

What have We Wrought? – The Legacy of the Washington Conference
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Growing up in the Methodist Church, it often puzzled me as to why and how there came to be so many Methodist Churches located in such close proximity to one another. St. Paul Methodist Church – the church in which I was baptized as an infant – was a small church, all of whose members were black. Although I was regularly taken to church by my parents and grandparents, the problem of race in the church really didn't dawn on me until 1969 when I was seven years old.

That was the year that St. Paul received its first white minister. That was also the year that there began to be discussions and outward overtures from the white Methodist church around the corner (Oxon Hill) about shared ministries and possible merger. Up to that point, the two churches seemed to exist in two separate worlds. Although they were less than a mile apart, in the same denomination, and supposedly worshipping and serving the same God, the churches were in fact essentially invisible to each other.

It was at the point when serious talks of merger and shared ministry began that the realities of racial division in the church came to the surface for the members of both St. Paul and Oxon Hill churches. Up until 1968, St. Paul, one of the oldest Methodist churches in Maryland, had been a part of the Washington Conference and the Central Jurisdiction - all-black sub-structures that had been created within the larger denomination, with the uniting of Methodist factions in 1939, while Oxon Hill had been an established and well-regarded member of the Baltimore Conference and the broader Methodist Church.

The creation of the United Methodist Church in 1968, with the merger of the Evangelical United Brethren Churches in Christ and the Methodist Church, and the subsequent elimination of the Central Jurisdiction - and effectively the Washington Conference - offered what seemed to be new hope that local congregations like St. Paul and Oxon Hill, which had up to that point remained segregated, could heal their racial wounds and work towards reconciliation and eventual union.

Despite the hope engendered by these circumstances, the talk of congregational merger brought the often unspoken wounds of race division painfully to the fore. Who would be the

pastor of the newly merged racially integrated congregation? Would she or he be black or white? How would the committees of the new church be established? How would power and leadership be shared? How would finances be handled? In what style would the new congregation worship? The talks of merger eventually ceased, and today these two congregations continue to co-exist less than a mile apart from one another.

The experiences of St. Paul and Oxon Hill United Methodist Churches are not unique within the historical context of Methodism.

In October, we will celebrate the 150th anniversary of emancipation in Maryland and the creation of the Washington Conference. Bishop James Thomas intimates in the title of his book on the story of the Central Jurisdiction that its existence was Methodism's "racial dilemma." At the meeting at which the Washington Conference was established as a part of the Central Jurisdiction, it has been said that Bishop Edgar Love asked, "What have we wrought?" For black Methodists, the results of the "Uniting Conference of 1939" in Kansas City and the establishment of the Central Jurisdiction (and subsequently the Washington Conference) effectively meant the establishment of a "denomination within a denomination – a church within a church."

Dr. William B. McLain, in his 1999 article entitled, "When a Dream is Deferred," intimates that the creation of the Central Jurisdiction was yet another effort of the Methodist Church to rid itself of the race problem by sweeping it under the church's "rug", as was evident with the 1939 Plan of Union and the compromises among the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church South and the Methodist Protestant Church. One of the selling points of the establishment of an all-black jurisdiction and conferences was that black Methodists would be allowed to elect their own bishops and build their own institutions.

In 1968, at the dawn of the formation of the United Methodist Church and the elimination of the former Central Jurisdiction, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. eloquently and prophetically cautioned that with the elimination of the Central Jurisdiction, there existed the possibility of black Methodists "being integrated out of power." Some forty-six years later we are left to ponder the profundity and accuracy of King's observation. McClain asserted that notwithstanding the 1968 merger, the legacy of segregation has continued to plague the United Methodist Church.

What have we wrought? Indeed, the effects of church segregation of the past persist in United Methodism today. In fact, the vast majority of United Methodist congregations – across racial, ethnic and geographic lines - remain essentially segregated. The legacy of racial segregation is most evident in the decline of many black United Methodist congregations. Over the past fifty years - this decline is apparent in consistently decreasing membership, worship attendance, stewardship, and diminished vitality in worship and witness in many churches.

And yet today, a biblical-theological prospect, as rooted in a question raised by the prophet Ezekiel in the 6th century B.C.E., is before us. "Who will stand in the breach? I looked for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach...but I found no one." (Ez. 22:30) As one who is counted among those who are products of the Washington Conference, and as a committed United Methodist, I stand with many others on the legacy of our segregated past with a hope rooted in the promises of God. As we who are of many hues continue to work together towards truly becoming the "United" Methodist Church, this is a hope that with God's help, our future will outshine our tragic past.