

**“THE PASSIONATE JOURNEY TOWARD MERGER:
A FIFTY-YEAR PERSPECTIVE ON THE CREATION OF THE SOUTH
CAROLINA CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH”**

By

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On June 5, 1972, the members of the two existing South Carolina Conferences of the United Methodist Church gathered on the Wofford College campus in Spartanburg, South Carolina. One Conference was established in 1866 in the wake of the Civil War by the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the other Conference was created by the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1796, but adhered to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in 1845. Both conferences contained elements of the Methodist Protestant Church, which had separated from Episcopal Methodism in 1830 and reunited to form The Methodist Church in 1939.

The final session of the 1866 Conference convened in Leonard Auditorium in the morning, and the 1785 Conference (designated by the year at Bishop Francis Asbury made the first appointments to South Carolina) in the afternoon in Memorial Auditorium. That night the new conference held its first session in Memorial Auditorium.

The sessions in 1972 were the culmination of unfinished business deriving from the creation of The Methodist Church in 1939. One of the major roadblocks to unification was the treatment of the black membership within the new church. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South was overwhelmingly white in a land racially segregated by law. The creation of the jurisdictional system was geographical with one glaring exception—a Central Jurisdiction would include the black conferences and membership. In the Methodist Episcopal

Church General Conference there were 83 nay votes, and 11 abstentions. They sat in silence as the conference celebrated the majority vote. In South Carolina more than 100 persons joined black denomination, and the black churches of the former Methodist Protestant Church became a part of the black conference as the Berkeley District. In the old Southern church there were complaints that the Central Jurisdiction was a move toward eventual integration. South Carolina became the center of a new denomination—the Southern Methodist Church.

After World War II the rising tide of the civil rights movement had its effect on the church. The women of both conferences cooperated in the formation of Bethlehem Centers in Spartanburg and Columbia. But the two conferences took different attitudes toward the civil rights movement itself. Not until 1954 did a joint committee meet to discuss program areas where cooperation might be possible. The cautious views of the whites met the blunt views of black leaders. The white committee turned its responsibility over to the new Board of Social and Economic Relations. At the same time the black conference memorialized the General Conference to abolish the Central Jurisdiction,

In 1956 General Conference adopted Amendment IX to the Constitution to allow black churches and annual conferences to transfer into regional jurisdictions when all parties agreed. Little action resulted. Not until 1964 did the General Conference adopt the goal of an inclusive church and direct that no reference be made to the Central Jurisdiction.

At the 1964 session of the Central Jurisdictional Conference annual conference boundaries were realigned to ease their transfer into regional jurisdictions.

Against the background of the civil rights movement in the state, the white conference in 1966 voted to approve the transfer of black conferences into the Southeastern Jurisdiction. A motion was offered to set 1972 as the date for merger in South Carolina and requesting the bishop to appoint merger committees to work on the mechanics. The date failed, but the call for merger committees was adopted.

At the 1968 Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference the black South Carolina Conference was transferred from the Central Jurisdiction. The two South Carolina Conferences were distinguished by date. Both became part of the Columbia Area, though at first there was considerable apprehension over Bishop Paul Hardin, Jr. among the black leadership. The two bodies began to hold joint pastors schools and leadership training.

Between 1967 and 1969 the merger committees of the two conferences met and divided into subcommittees. Underlying the debates over pensions, minimum salary, and other questions was the often unspoken issue of racism.

Working toward the General Conference goal of 1972, the merger committee appointed a smaller task force to draw up a plan for merger. In 1970 the larger committee adopted the proposed plan and submitted it to the annual conferences. A year of open meetings was held, and in 1971 the 1866 Conference approved it overwhelmingly; the 1785 Conference defeated it, 528-432.

Bishop Hardin appointed a Committee of Six in the 1785 Conference to draw up a modified plan. A special session approved the plan; it was defeated by the 1866 Conference almost unanimously. A Committee of Six from each conference met to perfect a plan, and in January 1972 the two conferences met in joint session in Columbia in the Township Auditorium. Both conferences adopted the plan of merger by wide margins, making way for the meetings in Spartanburg in June. A new chapter in what John Curry called “the passionate journey” began.

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