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).
*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, "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.”
Research Resources

If you are interested in researching your own church’s history or larger research projects with the General Commission on Archives and History, here is a brief glance at some of the records we have or research we can help you explore.
The United Methodist Church and its antecedent bodies, more on the Methodist side than the Evangelical United Brethren side, struggled with racism in its many forms since the time of John Wesley in 18th century England. Slavery had established itself as a lucrative market for British merchants who were key drivers in the Atlantic slave trade. Wesley believed theologically in the moral, natural rights of justice, liberty, and happiness for all, including slaves. His abolitionism found its voice in various expressions culminating with the 1774 *Thoughts on Slavery* tract along with his last earthly 1791 letter to William Wilberforce. Wesley implored Wilberforce to continue the fight to end British involvement in state sanctioned institutional slavery. Both above documents reside in The United Methodist Archives and History Center’s holdings.

Unfortunately, there were some American Methodists who interpreted the idea of liberty and justice in other ways that would haunt the church to the present day.

The history of United Methodism’s personal and institutional racism, especially against Black Methodists and other non-white Methodist groups can be found throughout GCAH’s holdings in both the library and archive departments. Much of our 18th and 19th century documentation on Methodism and racism is found in printed matter such as newspapers, tracts, biographies, General and Annual Conference journals, mission reports, etc. A search in our library catalog (https://walter.drew.edu/solr/keyword.php) and Drew Methodist Collection (https://www.drew.edu/library/2019/08/21/methodist-conference-journals/) will reveal the breadth and depth of racism in the various levels of the church over its lifespan.

GCAH’s archival racism holdings range from the records of general boards and agencies, personal papers, audio-recordings, photographs, slides, art work, films, etc. Records from the general boards and agencies are a good source to study institutional racism. Key collections include General Commission on Religion and Race, United Methodist Women, General Board of Church and Society, General Board of Global Ministries, and the Council of Bishops. Much of this material is 20th century but there are examples from the 19th century as well. Personal papers put the “flesh” on understanding Methodist racism unlike most general boards and agencies records. The scope of racism ranges from the 19th to 21st century with the
bulk being post-Civil War. A researcher will for the most part have to excavate the collections to find answers to their questions. Go to http://catalog.gcah.org:8080/exist/publicarchives/gcahcat.xql?term1=Slavery+&field1=su&mode1=contains&field2=any&term2= to discover our collections regarding slavery as well as racism, racial justice and racial reform. Bishop Gilbert Haven’s papers are a good place to start for mid-19th century abolitionism (http://catalog.gcah.org/publicdata/gcah5250.htm) within the Methodist Episcopal Church. Bishop Leontyne Kelly papers are worth noting since she is the first Black woman elected to the episcopacy (http://catalog.gcah.org/publicdata/gcah2712.htm#d1). Try a variety of race related terms to find more information on the subject.

Our Missionary Scrapbook Collection is an on-line pictorial history of early to mid-20th century Methodist Episcopal Church mission work both in the United States and beyond. By this time missions no longer meant just evangelism and conversion but also addressing social problems and inequality by the church and the larger society. The captions can be both racist and offensive to the present-day mindset but they are stark reminders of overt or subconscious institutional and personal racism. The albums can be searched at http://catalog.gcah.org/omeka/.

The African American Methodist Heritage Center archives, housed at GCAH, is another rich source documenting racism in the church. Here you will find first person voices struggling with racism and social justice in the church. See the following finding aids on our catalog site for AAHMC collections that reflect racism and its intersections in United Methodism.

http://catalog.gcah.org/publicdata/gcah5985.htm
http://catalog.gcah.org/publicdata/gcah5858.htm
http://catalog.gcah.org/publicdata/gcah4907.htm
http://catalog.gcah.org/publicdata/gcah5708.htm
http://catalog.gcah.org/publicdata/gcah5884.htm
http://catalog.gcah.org/publicdata/gcah5663.htm
http://catalog.gcah.org/publicdata/gcah5730.htm
http://catalog.gcah.org/publicdata/gcah5924.htm
http://catalog.gcah.org/publicdata/gcah5925.htm
http://catalog.gcah.org/publicdata/gcah5684.htm#d1

If you need help to explore or research our race related holdings, contact our Reference Archivist, Frances Lyons at flyons@gcah.org. She will be able to aid and suggest resources as well as other options not readily apparent in our finding aids.
Documenting and Acknowledging Racism in the Local Church

Racism and the move to become an anti-racist local church is a journey. It is a journey that can be painful, soul-searching. It can cause a feeling of brokenness when local churches discover how racism affected their past and may continue informing the present. Discovering evidence of overt or subtle racism in local church historical sources can also lead to a time of healing and acknowledgement when understood through the lens of the Gospel message. Upon discovery, frank discussions and prayers enlighten the faithful and create new possibilities for genuine inclusiveness and spiritual growth. Even if your church was not overtly racist in the past such as barring Black membership, there are more subtle ways that racism can be found in a congregation’s past. What organizations have hosted meetings on your property? Did you congregation oppose immigrant-based new church plants? How did your congregation respond to the Central Jurisdiction (1939-1968) which created instituted segregation between white Methodists and Black congregations? Do you have a cemetery on the property, and if so, who is (or isn’t) buried there? Whose land does your property originally belong to? Are there race-based clauses in your property’s original deed? How does your church’s land relate to its surrounding community? Is there gentrification? Do the people in your pews resemble the people living down the street? There are countless ways to research how your congregation, the church’s property, and its past have discerned racism.

Before a local church can discover potential racist events or policies in the past, it is important to know that racism shaped the history of United Methodism from its very beginning. And many times, whether overt or subtle racist acts via words or deeds ended up blunting the original meaning of the phrase “Kingdom of God” as United Methodists understand it, which, in turn, still reverberates in our denomination’s soul.

But you ask, “How can we find racism in our past?” It’s a good question that requires digging not only into past congregational records but also area newspapers, including advertisements of church services, town and county archives, oral histories, personal diaries, even remembered casual conversations of church members with family, friends and neighbors, etc., for a larger context.

In local church records what is not said is often louder that what is documented. Silence, however, is not necessarily racist but could be interpreted as such if previously uncovered evidence has emerged.

The best places in the local church to discover overt or subtle racism can be found in the following examples:
• Annual conference reports (Formerly known as charge conference reports)
• Minutes of meetings
• Church and annual conference histories along with newsletters
• Church announcements in broadsides or pamphlets
• Bulletins and copies of sermons if available
• Where ministry was focused in the community via church related events
• Financial reports: Did any offerings go to the Freeman’s Aid Society if your church is a former Methodist Episcopal Church between the latter 19th century to 1935? Or where did offerings go to support mission projects which included work amongst persons of color? What was the motivation of sending offerings to overseas mission projects? Was it out of Christian compassion to lift God’s children or to instruct heathen populations to become more like white American Protestant church culture?
• Sunday School documents: What was being taught or not taught? Were there segregated classrooms? Was there a bus ministry to Black or Brown parts of town?
• Vital records such as membership, marriage, baptism, and death. Though rare there may be commentary for individual entries.
• Videos, recording or photographs of church events such as a Christmas play: Look to see who had what parts if your congregation was racially mixed. If not, then how were certain characters presented. Are racial stereotypes being projected?
• Property deeds or church property sales/purchases reflecting racial discrimination. If so see if there were cultural or legal barriers disallowing sales to non-white populations. Also check to see if the church through its various groups stood up to racist real estate practices.
• Church cornerstones: Does your church still have the former Methodist Episcopal Church, South, designation or racist content in the cornerstone time capsule? If so, make a display acknowledging past racist acts and have a service of acknowledgement and repentance at the opening of the time capsule’s contents display.
• Current outlets such as podcasts, social media and YouTube videos
• What outside organizations did the church support in the form of advertisements in programs or property usage.
The below document was written by Rev. Patricia Thompson who serves as the conference historian for the New England Annual Conference of the UMC. She wrote this piece after racist materials were found in the cornerstone of a local church in her conference. It is presented here as a case study and a point of discussion for those of you who might be interested in doing this work and provides another perspective on how to begin researching your church’s past.

**What’s Hiding in Your Church’s History?**

Recently, we heard about the discovery of a cornerstone, originally belonging to the Fairlawn UMC in Shrewsbury, MA, which closed its doors in 1997. Wellspring UMC, the successor to Fairlawn is closing its doors this year – 2020. When District Superintendent, Rev. Megan Stowe, went to collect the records from this church, she learned that the cornerstone of the Fairlawn UMC which was included among the records actually contained items related to activities of the KKK in the 1920’s and 1930’s. This was the result of a resurgence of such activity in relation to European immigrants and Roman Catholics, who were moving into the United States during those years. These items, a part of the history of Fairlawn, had literally been buried in their cornerstone and might never have surfaced if the church had not closed.

This, then, raises the question. What might be hiding in your church’s history? Is there any history of KKK activity in your church? Or, on the other side, any evidence of anti-slavery activity? Often, when we write the history of our churches, we want to celebrate all of the positive, uplifting parts of that history, and we would often rather not talk about any of the negative parts of that history – whether it might have been the activities of the KKK, a pastor who may have run off with the choir director who was the daughter of one of the leading members of the church, or events which may have ended up splitting the church or, at the very least, caused a rift among members.

Yet, it may be those very events that continue to shape the functioning of the church in the present day, for they are often there, just under the surface, causing anxiety or even anger. And comments are often made now and then, that reinforce the need for more conversation or clarification about what really happened. Sometimes, because the events have never been brought out into the open and discussed, there has never been the option for the rumors about what happened to have been corrected or for repentance and healing to take place.

Thus, it is important to know as much about your church’s history, as possible, so that you can deal with both the not-so-positive pieces as well as celebrate all that has been done well, and then allow the whole history to enable you to move forward into the future.

So, how do you go about finding out about your church’s entire history? First, of all, you should consult with your local church historian and determine if a comprehensive history of your church has ever been written. If you do have a written history, read that document thoroughly to see what you might learn.

If you do not have a local church historian, this might be the time to think about identifying someone for that role, since it will soon be time to elect officers for your church for the coming year soon. Although our United Methodist *Discipline* strongly recommends that every church
elect a local church historian, currently only about one-third of the churches in the annual conference actually list a church historian on their lay leadership report.

If you do not have a local church historian with whom to consult, is there anyone else who is responsible for keeping track of the church records? The church secretary, perhaps. Or even the pastor (if you are reading this and are not the pastor). If you currently have no one who does that, this would be a good time to scour the church to see where your records might be. They are often hidden away in a remote closet somewhere or in the basement of the church, or, even in someone’s home. And, you might inquire if, indeed, your church has a cornerstone that might have had records stored in it when the current building was constructed!

Your first step, then, after locating all of your records, including that written history if there is one, is to attempt to house all of them in one place, safe from bugs, changing temperatures, etc. Given the space limitations in some older churches, this might be a challenge, but do the best you can.

Read through your records, especially early quarterly conference records, Official Board minutes, Trustees’ records, minutes of men’s and women’s groups, etc. to see what you can find.

Another resource which may, in fact, yield more actual information about activities in which members of the church were involved than the actual minutes of meetings, is local newspapers. Many area newspapers often had columns for each town which included information about church activities. I have, in fact, written an entire local church history using only information from local newspapers - since there are no existing records available!

Yet another source, with which you may already be familiar, are your older members. Talk with them and ask them about their early memories of the church. If there are negative or troubling parts of the church’s history, they will most likely remember those. In fact, if that is the case, you have probably already heard about some of them, mentioned in passing during a meeting or referred to when something happens that causes a memory to surface. Often, as mentioned earlier, however, these will probably never have actually been brought up, researched, and discussed in order to discover exactly what happened as well as what needs to happen to help resolve any issues that may still be festering, or how to help the church repent of activities such those involving the KKK or other racist or xenophobic activities that might have taken place at one point or another.

This is a good time to explore any such issues which might be a part of your church’s history and to have a discussion about the best way in which to handle them. If there are such issues, there may be folks on both sides of whatever the issue may be, and the issue(s) needs to be handled in a respectful and mature manner. Listen carefully to what each individual is saying. If you are a lay person reading this and not the pastor, then talk with your pastor about leading a discussion which could lead to repentance (if that is necessary) and more importantly, could help to bring about the healing of old wounds. It is far healthier to have an open discussion of the issues than to continue to let whatever went on before fester underneath the surface. Depending upon the issue and how deeply feelings may go, you might want to contact your District Superintendent to help you identify someone who might help in the resolving the issue.
This is *not* to say, however, that every church has such issues hiding somewhere in your history. And even if there are such issues, there will be many other events in your history to remember and celebrate, as well. Many of you have already researched those and written about them. But if you haven’t, now might be a good time to do just that while also working to resolve any issues that might be hiding near the surface.

And, in fact, there may be some very positive history hiding almost in plain site which has never been explored. That was the case for the little church in Wolcott, Vt, where I now attend. One line in the 125th anniversary celebration history published in 1980 noted that the congregation had been gathered by an African American named George S. Brown. Yet, until this information was brought to my attention around 2005, nothing had ever been done (as far as we knew) to uncover Rev. Brown’s story. Most likely, because the kind of resources that are available today were not available to either of two former local church historians. As it turns out, Rev. Brown had an amazing history and as far as can be determined, this church is the only white UMC in the United States that was actually organized by an African American who then supervised the construction of the church building which is still standing today.

Who knows what might be hiding in your church’s history?

- Pat Thompson

*To hear a discussion with Rev. Pat Thompson, Rev. Megan Stowe, and Bishop Devadhar on Wellspring UMC and its past, listen to Un-Tied Methodism: A Local Church Researches Its Past