through diversity, so wonderfully symbolized by the Christian Churches, is a sign pointing to the healing of the nations.

The proposal of Universal Military Training threatens to rise again. Yet within our own lifetime, those who were the first to take the sword have perished by it. Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan were not saved by military training. Their very domination by the military way of life evoked a false sense of security and a disregard for spiritual values. The Church is concerned with our survival as a democracy penetrated by Christian values. Militarism as a way of life is a foe of democracy, and our forefathers fled to these shores to escape it. We call upon our people to prevent any attempt to fasten peacetime conscription on the American people.

To create and foster a climate in which men may dwell together as brothers is our business. We commend heartily the efforts
of President Eisenhower to create a more effective framework of international cooperation and understanding. Upon another occasion, we applauded his offer to share atoms for peaceful, humanitarian purposes. We believe that urgency in such cooperation is a signal need of our time.

We endorse the Refugee Resettlement Program now being sponsored by the Methodist Committee for Overseas Relief. We appeal to our Methodist people to provide sufficient sponsorships to care for the 5000 refugees who constitute our responsibility, our of the 209,000 people who are anticipated as seeking homes in the United States under the 1953 Refugee Relief Act. We believe that the sponsoring of these families by a church or individual Methodists becomes a privilege and a source of spiritual joy.

Finally, we who are the inheritors of the Wesley tradition feel the power of a great evangelistic passion. We remember that with a Revolution flaming across the Channel, John Wesley felt his primary responsibility to be the proclaiming of the good news of God in Christ. This has been and is now the supreme goal of all our endeavors. Since Methodist union in 1939, the Church has grown by nearly two million members. In all our history, there has never been a time that our evangelistic programs have been more widespread than just now. Yet we take no undue satisfaction in our statistical victories, but we seek the commitment and devotion which will give us more spiritual power. Let us pray humbly that the spiritual children of John Wesley—the ministers and laymen of The Methodist Church—may make their rightful contribution to a dark time which longs for the light of Jesus Christ.
In 1963, the Council of Bishops released a statement explicitly on “racial tensions.” This statement was released in response to the imprisonment of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr on April 12, 1963 (Good Friday) in Birmingham, Alabama. It was during this night in prison that King wrote his own call to action, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. Which statement, King’s or the Bishops’, calls you to action?
MESSAGE ON RACIAL TENSION

adopted by the
Council of Bishops
The Methodist Church
April 18, 1963
San Francisco, California

The Council of Bishops of The Methodist Church, meeting in San Francisco, wishes to express great concern and regret over the racial tension and violence which have been occurring in our land. The position of the church has been repeatedly stated, and is found embodied in the Book of Discipline of the Church, in the resolutions of the General Conference on race. We stand for justice and brotherhood among all races and people.

We are a world church and proudly claim all peoples among our membership, all races under our banner.

We at this time wish particularly to commend our Methodist ministers and laymen of the racially troubled areas of the world for the sincere and honest efforts that many have made and are making to improve relations between the races. We strongly urge that such efforts be continued, with particular emphasis being given to the right of all people, of all races, to enjoy full citizenship in this nation and every nation under God. Our hearts go out in sympathy to all persecuted groups and to the cause of Christ.

No one has a monopoly on the best methods to attain the goals aimed at. Our main concern is that we be Christian in this and all other relationships of life.
By 1985, the General Conference of The UMC did have new initiatives to examine racism in the ranks of the denomination, but still, this work was left wanting. Their 1985 statement is reprinted below.

“The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church, recognizing that not enough progress had been made to eliminate racism, found it necessary to issue their Statement in May 1985 titled,

"Continuing Racism: A Concern of The United Methodist Church."

"Racism is a scourge which plagues all mankind. It determines the relational attitudes of masses of people. It is encased in a multitude of systemic and institutional forms which give privilege and status to some by the mere accident of birth and color, while perpetuating disadvantage to others. To-day there are those who would attempt to justify racism on philosophical and theological grounds. However defined, it is an offense against humanity and the source of untold suffering and oppression. Finally, it is an offense against God the Creator who made all people after the divine image.

"The term "racism" evokes anger, guilt and grief among many persons. Unfortunately, we have spent more time defining, debating and defending racism than in destroying its root causes.

"The United Methodist Church can take pride in its pronouncements and in many of its practices and programs which condemn racism and encourage racial justice. Nevertheless, both our faith and the current climate call for renewed concern and action if we are to be serious about the demonic nature of racism and the need for its destruction.

"There are signs clearly indicating that consistent concern and action are necessary if we are to be faithful to a Gospel that declares that God intends and expects justice for all human beings ... In this struggle we understand ourselves as being linked with other Christian denominations, councils of churches and people of good will; we cannot be effective if we try to act alone. Our call to discipleship and our compulsion to be witnesses to what God has done in Jesus Christ, motivate this prayerful response to the demonic reality of racism. May this expression of concern and commitment be implemented through concrete action."

Council of Bishops
On June 8, 2020 the Council of Bishops issued its most recent call to Dismantle Racism, largely in response to the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. Compare the language here to that in the 1985 call.
June 8, 2020

**Council of Bishops statement on the Scourge of Racism**

The past few weeks have left many hurt, angry and outraged as we have witnessed the deaths of unarmed Black persons at the hands of police and racism; Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and the countless others whose names are known only to mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers and friends.

Many bishops have worked to amplify and magnify one another’s voices. The words of Bishop Bruce Ough, resident Bishop of Minneapolis area, were a clarion call to the crisis before us, “There is more than one pandemic ravaging Minnesota and our country at this time. In addition to fighting COVID-19, we are besieged by a pandemic of racism, white supremacy, and white on black or brown violence.”

The voice of Bishop LaTrelle Easterling, resident Bishop of the Baltimore-Washington area, gave power to the realities, “Being Black is not a pre-existing condition; being Black is not justification for probable cause; being Black is not to be inherently suspicious nor suspect. Being Black is a gift from Almighty God and a manifestation of an aspect of God.”

These prophetic voices and those of others have provided words when we had none.

As bishops of the United Methodist Church, we ask every United Methodist to reclaim their baptismal vows to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.

**We ask every United Methodist to name the egregious sin of racism and white supremacy** and join together to take a stand against the oppression and injustice that is killing persons of color.

As bishops of the whole church we affirm the peaceful protests as a means of giving voice where it is needed most.

We are clear that it is beyond time for all United Methodists to act. **It is time to use our voices, our pens, our feet and our heart for change.**
We join with other church leaders and boards and agencies of the United Methodist Church to add strength to the message that we will no longer remain silent nor complicit but must act now!

As a next faithful step we ask United Methodists to read all they can on the subject of anti-racism and engage in conversations with children, youth and adults. Have conversations with coworkers and friends. These will not be easy but they will help us gain a greater appreciation for one another. In a recent podcast, “Unlocking Us,” lecturer, author and podcast host, Brene Brown, hosted author, historian and American University professor, Ibram X. Kendi who said, “By not running from the books that pain us, we can allow them to transform us. I ran from antiracist books most of my life. But now I can’t stop running after them – scrutinizing myself and my society, and in the process changing both.” May we listen not only with our ears but with our hearts and run after books, podcasts and conversations that transform entire communities.

For at least the next 30 days, we ask every United Methodist everywhere to join in prayer at 8:46 a.m. and p.m. for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, the time the officer held his knee on George Floyd’s neck. Do this for at least the next 30 days. Pray for all persons of color who suffer at the hands of injustice and oppression. Pray for our church as we take a stand against racism. Imagine the power of a concert of prayer heard around the world.

And finally, to borrow from Bishop Easterling once again, “The time is now. Dismantle the architecture of whiteness and white supremacy; stop creating, implementing and supporting policies that perpetuate economic injustice; stop the dog-whistle political maneuverings which incite violence against people of color; commit to being an anti-racist; stop over-policing Black and brown bodies; stop using deadly force in ordinary police interactions with Black and brown people. Stop killing us.”

May the God of Grace and Peace be with you.

Bishop Cynthia Fierro Harvey
President - Council of Bishops
The United Methodist Church

Records of the Council of Bishops Collection, General Commission on Archives and History, Madison, NJ 0749
After the June 8, 2020 Council of Bishops statement, a few bishops, created a video calling for action. The video led to the creation of a website and encouraged different levels of the United Methodist connection to begin (or continue) anti-racism work. This website is still active and updated continuously: https://www.umc.org/en/how-we-serve/advocating-for-justice/racial-justice/united-against-racism

Will this renewed effort lead to actual institutional change?

All of these efforts have led to renewed conversations, book studies, new websites, and many interviews with United Methodists. Few have led to substantial change. Why is this? Why have United Methodists been willing to talk about race, racism, and white supremacy, but not willing to act?

Part of the lack of change has to do with the hesitancy of white United Methodists who refuse to acknowledge the way that they historically and contemporarily participate in racist systems that have formed most of modern-societies and our current denominational structure. We have to do the hard work of personal and institutional examination of our past in order to envision more equitable futures.

This is where GCAH is seeking to join the conversation. We cannot begin to have honest discussions about race until we acknowledge the racist past we have and the way that the racism of our fore-Methodists is seeped into our current structures and theologies. It is our hope at GCAH, that this workbook and the other resources produced by our commission will help guide this effort at the local church, annual conference, and individual level.