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.”

*Cover art from the 1987 *Journal of the National Convocation on Racism*, published by General Commission on Religion and Race. The artist and logo designer, Wes Yamaka, noted,
Pride, Shame, & Pain

Why an exploration of our history is important

“Denial is the heartbeat of racism, beating across ideologies, race, and nations.” - Ibram Kendi²

Denominations are no less at fault for denial. Too often, denominations, like those in the Methodist tradition, seek to highlight their proud moments in their past. For Methodists, this comes easily. From our educational systems, healthcare institutions, missionary endeavors, and disaster response to our emphasis on eradicating malaria, poverty, malnutrition, and hunger—Methodists, throughout history, have accomplished much of which to be proud. But there’s more to the story. There’s the side of Methodism that isn’t worthy of pride, that is harder to tell, that is easier to deny. But “denial is the heartbeat of racism.”

On June 8, 2020, amidst a racial reckoning in the United States that reverberated across the globe and on Juneteenth 2020, the day that marks the end of slavery in the United States, the Bishops of The United Methodist Church (UMC) called on fellow United Methodists to dismantle racism through a “multi-level effort to initiate a sustained and coordinated effort to

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² Ibram X. Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist* (New York City: One World) 9.
dismantle racism and promote collective action to work toward racial justice.” In their call, Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi reminded United Methodists of the cycle of racism:

You know the story—A few days of headlines followed by a few days of protests followed by short-lived initiatives, hollow acts of repentance and broken promises. You know the story—A spark of hope that gets doused when something else comes along to grab the headlines or to grab financial resources. You know the story—A fading of emphasis, a sigh of relief from some — “we don’t have to deal with that anymore.” You know the story—A cry of despair from others that “it will never change,” and a voice of anger that says, “I knew it was too good to be true.” It is a story that has played out far too many times. And in the midst of it all, we wait for the next gunshot, the next knee on the neck, the next cry of, “I can’t breathe.”

Do you know the whole story? You might know how the story has played out in contemporary times if you’ve watched national and international news or paid attention to social media. But do you know the story of Methodists’ complicity in racism? Do you know that Methodists segregated African Americans into a separate jurisdiction because white Methodists wanted to ensure that Black Methodists wouldn’t be sent to serve white congregations? Do you know that our historic denomination (the Methodist Episcopal Church) separated over whether or not slavery was moral, even some Methodists claiming it was biblical? Do you know that some of our founding leaders pulled Black Methodists from their prayer-bended knees and ordered them to leave because it was white peoples’ turn to pray? Do you know that Methodist preachers were members and leaders of the Ku Klux Klan? Do you know these stories?

Bishop Moore-Koikoi hopes that, “This time—this time—it has to be different. We must change the story this time as we press on to freedom.”

But in order to change the story, you have to know the full story.

This Heritage Sunday, we’re going to tell that full story. It won’t be easy to hear, and it shouldn’t be. Confronting and acknowledging a racist past and the ways that past creeps into the present is not easy work. It demands intention, humility, ownership, vulnerability, and, most of all, action. This story is not merely words or information—even though it is also that. It’s a call to be different, a call to act differently, a call to create a future where historians one hundred years from now will recognize this as the moment that United Methodists finally got the full story.

This workbook is divided up into glimpses of our past. These glimpses are meant to be places to begin discussion, self-reflection, and action. They provide the basic historic information and are presented in hopes that you will be intrigued to look to the “additional resources” section to learn more about Methodism’s past. I’ve done my best to capture the narrative of race within Methodism in a few short pages, but there are dozens of books that, necessarily so, provide more detail and nuance to this narrative. I encourage you to design book studies around those larger

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3 Kendi, p. 9.
https://www.umc.org/en/content/bishops-juneteenth-dismantling-racism-announcement
monographs. GCAH would be more than happy to help you design these book studies. We’ve included well-known and lesser-known historical documents, presented with brief historic context. These are meant to help you engage directly with statements from our past, to wrestle with the language, and to digest often unknown efforts to support, discern, or dismantle racism.

This is also not a complete story. There are many local churches who do not have a recorded historical narrative. This is why we’ve provided step-by-step instructions for those interested to begin to research the history of their congregations, to record that history, to present that history, and to create a more anti-racist future. I also ask that as you read through this narrative, as you examine the documents, and as you listen to the videos, if there are stories, documents, images, or videos that you think are missing and need to be a part of the larger narrative, please reach out to me personally. Historians work better as teams for no single historian can provide the whole narrative.

As any and all efforts to do this work are never correctly done alone, we thank the General Commission on Religion and Race and United Methodist Women for their assistance in putting together these resources and their willingness to let us borrow some previously published resources.

As you read, please keep in mind that, “[T]he only way to undo racism is to consistently identify and describe it—and then dismantle it. The attempt to turn this usefully descriptive term [racism] into an almost unusable slur is, of course, designed to do the opposite: to freeze us into inaction.”

It’s time to act.

Ashley Boggan Dreff, Ph.D.
General Secretary
General Commission on Archives and History
United Methodist Church
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5 Kendi, 10.
**HISTORICAL NARRATIVE**

**JOHN WESLEY AND ANTI-RACISM**

It’s the responsibility of white people to identify, call out, and stop racism as white persons are, through the way that societies privileges whiteness, the perpetrators of racism and not victims of it.

This is not a political statement. This is a Wesleyan statement. It is a modern-day verbiage of John Wesley’s *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, written in 1774.

Wesley was first exposed to the racist institution of slavery while living in the American colony of Georgia in the 1730s. The abolitionist movement in America did not officially begin in an organized fashion until the 1830s with the formation of American Anti-Slavery Society. However, prior to this organization, there were individuals, Black and white, protesting the injustices of the institution, the hierarchies it created within God’s Kingdom, and the resulting systems of oppression imposed relentlessly on those who were not white.

John Wesley was one of them. Writing *Thoughts Upon Slavery* in 1774 makes this tract one of the earliest written by a white person condemning the white-controlled institution. Wesley condemned, in particular, the American form of chattel slavery, which gave the “master an arbitrary power” that was unlimited for it was so often without “any correction” and which “descends in its full extent from parent to child, even to the latest generation.”

In his early commentary we see Wesley as calling out a system, a system which deemed and degraded persons from Africa as lesser, as somehow justified as property, based on no other quality except from where they were kidnapped.

Wesley further calls out the colonial assumption that Western society was somehow superior to those of the Southern hemisphere. He quotes various reports from missionaries and others to show that Africa was, in fact, civilized, and thus the persons therein were not “savages” or “lesser” but were equally created in the eyes of God. He describes the land of Africa as “fertile, producing abundance of rice and roots,” a place which had its own economy, policies, religions, and traditions. In case his descriptions of civilization were not direct enough, Wesley went further and called out persons who perpetuated these stereotypes as racist:

> Upon the whole therefore the negroes who inhabit the coast of Africa, from the river Senegal to the southern bounds of Angola, are so far from being the stupid, senseless, brutish, lazy barbarians, the fierce, cruel, perfidious savages they have been described, that on the contrary,

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1 Thoughts upon slavery, XI:59, sec. 2.11
they are represented by them who had no motive to flatter them, as remarkably sensible, considering the few advantages they have for improving their understanding:--As very industrious, perhaps more so than any other natives of so warm a climate.--As fair, just and honest in their dealings, unless where white men have taught them to be otherwise:--And as far more mild, friendly and kind to strangers, than any of our forefathers were. Our forefathers! Where shall we find at this day, among the fair-faced natives of Europe, a nation generally practicing the justice, mercy, and truth, which are related of these poor black Africans? Suppose the preceding accounts are true, (which I see no reason or pretense to doubt of) and we may leave England and France, to seek genuine honesty in Benin, Congo, or Angola.

In this one paragraph we can see the beginnings of anti-racism within John Wesley’s thoughts. He calls out a stereotype. He corrects it. And he places the burgeoning racism, correctly, in the laps of the “forefathers,” those white or “fair-faced natives of Europe” who were supposed to be beacons of “justice, mercy, and truth” but instead colonized lands, kidnapped persons, and enslaved them. Thus, Wesley proclaims that the virtues of “justice, mercy, and truth” cannot be learned from Europeans for they are enslavers, but must be learned from the people of Africa for it is they who are exemplars of “genuine honesty.”

One of the more unusual elements of this tract is that Wesley is not basing his main argument in citing Scripture (his normal defense) but instead invoking natural justice, in which slavery is contrary to the basic way that God creates:

Where is the justice of inflicting the severest evils, on those who have done us no wrong? Of depriving those that never injured us in word or deed, of every comfort of life? Of tearing them from their native country, and depriving them of liberty itself? To which an Angolan, has the same natural right as an Englishman, and on which he sets as high a value? Yea where is the justice of taking away the lives of innocent, inoffensive men? Murdering thousands of them in their own land, by the hands of their own countrymen: Many thousands, year after year, on shipboard, and then casting them like dung into the sea! And tens of thousands in that cruel slavery, to which they are so unjustly reduced? But waving, for the present, all other considerations, I strike at the root of this complicated villainy. I absolutely deny all slave-holding to be consistent with any degree of even natural justice.

Finally, Wesley recognized how the institution of slavery would affect Black persons for generations to come, preventing them from being recognized and treated as equals for generations. Wesley argued that enslavers had deprived Africans of any and all means of improvement and he blamed the creation of social inequalities not on Africans but on white people. He wrote, “It is not their [the enslaved] fault, but yours [Europeans]. You must answer for it, before God and humanity.” White people must answer for these crimes, these hierarchies, these systems. White people must call out racism when they see it and seek to correct it for “you first acted the villain in making them slaves (whether you sold them or bought them). You kept

2 Thoughts upon slavery, XI:59, sec. 1.2
3 Thoughts upon slavery, XI:59, sec. 4.2-3
them stupid and wicked by cutting them off from all opportunities of improving either in
knowledge or virtue.⁴

John Wesley, in 1774, with the writing of this tract, declared himself an anti-racist. He called
white people, like himself, to identify racism and to proclaim it loudly as contrary to basic human
nature. And he didn’t stop with just writings. He acted.

When John Wesley formed his Methodist societies, he did not allow enslavers to be members.
This is a practice that was continued beyond his British movement and into the Methodist
Episcopal Church (MEC) when it was formed in 1784 in Baltimore, Maryland. However, it was
also a practice which was quickly abandoned. White Methodists, those in charge of the MEC,
compromised Wesley’s original intent to form an anti-racist Christian movement when they
refused full ordination to Black preachers simply because they were Black, when they began to
allow membership of enslavers into their societies, and when they began to segregate worship
services according to race.

There were Methodists who continued John Wesley’s anti-racist legacy within the denomination,
seeking to remind those white Methodists in charge of Wesley’s original intent for the movement.
They continued to challenge the systemic injustices that replicated social hierarchies within the
denomination, fighting the creation of second-class citizens in the Kingdom of God.

PAIN AND SHAME IN OUR PAST: METHODISM’S COMPLICITY IN RACISM

Adhering to Wesley’s anti-racist ideology, when the Methodist Episcopal Church was initially
formed in 1784, it maintained a strict policy against its society members owning slaves,
threatening to deny communion or excommunicate anyone who enslaved others. However, this
stance did not last beyond its first year. As the majority of Methodists lived in Virginia and
Maryland at that time, this stance was almost immediately compromised and became limited only
to clergy of the Methodist movement and not applicable to lay persons. What began as a bold,
proto anti-racist stance was watered down, compromised, and caved to white-supremacist
interpretations of Christianity in each ensuing year. By 1800, members and clergy were given one
year to emancipate any persons that they enslaved, but this was more of a statement in writing and
rarely a policy in practice. Eventually the divisions between those who sought to maintain anti-
racist policies and those who compromised with white-supremacy resulted in schism at multiple
levels.

One of the first groups to leave the MEC because of its racist policies were Black Methodists, led
by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. They left St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church in
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1787, after they were physically assaulted and removed from their

⁴ Thoughts upon slavery, XI:59, sec. 4.2-3
knees while praying. Forming the Free African Society, Allen purchased a plot of land down the street which was officially established as Mother Bethel in 1794. White Methodists were determined to maintain control over the land, clergy, and members of Mother Bethel through legal efforts. They attempted to use the Deed clause of the Methodist Constitution to claim the land and thus maintain white control of Black Methodist faith. Allen sued the MEC in both 1807 and 1815, successfully leading to the formation of an independent congregation. Due to these unrelenting acts of white supremacy, the Free African Society eventually became a separate denomination called the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in 1816, with Richard Allen as its first bishop. According to Methodist Historian Dennis Dickerson, the true spirit of John Wesley’s anti-racism and egalitarian understandings of the world were carried on through Allen and the AME, not necessarily through Bishop Francis Asbury and the Methodist Episcopal Church (predecessor to the UMC):

Richard Allen could justifiably view himself as John Wesley’s truest American heir. In his devotion to spiritual fervor, social witness, and strict adherence to Methodist doctrine and discipline, Allen’s claim as a quintessential Wesleyan is both compelling and credible.5

However, some African Americans remained in the St. George's congregation. Several years later, in 1794, eighteen of these members began holding their own religious services. They first met in homes; then in 1796 they purchased property and built African Zoar Church north of Philadelphia's city limits in a section called Campington. "Black Harry" Hosier is the church's patron founding pastor. The members of this new church never loosed their ties to the Methodist Episcopal Church, making Zoar the oldest black congregation in the United Methodist tradition with a continuous existence.

Zoar was the fourth congregation in the United Methodist tradition to be organized in Philadelphia. On August 4, 1796, Francis Asbury dedicated the church building at Fourth and Brown Streets. He recorded in his journal that he "was called upon by the African society in Campington to open their new house, which I did, on Rom.i, 16-18, and had an unwieldy congregation of white and black." Asbury preached at Zoar several times and ordained two African American local preachers, Jacob Tapsco and James Champion, there on April 9, 1809. Zoar Church's first black pastor was Perry Tilghman, a lay preacher who served the church from 1835 to 1844. At least five other congregations have been organized out of Zoar church, earning it the affectionate nickname "Mother Zoar." On August 23, 1852, the first Convention of Colored Local Preachers and Laymen convened at Zoar Church. This was the first gathering of its kind in United Methodism. The African American preachers continued to meet annually until 1863, and in 1864 they organized the Delaware Annual Conference, the first of what were eventually twenty-five "Negro Annual Conferences" in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

White supremacy within Methodist ranks did not end with the mistreatment of Allen and Black Methodists in Philadelphia. Similar racist actions in New York City led to the formation of various Black congregations by 1800. Just as St. George’s MEC tried to maintain white control over Black led Mother Bethel in Philadelphia, John Street Methodist Church in New York City

5 Dickerson, A Liberated Past, 26.
tried to maintain control over six Black congregations. In 1820, these six congregations founded the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) denomination and elected James Varick as their first bishop.

In 1844, white supremacy, yet again, led to a split in the Methodist Episcopal Church. The resulting two denominations, the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, (MECS) resulted from the divide over different interpretations as to the morality of slavery and whether or not bishops could enslave persons. The MECS did not see a moral quandary in allowing bishops, clergy, and lay members of the denomination to enslave Black persons. In 1840 and 1844 when Bishop James Osgood Andrews (Georgia) bought one slave and inherited another through marriage, the debate reached the level of General Conference, and ultimately led to an institutional split.

Racism as sin continued to plague the Methodist tradition. After the Civil War, Black Methodists associated with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, organized against white control of their congregations and formed their own denomination in 1870. Originally called the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, in 1956 the name was changed to the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME).

Prior to the turn of the twentieth century, conversations began between the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, as to possible reunion. These conversations seem to suggest that since enslaved persons had been emancipated by the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, the two denominations no longer had reasons to remain separate. This is a shallow interpretation of the 1844 schism. The two denominations had grossly different exegetical methods and social constructions of race which were exacerbated by the development of Biblical Criticism in the 1870s and the Social Gospel movement in the early twentieth century.6

Discussions between these two denominations and with the Methodist Protestant denomination became more serious by the 1930s. In 1939, the three denominations merged to form The Methodist Church, but not without racist actions.

Behind this merger was an undergirding intention to be the largest mainline Protestant denomination in the US. Other denominations in the 1920s split according to modernist and fundamentalist biblical interpretations. At that time, it was seen as an opportunity for Methodists to claim power and prestige, particularly in the United States, through membership numbers. The desire to be powerful dominated the desire for true racial reconciliation and theological discussion. In 1939, as a way to appease the white supremacists, all Black members and clergy of the three denominations were racially segregated into their own jurisdiction, the Central

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6 Biblical Criticism first emerged in Germany and made its way to the United States. It analytically approaches Scripture as a historic document written in a certain context and prioritizes this lens when understanding and interpreting Scripture in the present.
Jurisdiction. White members and clergy were organized in jurisdictions by geographic region; Black members and clergy by race. This was explicit segregation. And this is expression of white supremacy made its way into the very system that still organizes our jurisdictional structure in the UMC today. In 1968, with the creation of The United Methodist Church, the jurisdictional structure was maintained and the Central Jurisdiction was simply dissolved into the pre-existing racist system. Again, in 1968, there was an opportunity to attempt racial reconciliation, to listen to Black Methodists as to how to best ensure that their voice was heard in an equitable way, and again, this did not happen. Black United Methodists stepped up in 1967 and created Black Methodists for Church Renewal which saw to the creation of the General Commission on Religion and Race which ensure that Black United Methodists are represented, but the General Conference and the local church have yet to fully, deeply, and honestly discuss how race and racism inform our current structures.

PRIDE IN OUR PAST: METHODISTS WHO CONTINUED WESLEY’S ANTI-RACISM

There were Methodists, who despite the above racist actions, continued to push the denomination to reclaim Wesley’s anti-racist theology.

One of the larger groups to engage in anti-racist work was the Woman’s Society of Christian Service (WSCS), one of many predecessors to today’s United Methodist Women. At the formation of Central Jurisdiction in 1939, the WSCS immediately began to argue for its dissolution and to challenge the white supremacist underpinnings of racial segregation. These women organized sit-ins, boycotted Jim Crow states, and by 1952 wrote a Charter for Racial Justice (included in the Historical Documents section of this book). Within the UMC, the Women’s Division (successor to WSCS and immediate predecessor to UMW) brought the Charter for Racial Justice into the newly formed denomination, leading to its denominational endorsement by 1980 and every eight years since.7

With the formation of The United Methodist Church in 1968, the Central Jurisdiction was dissolved due to the demands of the Evangelical United Brethren who did not wish to maintain a segregated structure. Black Methodists such as Ethel Johnson sought to ensure through their advocacy that Black Methodists would be given the same opportunities as white Methodists. Johnson and others created Black Methodists for Church Renewal (BMCR) in 1967 to ensure that Black Methodists were not left out of merger discussions. This organization led to the creation of the General Commission on Religion and Race (GCRR) in 1972 whose goal is to ensure that racial minorities in the denomination have equal representation and leadership opportunities.

7 The Woman’s Division and United Methodist Women have historically prioritized dismantling racism arguably more than any other constituency within the Methodist tradition. For a historical narrative of their efforts we recommend, Thelma Stevens’ Legacy for the Future: The History of Christian Social Relations in the Women’s Division of Christian Service, 1940-1968 which talks about the creation of the charter. For a history of Black women involved in these efforts please see To a Higher Glory: The Growth and Development of Black Women Organized for Mission in The Methodist Church, 1940-1968 available online via https://fliphtml5.com/eiek/hori
Throughout the history of the UMC, there have been sustained efforts to discuss and dismantle racism. As mentioned above, GCRR was formed in the early 1970s. In the 1980s, largely through the efforts of Bishop Woodie White and GCRR, General Conference adopted a resolution on Global Racism and asked that a national convocation on racism be held (documents from this convocation can be found in the historic documents section of this book). In the 1990s, racism was discussed as sin in an eight-part series produced by GCRR and the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) entitled *Anti-Racism: The Gift of Diversity*. In 2000, the General Conference held a service of repentance for its racist past, inviting leaders from the AME, AMEZ, and others. In 2020, the Council of Bishops again called for the dismantling of racism in light of the repeated, senseless murder of Black persons at the hands of police officers. United Methodists continue to call out racism when they see it. This harkens back to Wesley’s understanding of social and spiritual equality. It recalls the original Methodism that was so attractive to Black and white persons in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It perhaps is why—despite the overt and covert ways that white Methodists have been racist—many Black persons remain Methodist even as they continue to suffer from the continuing effects of white supremacy.

An analysis of the journals and statements that were written in these decades show progress. The conversations began with getting Methodists to acknowledge that racism exists and is a sociological issue (1950s and 1960s). The conversation progressed, helping white Methodists realize that it was also a denominational issue through the existence of the Central Jurisdiction. In order to combat continued racist structures, GCRR and BMCR were formed in order to ensure equity at all levels of the denomination (1970s). Through the efforts of Bishop Woodie White, in the 1980s racism was finally being discussed as sin, as a theological issue, one that was embedded not only institutionally but theologically into United Methodism. These efforts continued into the 1990s, culminating in a General Conference Act of Repentance in 2000. We’ve made progress in these conversations. United Methodists have begun to nuance how racism is built into the various sociological, institutional, and theological structures that all merge to form our denominational. However, this work is far from over. As good Wesleyans, we must always strive for Christian perfection, the ability to truly see ourselves and each other through the eyes of God. Dismantling racism, telling our stories, reflecting on where we’ve been, what we’ve accomplished, and the historical sins that we continue to repeat (or ignore) is a step in this process of Christian perfection.