

Schism in American Methodism: Polity, Power, and Property

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Abstract

The current efforts to form a new Global Methodist Church (GMC) present an occasion to survey schisms in Methodism and reconsider United Methodism's lack of any provisions providing for groups to withdraw from affiliation. Any group wishing to withdraw while maintaining equity in church property requires special legislation by a General Conference, such legislation drawing on precedents set by the formation of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South (1844–45) and The Colored (now Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church (1870). Throughout Methodist history, racial and theological differences motivating schism have always been joined by ecclesiological critiques. Methodist polity has been a significant discouragement to schism and thus most schisms have included and at times hinged upon protests against the church's centralized authority, the power of bishops (especially in the stationing of ministers), and especially the collective ownership of church property. As schisms proceed, the dominating issue frequently becomes the control of property.

Introduction

Recent news coverage given a group of United Methodist Church members and ministers who have organized and laid plans to leave and form a new denomination with a proposed name of the Global Methodist Church (<https://www.globalmethodist.org/>) has raised a spectrum of issues about

the nature of schism in American Protestant Christianity in general and United Methodism in particular and led to an active conversation among Methodists about the role of schisms in the life of the church. That the dissenting group has drawn up a plan, which it is bringing to the next general conference for approval to facilitate its leaving underlines the unique nature of schism in Methodism. It also belies the simple fact that no provisions for such an occurrence exists in the legal documents of the UMC. This is the case although some historical precedence is found in the 1844 split of The Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) and especially a similar split in 1870 that led to the formation of The Colored (now Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church. The set of obstacles that the future Global Methodist Church would have to overcome to actualize its present plan provides a context to review the history of schism since the 1784 formation of the MEC following the American Revolution and the neglected role that polity plays in such schisms.

Meanwhile, we approach recent religious schisms as citizens of a religiously fragmented society. There are 1200+ denominations in the US (and that many more non-Christians groups, though most are relatively small). Methodism has experienced several dozen schisms, but relatively fewer compared to other families such as the Baptists or the Mennonites and far less than the Pentecostals, which have now formed more than 300 separate denominational bodies.

Setting the Stage

The Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) was established during the crisis created by the Americans actually winning the Revolution and going through the process of setting up the United States. Prior to the Revolution, American Methodism existed as a rather informal organization under the guidance of preachers dispatched by John Wesley from the United Kingdom. When the United Kingdom lost the war, almost all of the preachers returned to England, with only Asbury remaining in the former British colonies. The American preachers turned to him for leadership, named him a bishop, and granted him significant powers, which he wielded as a charismatic leader for more than three decades.

At this point, the question of schism,¹ as opposed to individuals simply walking away from the group, was largely academic. The MEC had few assets, and that is often what schism is primarily about—who gets what assets. But once the MEC became a growing concern, schism would become an issue. And Methodists organized with at least an informal understanding that property was to be owned in common by the whole church, like the Episcopalians. They differed from the Baptists and Congregationalists, among whom the property in which congregations worshipped was largely owned and controlled by the local church, and only property purchased by pan-congregational associations was held in common. Even today among Baptists the membership as a whole may own headquarters buildings, schools, orphanages, homes for the elderly, church camps, and publishing houses, but not the local church property and other associated assets like parsonages, educational buildings detached from sanctuaries, or various bank accounts that hold savings and endowments.² Assuming yet another position, the Churches of Christ hold nothing in common, with all of its publishing, educational, and missional work being done through independent parachurch organizations.

The issue of property and ownership of church assets and its effect upon the exercise of the episcopal office, has been a neglected concern in formal ecclesiological discussions in spite of its central importance in most Methodist

¹ Most church historians have tended to emphasize theological issues in discussions of schism, with some concern for the role of personal disputes among leaders. Sociologist H. Richard Niebuhr initiated discussions around a variety of sociological issues, though notably emphasizing the tendency he found among the more successful denominations to lock themselves into a middle-class status and neglect the needs of the lower class (*Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: H. Holt & Co., 1929). Niebuhr's original work continues to provoke further expansion of the various social factors undergirding religious schisms. Recent contributions include: Robert C. Liebman, John R. Simon, and Robert Wuthnow, "Exploring the Social Sources of Denominationalism: Schisms in American Protestant Denominations, 1890–1980," *Sociological Review* 53 (1988), 343–52; John R. Sutton and Mark Chaves, "Explaining Schisms in American Protestant Denominations, 1890–1990," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43 (2004), 171–90; and Roger Finke and Christopher P. Scheitle, "Understanding Schism: Theoretical Explanations for their Origins," in James Lewis and Sarah M. Lewis, eds., *Sacred Schism: How Religions Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 11–33.

² Among the attempts to explore Methodist schisms, see Thomas B. Neely, *American Methodism: Its Divisions and Unification* (New York: Thomas H. Revell Co., 1915); Gus Tubeville, "Religious Schism in the Methodist Church: A Sociological Analysis of the Pine Grove Case," *Rural Sociology* 14, 1 (March 1949), 29–39.

church schisms.³ However, it has been thrust to the fore in the Global Methodist case, as those who have announced their intention to leave have asked the church to turn over the property of exiting congregations and an additional substantial sum to the schismatic group. Should this transfer occur, the GMC plans to assign the local church property to the congregations, an important shift away from traditional connexionalism toward a congregational polity. While the GMC, at least initially, will maintain episcopal leadership, in the re-assignment of property ownership to the local church, it will dramatically alter the exercise of the office of its bishop. Ultimately, the power of the bishop, most notably exercised in the appointment of ministers and selection of district superintendents, rests on his/her leadership of a body that owns all of the denomination's material wealth.

The property issue became quite clear in the MEC's first major schism that led to the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. In understanding the AMEs, of course, one must set aside the common story of black members of the church becoming angry over being pulled off their knees at a worship service in 1787. While the 1787 story is important for Black Methodists, the AME schism did not occur until 1816, and the events occasioning the break had little or nothing to do with the 1787 incident.⁴ By 1816 the Methodists had multiple congregations in Philadelphia, two of which, Bethel and Zoar, between them served most of the African American

³ This was the prominent theme in the primary study of the schism following the 1939 Methodist Church merger, Walter McElreath, *Methodist Union in the Courts* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1946), but no like study appeared following the formation of The United Methodist Church. It was passed over in recent discussion of ecclesiology such as Douglas M. Koskela, "Discipline and Polity," in Jason E. Vickers, *The Cambridge Companion to American Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 156–70. It is touched on only in passing in the otherwise stellar books on denominationalism by Russell Richey. See his *Denominationalism: Illustrated and Explained* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013).

⁴ On the AME schism, see Will B. Gravely, "African Methodism and the Rise of Black Denominationalism," in Russell E. Richey and Kenneth Rowe, eds., *Rethinking Methodism* (Nashville: Kingwood Books, 1985). Also see Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, eds., *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays* (Nashville, TN: Kingwood Books, 1993), 108–26; J. Gordon Melton, *A Will to Choose: The Origins of African American Methodism* (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2007), 91–108. Over the years, AME historians have paid little if any attention to the events at Bethel between 1787 and the 1816 schism, though some attempt to correct that oversight has been taken in the most recent effort by Dennis C. Dickerson, *The African Methodist Episcopal Church: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

members, but work as a whole was under the guidance of two ministers stationed in the city, both of whom were white.

In 1814, Richard Allen (1760–1831), who was African American and the minister in charge at Bethel, had moved to discipline a member, Robert Green, whom he disfellowshipped. Green went over Allen's head and appealed his case both to the white ministers in charge and the courts. Bethel was at the time dealing with issues of their contributions to the common Methodist budget, and Allen was at odds with both of the ministers stationed in the city, John Emory (1789–1835) and Robert Roberts (1778–1843). The issue between Allen and Green might have been resolved on a pastoral level had not the court stepped in and ruled in favor of Green. It ordered that Bethel be sold at auction to pay him damages, and Allen had to use his personal savings to buy back the church building. In the wake of his ongoing issues with the white ministers, he reorganized the church with a new deed that clearly established the property as under local ownership, the MEC having no interest in it.

Having settled the property issue, Allen subsequently moved on to organize a new denomination that substantively copied the MEC in doctrine, worship, and organization (complete with bishops), with one major exception. He weakened the centralized control of property and assigned extra powers to local church trustees. In the wake of his recent experience, he attempted to ensure that the Bethel property could never be lost again and believed that the trustees would protect the property. The deed at Bethel would come back to haunt the AMEs, as Daniel Payne (1811–1893) anticipated in the 1840s. As the AMEs grew into a substantial body across the northern states, the Bethel trustees repeatedly misused their powers. Thus, in 1844 Payne led an effort to curb the authority Allen had initially given them. Though formally successful, his actions did not immediately prevent the Bethel trustees from acting as before when, in 1848, they in essence fired the conference-appointed minister and selected a local preacher as their new pastor. The issue was only settled after a secular court ruled against the trustees. In the wake of that trial, the AMEs reasserted their centralized control of church property.⁵

Ultimately, the first round of schisms in Methodism were all rooted in racism, which we can think of as the necessary and sufficient cause of a series of breaks in fellowship. In the absence of strong racial prejudices, these schisms would not have occurred. That being said, it is also the case that relative to the

⁵ Daniel Payne, *The History of the A. M. E. Church* (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the A. M. E. Sunday School Union, 1891), 197–216.

formation of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church,⁶ and the African Union Church, interest in and control of church property by African Americans shaped the birthing of each new denomination. The loss of black members early in the century, as insignificant as it seemed at the time, nevertheless raised the sensitivity of white Methodists to the wide range of disputes that could inadvertently lead to a loss of church property, one manifestation of that new awareness being the near universal addition of trust clauses in Methodist deeds.

While racial issues would dominate in the remaining schisms in Methodism through the mid-twentieth century, one other issue competed with race to disturb the church's peace—the power that had been ceded to the episcopacy, especially the power to station ministers. As early as 1792, one James O'Kelly had demanded the right to appeal the appointments made by the bishop and eventually led a small group away into what he called the Republican Methodists.⁷ The more substantive challenge to episcopal rule, however, came in 1830 when a set of prominent ministers focused their grievances around demands of a restructuring of the church with the inclusion of laypeople in the general conference, the elimination of the office of bishop, and the election of presiding elders (i.e., district superintendents). When their challenge was rebuffed, they left and founded The Methodist Protestant Church.⁸

Meanwhile, in the several decades leading up to the Civil War, even as the growth of the church in the slave states continued on a steady upward trajectory, Methodists maintained, at least formally, opposition to slavery, a perspective that would be severely tested by the emergence of abolitionism. The MEC began with a stance not unlike the Quakers, from which it was partially derived, but had very quickly begun to weaken its position as the southern membership grew. Through the 1830s, however, abolitionist sentiments found support throughout the northern conferences, especially in New England, and in

⁶ William J. Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: Reality of the Black Church* (A.M.E. Zion Pub. House, 1974).

⁷ The O'Kelly movement continues as a constituent part of the Churches of Christ and Christian Churches, a wing of the Stone-Campbell Restoration tradition. W. E. MacClenny, *The Life of James O'Kelly and the Early History of the Christian Church in the South* (Charleston, AR: Cobb Publishing, 2020); Charles Francis Kilgore, *The James O'Kelly Schism in the Methodist Episcopal Church* (D.F. [Federal District], Mexico: Casa Unida de Publicaciones, 1963).

⁸ Douglas R. Chandler, "The Formation of the Methodist Protestant Church," in Henry Stevens Burke et al., eds., *The History of American Methodism*, Vol I (New York/Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964), 636–83.

the early 1840s, a group led by the Reverends Orange Scott (1800–1847), LeRoy Sunderland (1802–1885), and L. C. Matlock (1816–1883) demanded reform—that all the compromises on slavery be reversed and that the church return to its founding stance. At the time, the majority opinion in the church was anti-slavery but definitely not abolitionist. Church leadership favored the gradual elimination of slavery and viewed demands for immediate abolition as an extremist position. As their abolitionist position was rebuffed, the dissenters accumulated additional issues in their complaint. They picked up the perennial issue of abuse of power by the bishops but then made common cause with the emerging Holiness movement and complained of the loss of traditional forms of piety among the laity. They also aligned with an emerging critique of Freemasonry (to which many Methodists adhered) and denounced secret societies. As it became obvious that the church would not implement any of their demands, in 1843, the reformers individually withdrew and subsequently, 22 ministers and 6,000 ex-members came together and created the Wesleyan Methodist Church in America.⁹ As they created their non-episcopal association, they added specific regulations against any compromise with slavery, the use of alcohol and tobacco, or participation in secret societies, and for modesty in dress.

Like all the previous schismatic groups, the Wesleyans maintained the MEC's Articles of Religion intact, as no basic doctrinal issue was at stake. The Articles make only a passing reference to ecclesiology, with a basic definition of the church, but no statement on church polity. In line with the revival of an emphasis on holiness, the Wesleyans did create a laundry list of demands relative to piety, which in effect made the way of living out the Christian life an issue and did so before the issue found popular support in the decade immediately after the Civil War.

Abolitionism would continue within the MEC though advocates now had miniscule support and lacked any meaningful voice in the church's policy making. It would become momentarily visible in upstate New York toward the end of the 1850s, when again it would be married to a spectrum of additional reform issues, among which was a protest of the longstanding practice of selling pews in local churches to members who could afford them. In 1858, the small group demanding the "freeing" of the pews would not withdraw, but in a rather

⁹ The Wesleyan Methodists are now an integral part of the Wesleyan Church formed in 1968 by a merger with the Pilgrim Holiness Church. That merger also created a set of new denominations by dissenting members of both groups. Robert Black and Keith Drury, *The Story of the Wesleyan Church* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2018).

unique moment in Methodist history, were expelled from the church for insubordination. Not wishing schism, they sought reinstatement by appealing their case to the 1860 General Conference. Only when that failed did they begin anew by forming what they called the Free Methodist Church.¹⁰

Meanwhile, with the abolitionist issue largely settled by the withdrawal of the Wesleyans, the anti-slavery majority in the northern conferences had to quickly turn and address the other side of the slavery issue, a task placed on the front burner as the 1844 General Conference gathered. The possibility of compromise was complicated by Bishop James Andrew (1794–1871) who had inherited a small number of slaves. There being an anti-manumission law in Georgia, the bishop argued that he could not simply free his slaves, and he refused to sell them to another person who might treat them badly.¹¹ In the heat of the debate at the General Conference, a plan to divide the church was brought forth, and while other issues were present, such as the itinerancy of the bishops, there is no doubt that slavery again was the necessary and sufficient issue that led to the split. Also, given the manner in which the schism occurred, by general conference action, the division occurred with an assumed agreement that the Southern church would maintain possession of all of its local church property as well as the property owned by those annual conferences that aligned with The Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS).¹²

¹⁰ The Free Methodist schism has received more extended consideration in recent years. See Howard A. Snyder and Daniel V. Runyon, *B. T. and Ellen Roberts and the First Free Methodists* (Indianapolis, IN: Light and Life Communications, 2011) and Kevin M. Watson, *Old or New School Methodism? The Fragmentation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). As the Wesleyans anticipated the Holiness movement as a whole, the Free Methodists heralded the spread of Phoebe Palmer's particular reworking of the holiness perspective which would come to prominence in the MEC following the Civil War.

¹¹ Our understanding of Bishop Andrew has been altered by more recent historical work, but current assessments of his relationship to his slaves were not at issue in 1844, his mere ownership of slaves was all that was before the General Conference. See: Mark Auslander, *The Accidental Slaveowner: Revisiting a Myth of Race and Finding an American Family* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

¹² John Nelson Norwood, *The Schism in the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1884: a study of slavery and ecclesiastical politics* (Alfred, NY: Alfred University, 1923); Alexander Gross et al, *A History of the Methodist Church, South in the United States* (Nashville, TN: Pub. House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1907); Charles Elliott, *History of the Great Secession from the Methodist Episcopal Church in the Year 1845: eventuating in the organization of the new church, entitled the "Methodist Episcopal Church, South,"* (Cincinnati, OH: Swormstedt & Poe, for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1855).

With the 1844 conference completed, the MECS moved quickly to reorganize as an independent church body even as many northern church leaders just as quickly reviewed and repented their approval of the plan that they had allowed to pass. Their remorse over the break would burst forth after the Civil War. The attempts to reclaim church property by MEC church authorities would lead to a host of court cases by the MECS to recover land and buildings lost as MEC conferences were organized across the South, especially among African Americans. The anger generated by these court cases further delayed the efforts to reunite the MEC and MECS in the decades following the Reconstruction era.

The conclusion of the Civil War and the end of slavery posed another immediate issue for the MECS. Through the 1840s and 1850s, the MECS had brought some 200,000 African Americans into membership and invested considerable money in constructing facilities for their use. Their continuance in fellowship as free people seemed at the time an impossible situation, and the future of the Methodist Freedmen became a primary issue at the 1866 MECS General Conference. Several plans were floated, including an early favorite that the black members be turned over to the AMEC, which had initiated a vigorous program to bring the former slaves into their fellowship long before the war ended. As more and more of the MECS' black members adhered to the AMEs and AMEZs, white Methodists found themselves unwilling to enrich either church with the property and buildings originally constructed for use by black members. In the end, a new plan to create a third church won the day, and in 1870, the MECS voted to assist their remaining African American members to create The Colored (now Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church.¹³ The decision meant that for a second time, a schism in Methodism was facilitated by the action of a general conference. In addition to the transfer of property, the MECS also made arrangements for some long-term financial assistance to expediate the new church's organization and maintain its program over the years.¹⁴ Meanwhile, as the 1870s began, the former African American members of the MECS across the South were divided among the AMEC, the

¹³ Othal Hawthorn Lakey, *The History of the CME Church* (Memphis, TN: CME Publishing House, 1985); James Clinton Hoggard, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: A Bicentennial Commemorative History* (N.p.: African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church Bicentennial History Commission, 1986).

¹⁴ The MECS, through its successor bodies, continues to provide financial support to the CME Church to the present.

AMEZC, the CMEC, and the new African American conferences established by the MEC.

With slavery finally behind them, a new issue would disturb the several larger Methodist denominations in the post-war years—holiness. Methodism was founded as a “holiness” movement that aimed to spread scriptural holiness across the land. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, holiness was deemphasized in the effort to convert a largely secular public and build a national denomination. Finally, in the 1840s, a movement began to recover holiness as a prominent element in church life. The movement gained strength in the 1850s but was again shoved aside during the Civil War. After the war it gained a new champion in the person of Phoebe Palmer (1807–1874), who also introduced a seemingly small but game changing innovation into holiness thought.¹⁵

Under Wesley, Methodists had considered the full attainment of holiness (or sanctification) to be a lifelong goal that few would reach. Ministers and members were to engage in the earnest search for sanctification and demonstrate that search by leading a pious life, which included attention to holy disciplines and separation from a variety of “worldly” pursuits. In her ruminations on the issue of holiness, Palmer concluded that since the act of making a person holy was, in the end, not due to human endeavor but an act of the Holy Spirit, there should be no need to wait a lifetime for God to act, but that new Christians should begin to pray immediately for the Holy Spirit to sanctify (and empower) them. Palmer’s innovation invigorated a post-war Holiness movement whose members were transformed from a crowd of those beginning a long-term quest for holiness to a close-knit fellowship of the sanctified.

Through the 1870s, holiness of the Palmer persuasion, flourished. A national gathering was held annually in New Jersey, and most conferences saw the founding of camp meeting sites where gatherings could be held through the summer. A number of prominent ministers adhered to the movement and a majority of the bishops, at least in the MEC, were more or less enthusiastic supporters. Also, several of the older schismatic groups, such as the Wesleyans and the Free Methodists, aligned with the movement.¹⁶

However, before the end of the decade, a reaction set in. Some of it was theological, with prominent Methodist leaders questioning, even denouncing,

¹⁵ Charles Edward White, *The Beauty of Holiness: Phoebe Palmer as Theologian, Revivalist, Feminist, and Humanitarian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986).

¹⁶ Timothy Smith, “The Holiness Crusade,” in Emory Stevens Burke et al., eds., *The History of American Methodism* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 608–27.

post-Palmer holiness perspectives. Their protest developed a sociological component as ministers reported disturbances in local churches as the sanctified often looked down upon the non-sanctified church members. It took on an organizational dimension, as church leaders realized that their authority did not extend over the independent Holiness campgrounds. Finally, by the end of the 1870s, the power had shifted among the MEC bishops, who no longer favored the movement but began to attack it.¹⁷

Ministers who became early targets of bishops and district superintendents began to call for separation from “unholiness.” They launched a “come out” movement, the various independent Holiness campgrounds providing them with places for strategizing and communicating with supporters. Through the 1880s and 1890s a number of new Holiness Methodist denominations appeared. Most were relatively small with initial membership limited to one conference or state. Most would disappear over the next generation as they discovered each other’s existence and merged to create larger groups. Among the last to form was the Church of the Nazarene founded by a retired Methodist minister, Phineas Bresee (1838–1915), with decided Holiness leanings, a single independent Holiness congregation in Los Angeles. Following his retirement at the end of a distinguished career, Bresee had begun preaching at the Peniel Mission in Los Angeles. He asked the presiding elder to formally appoint him there, but his request was refused. Rather than give up his work, he reorganized the mission as the First Church of the Nazarene.¹⁸ Through the early decades of the twentieth century, Bresee would come into contact with several of the small regional Holiness groups and initiated a set of mergers that resulted in the transformation of his modest original congregation into the lead church in one of the larger national Holiness bodies.

It should be noted that the MECS was not as hostile to the Holiness movement as was the MEC, and the latter experienced more losses than its southern counterpart. While several new Holiness denominations arose in the South, most notably in the Appalachians, a Holiness movement remained alive and well within the MECS into the twentieth century with leadership provided by a set of prominent evangelists like Sam P. Jones (1848–1906), Beverley

¹⁷ Melvin Easterday Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980); William Kostlevy, *The A to Z of the Holiness Movement* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Floyd Cunningham, *Our Watchword and Song: The Centennial History of the Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009); Carl Bangs, *Phineas Bresee: Pastor to the People* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2013).

Carradine (1948–1931) and the long-lived John L. Brasher (1868–1971).¹⁹ The Holiness movement would, of course, experience its own internal critique as the twentieth century began and become the birthing place of the Pentecostal movement, a subject unto itself.²⁰

Holiness is an issue that invites observations derived from H. Richard Niebuhr's original thesis concerning social causation operating in a religious schism.²¹ First generation Holiness converts tended to represent a distinctly lower economic strata of society. Methodist disciplines have on various occasions raised the economic status of a whole generation of believers and the post-Civil War generation proved to be one such economically mobile generation. A century later, the larger Holiness churches experienced a similar split with what was popularly termed the Glen Griffith Movement when in the 1960s, and harking back to the Wesleyan schism in the 1840s, a set of its most conservative members complained of the worldliness overtaking the older Holiness bodies and began to organize a new set of Holiness denominations.²²

The Twentieth Century

While the nineteenth century saw the original MEC become the subject of splintering decade by decade through the nineteenth century,²³ the new century gave birth to a counter trend—the Ecumenical Movement, a significant founding moment being the formation of the Federal Council of Churches in 1908. There were more than 300 denominations in the United States by this

¹⁹ On the southern phase of the Holiness movement, see: Briane K. Turley, *A Wheel within a Wheel: Southern Methodism and the Georgia Holiness Association* (Macon, GA: Mercer University, 1999); Lawrence Brasher, *The Sanctified South: John Lakin Brasher and the Holiness Movement* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

²⁰ The Pentecostal/Charismatic movement has, as of 2020, spawned more than 400 denominations in the United States.

²¹ Niebuhr, *op. cit.*

²² Carl Oblinger, *Religious Minensis: Social Basis of the Holiness Movement in the Late Nineteenth-Century Methodism: The Illinois Case, 1869–1885* (Evanston, IL: The Institute for the Study of American Religion, 1973).

²³ One important non-Holiness schism occurred in the MECS in the post-Civil War era. A group of members in Georgia protested the appointment system which on rural circuits meant that some smaller congregations never saw a minister on a Sunday. They left to found the Congregational Methodist Church which opted for a fully congregational ecclesiology that abolished the office of bishop and the itinerant ministry.

time, and the council brought together some 30 of the larger Protestant churches with several of the Eastern Orthodox groups. For Methodists, the council provided a periodic meeting place for leaders in the three predominantly white Methodist churches to meet and initiate conversations looking toward their reunion.²⁴ There were always a spectrum of issues to be settled, but each and every attempt to bring the churches together always came down to the significant presence of African American members within the MEC. While it was understood that the MEC white conferences in the South would be integrated into their MECS counterparts, the fate of the relatively small Black conferences remained unresolved.²⁵ In the end, it was agreed to segregate the African American conferences into what became the Central Jurisdiction,²⁶

One pocket of opposition to the merger came from some Methodist Protestant congregations that found themselves back in a church led by bishops who appointed district superintendents and ministers to their posts, and with the title to their local church property now called into question. Thus, while the great majority of the MPC voted for union in 1939, as the merger was ratified, congregations took their opportunity to withdraw with their property intact. Immediately after the merger these congregations came together in no less than five new Methodist denominations that continued MPC polity. Small and isolated, by the end of the century some of these would die out, and, lacking the services usually provided by denominational offices, others largely left behind their distinctly Methodist beliefs and practices and realigned with the emerging Evangelical movement

Interestingly, the most successful of the 1939 splinters was a group in South Carolina that refused to abandon its property. It considered itself the

²⁴ There was no meaningful consideration at the beginning of the century of the need or desire to reunite predominantly white churches with the several African American Methodist denominations.

²⁵ There is a large literature dealing with the process of unification and the formation of the Central Jurisdiction. See: Morris L. Davis, *The Methodist Unification: Christianity and the Politics of Race in the Jim Crow Era* (New York University Press, 2008); John M. Moore, *The Long Road to Methodist Union* (Nashville, TN: Methodist Publishing House, 1941);

²⁶ James S. Thomas, *Methodism's Racial Dilemma: The Story of the Central Jurisdiction* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, [1992]); Barbara Ricks Thompson, *The Central Jurisdiction Recovery Project: preserving our past—building our future* (Washington, DC: General Commission on Religion and Race, United Methodist Church, 2006); Peter C. Murray, *Christ and Caste in Conflict: Creating a Racially Inclusive Methodist Church* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, PhD dissertation, 1985).

continuing The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, even though it abandoned the office of bishop. In spite of the group being of a relatively small size, Methodist authorities took their actions quite seriously and sued for what they considered to be the denomination's property, including the name, The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, a name specifically passed to The Methodist Church (1939–1968) in its constituting document.²⁷ The case would take six years to litigate and go all the way to the Supreme Court, but in the end the communal ownership of local church property and its copyright and trademark rights to the name "The Methodist Episcopal Church, South" were upheld.²⁸ The South Carolina group changed its name to the Southern Methodist Church. It also added a statement on the segregation of the races to its articles of belief and later would enjoy a spurt of growth in the wake of the Civil Rights movement and the 1968 disbanding of the Central Jurisdiction.

The German Factor

As Methodism spread during its first generation, it found a response among the growing German-speaking community. Two distinct German Methodist denominations formed, a major cause being Bishop Asbury's belief that America was basically an English-speaking land and the German language had no future. He failed to anticipate the massive immigration of German-speaking people through the nineteenth century that would allow both The Evangelical Association and The United Brethren in Christ to flourish though the Midwest. The post-Asbury Methodists soon realized Asbury's mistake and formed German-speaking conferences, which survived until the events of World War I forced the sudden anglicization of all of the German-speaking religious bodies.²⁹

²⁷ Interestingly, this suit was filed prior to the passing of the Lanham Act of 1946 the major legislation establishing companies with the rights to their brand names. It is also well ahead of the twenty-first century concerns with "branding" churches, the trademarking of church names, and the creation and trademarking of denominational logos.

²⁸ Walter McElreath, *Methodist Union in the Courts* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1956).

²⁹ On the Evangelical United Brethren and their history see: J. Steve O'Malley and Jason E. Vickers, *Methodist and Pietist: Retrieving the Evangelical United Brethren Tradition* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2011); Kenneth W. Krueger, ed., *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979); Paul Himmel Eller, *These Evangelical United Brethren* (Dayton, OH: Otterbein Press, 1950).

Meanwhile, as the United Brethren grew, in 1841 it adopted a constitution. While approved by the group, the new organization initiated a set of ongoing debates including one on Freemasonry and membership in secret societies. Also arising was a demand for lay representation in conference deliberations. These issues would be discussed and debated for a generation but would be revived in 1889 when another constitution was considered. It relaxed an older rule banning membership in secret societies, opened the general conference to lay representations, and made a few changes to the Statement of Faith. Those opposing the changes found a champion in the person of Bishop Milton L. Wright (1828–1917), the father of the Wright brothers of airplane fame, who would lead supporters in the formation of what they called the United Brethren in Christ of the Old Constitution (now known as the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, USA).

The breakaway group declared their continued use of the 1841 constitution, banned any membership in secret societies, and chose to follow a strict Bible-based behavior code. They tried to take local church property with them but were largely blocked in their effort.

Meanwhile, as the United Brethren were arguing about the issues that would finally divide them in 1889, a group of members in East Pennsylvania, influenced by the Amish Mennonite presence in their area, reacted to the beginning of the Civil War and declared the voluntary bearing of arms to be wrong. They challenged various statements made by the East Pennsylvania Conference of the Brethren as being supportive of war. Led by one George Hoffman, a group left and formed the United Christian Church. A relatively small body with less than a dozen congregations, it has nevertheless continued into the twenty-first century.³⁰

The Evangelical Association faced its singular major disruption in the 1890s over a set of issues relative to polity, from the power of bishops to the local control of church property (there being no doctrinal issues at stake). A major schism led to the formation of The United Evangelical Church, but shortly after the turn of the century, efforts were launched to reunite the church. That reunion occurred in 1922, but at the cost of the loss of dissenting members from The United Evangelical Church that continued as a separated body known as the Evangelical Congregational Church.³¹

³⁰ *History of the United Christian Church*, 1977.

³¹ Robert Sherer Wilson, *A Brief History of the Evangelical Congregational Church for the Enlightenment of Her Pastors and People* (Myerstown, PA: Church Center Press, 1953).

Toward United Methodism

The participation of The Evangelical Association and The United Brethren in Christ led to their merger to become The Evangelical United Brethren in 1946. In the generation following that merger, many in the new church's leadership saw their best way forward was a merger with The Methodist Church (1939–1968). The Methodists were more than open to such a merger as it would in their eyes unite them with a major part of the Wesleyan movement with whom they had been separated for a century and a half.

The EUB-Methodist talks were reaching a culminating point even as the Ecumenical Movement's ideal of creating something resembling a united American Protestant church was peaking, and Methodists joined in the momentary enthusiasm by becoming a part of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU). Initially assembled in 1962, COCU included the Episcopal Church, the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, the United Church of Christ, and The Methodist Church. These churches were soon joined by the three larger African American Methodist churches, the Presbyterian Church in the US (the Southern Presbyterians), and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). COCU would become the major test case of the limits of American ecumenism.³² Amid the many Protestant denominations (there were more than 600 by 1960), the Ecumenical Movement had been relatively successful in encouraging churches in the same denominational tradition to unite. Through the twentieth century there would be major mergers among Lutherans (1930, 1960, 1988), Presbyterians (1906, 1958, 1983), Holiness (1960), and Methodists (1939, 1946, 1968). Congregationally oriented churches in the Reformed tradition would create mergers that led to the United Church of Christ (1931, 1934, 1957). It has, however, been very difficult for denominations to unite across denominational family traditions apart from the power of the state (as in Japan or China) or in situations in which the uniting churches constituted a small national minority (as in Pakistan and India). Also, heralding the continuing role of race in American religious life, to date no predominantly African American denomination has merged with a predominantly white denomination.

The formation of The United Methodist Church in 1968 had to overcome a variety of opposition, including the disapproval of the more theologically

³² Keith Watkins and Michael Kinnamon, *The American Church that Might Have Been: A History of the Consultation on Church Union* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014).

conservative members of the church that bemoaned what they saw as the continued “liberal” drift of the church. Simultaneously, the most politically progressive members called for an updating of church life relative to African Americans, Native Americans, women, and even gay and lesbian members. African Americans especially wanted an end to the Central Jurisdiction, which was voted out of existence. EUBs wanted a variety of concessions including some visibility in the new church’s name (made somewhat impossible due to copyright/trademark problems) and the imposing of limits on the terms of bishops. They lost on every issue.

After the merger, however, church authorities faced threats of schisms on both sides of the merging body, though the major action in that direction came from the EUBs. The church had brought a membership into the merger concentrated in the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic states but had a newer developing membership along the West Coast. In the generation prior to the merger, West Coast members had noticed a problem in training ministers. Young ministerial candidates were sent to the main seminary located in suburban Chicago for their training, but a significant number of the students decided to remain in the Midwest following graduation. To stop the talent drain, the EUBs began to send their ministerial students to the seminary at George Fox University, a Holiness school in Portland, Oregon, for training. An unintended consequence of their action was a transformation by the 1960s of the West Coast EUBs into the most conservative pocket within their wider church fellowship. At the same time, the main Methodist seminary serving the conferences of the Northwest was Iliff Theological Seminary in Denver, the most theologically liberal of the Methodist seminaries at the time, whose graduates had transformed Methodism in the Northwest into one of the most liberal pockets of the church. As the 1968 merger concluded, the majority of the EUB ministers and members in Washington, Oregon, and Montana declared their withdrawal from The United Methodist Church and the formation of a new Holiness denomination. United Methodist authorities immediately moved to claim their property, in the end working out a settlement congregation-by-congregation over its disposition. The schismatic group continues today as the Evangelical Church in North America.³³

On the Methodist side of the merger, there was but one schismatic group, which formed in anticipation of the 1968 merger and the disbanding of the

³³ John M. Pike, *Preachers of Salvation: The History of the Evangelical Church* (Milwaukee, OR: Evangelical Church of North America, 1984).

Central Jurisdiction, but with a broader dissatisfaction with The Methodist Church as a whole. In 1965, some former members in Mississippi formed the Association of Independent Methodists. The new organization rejected episcopal leadership and complained of theological liberalism in the church. As congregations were organized and church property acquired, local church ownership of property was affirmed, and each congregation was allowed to call its pastor rather than have pastors assigned by a central church authority.³⁴

Most of the attention at the time of the merger was the loss of members to the Southern Methodist Church, which had over the previous quarter of a century gained a presence throughout the South. It added a substantial number of members who had left the proposed United Methodist Church over the possibility that it might in the future integrate conferences with all that such mingling might imply. An unexpected challenge appeared in Alabama when in 1959 the state legislature passed what was known as the Dumas Act, which attempted to authorize a majority of a local church organization to withdraw local church property from the use and control of a parent church organization. As the steps toward merger concluded, several Alabama congregations took advantage of the law and attempted to vote themselves out of the denomination. It took several years for the issue to be resolved with the Dumas Act being declared unconstitutional on separation of church and state grounds.³⁵

Since the 1970s, while The United Methodist Church has lost several million members, only a few groups have come together to create new "Methodist" denominations. One such group, for example, emerged in Texas in 1988 and took the name Bethel Methodist Church.³⁶ It has only five congregations. There are additional separated Methodist denominations in existence, but they are splinters of the splinter groups. There are, for example, at least three denominations that broken away from the Southern Methodist Church. While little mentioned in written sources, it is widely assumed among Methodist

³⁴ *Association of Independent Methodists: The First Twenty-Five Years, 1965–1990* (Marceline, MO: Walsworth Press, 1991); Ivan J. Howard, *What Independent Methodists Believe* (Jackson, MS: Association of Independent Methodists, n.d.).

³⁵ A spectrum of materials relative to several of the Alabama cases have now been posted online. See for example: A Blake Denton, "First Methodist Church of Union Springs, Alabama v. Haywood Lynn Scott," *Encyclopedia of Alabama*. Posted at: <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-3975>. Several new independent congregations emerged from the Dumas Act litigation, but no new denomination appeared.

³⁶ *Bethel Methodist Church: An Independent Methodist Denomination*, <https://www.bethel-methodist.com/>.

leadership that Methodist connexionalism, expressed in the common ownership of church property, has been a significant discouragement to congregations that have gone through periods in which a significant number of members wished to withdraw from the denomination.

Conclusions

Schism remains a complex occurrence in Methodism, all the more so as what is now the UMC emerged as a large somewhat-impersonal national body through the twentieth century and developed a spectrum of theological expressions of the Wesleyan tradition. The early twentieth century, marked by the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy, has been superseded by the current lack of any dominant theological perspective claiming a majority and the distaste of many of the seeming theological chaos. The problems created by the lack of theological consensus has found a flashpoint in the heated discussions around LGBTQ issues that came to the fore in the wake of settling basic organizational issues within the church on race with the abandonment of the Central Jurisdiction. One group, the Liberation Methodist Connexion (LMX), is composed of former United Methodists, who have withdrawn in recent years over the church's official stance on homosexuality and who now wish to provide a complete openness to LGBTQ persons and welcome them to all levels of church life and service. On the other end of the spectrum is the yet to be founded proto-organization that has taken the name Global Methodist Church (GMC).

The two groups have adopted a quite different approach to the key ecclesiological issues that as we have seen eventually come to the fore in Methodist schisms. The LMX has formally organized as a new denomination but has yet to meet and create its organizational structure. While affirming its connexional nature, it has voiced a commitment to a continued critique of structures that oppose liberation including "colonialism, white supremacy, economic injustices, patriarchy, sexism, clericalism, ableism, ageism, transphobia, and heteronormativity," an intention that implies an open future and the creation of a new polity that will work toward liberation. The founders of LMX, having previously withdrawn from the UMC, make no claim on any UMC assets.³⁷

³⁷ On the present state of the LMX see its official website (<https://www.thelmx.org/>) and Heather Hahn, "Progressives Launch Denomination," *Good News* (January/February 2021), 6.

The future members of the Global Methodists have published a plan, the "Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation" looking toward an "amicable separation" of the dissenting members from the UMC. Simultaneously, they have also released on their website a proposed *Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline*³⁸ for the Global Methodist Church that outlines their intended structure. The desire for a friendly departure has also been accompanied with an intensive and often harsh critique of the UMC in multiple articles that have appeared in recent years in the *Good News* magazine, a periodical advocating a conservative Evangelical position on the Wesleyan tradition within United Methodism over the last 50 years.³⁹ Those hoping to found the GMC, while describing themselves as a proto-denomination, in the meantime remain within the UMC and argue that as such they have equity in UMC property and have petitioned to take the property of congregations where a majority of the congregation wishes to withdraw and in addition have asked for \$25,000,000, to be taken from the church's reserve funds, which will allow the GMC to establish its national organization from the setting up of offices to the funding of bishops and district superintendents. The local church property will be immediately assigned to the local churches.

This plan draws heavily on the precedent set in the establishment of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in which the MECS provided for the new church by giving it all the property previously used by its African American members and along with an immediate cash grant and a perpetual annual stipend. The size of the GMC at its founding moment will be directly related with the willingness of the General Conference to approve the proposal and the larger church to allow the constitutional alterations that will allow it to go forward.

In the end, over the last two centuries, a constant theme running through the schisms in Methodism centers upon ecclesiology, that often-neglected topic in theological curriculum. Dissenters have, however, consistently included it in their agenda as they have challenged the church's ecclesiological structure as erected through the early decades of its existence. Along with other key issues of belief and practice, they challenged the church's hierarchical organization and the power it exerts through the collective ownership of property and manifest through the bishops' power to appoint ministers and select

³⁸ See: https://peopleneedjesus.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/82948-englishtransitionalbookofdoctrinesanddiscipline_.pdf.

³⁹ See, for example, Thomas Lambrecht, "Getting Methodism Unstuck," *Good News* (May/June 2021), 34–37.

district superintendents. This observation does not take anything from the other issues of theology and piety (and not forgetting the issues of racism so evident in past schisms) that motivate dissent. The ecclesial issues of polity, power, and property, however, have again become the critical issue in the current process propelling the intended establishment of the Global Methodist Church.

About the Author

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