



THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND THE MODERN ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

By John Thomas III, Editor, *The Christian Recorder*

Ecumenism is defined as, “the effort to foster understanding and cooperation among divided Christian churches, the ultimate goal being their reconciliation in some form of unity.”¹ The most structured advances in these directions are found in the modern ecumenical movement—the structures, institutions, and practices organized to promote these goals. The African Methodist Episcopal Church has participated actively in the growth and development of the modern ecumenical movement since its inception. Throughout the various expressions of global ecumenism, the AME Church has consistently advocated for issues of racial and social justice and ensuring that action on these issues would be central to the broader discussions on Christian unity.

1881-1910

AME Church Delegation to the 1901 World Methodist Conference in London, England



The first major instance of ecumenical involvement by members of the AME Church was the First Ecumenical Conference held in 1881 in London, England. This Conference brought together some 400 delegates representing 30 denominations from the Methodist denominations together at Wesley’s Chapel on City Road for the purposes of building ties across denominations who saw John Wesley as their spiritual father. The AME Church was represented by several delegates and Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne was given the opportunity to preside over one of the sessions given his seniority among Methodist bishops—becoming the first Black man to do so.²

From September 11-15, 1893, the World’s Parliament of Religions was held as a part of the World Columbian



Bishop Benjamin Arnett

¹ Movements: Ecumenical Movement: Timeline: The Association of Religion Data Archives. http://www.thearda.com/timeline/movements/movement_43.asp

² Ecumenical Methodist Conference (1882). Proceedings of the Ecumenical Methodist Conference, held in City Road Chapel, London, September, 1881. Cincinnati: Walden and Stowe.

Exposition in Chicago, Illinois bringing together over 5000 delegates. It is considered the birth of modern interfaith dialogue by being the first formal mass gathering of Eastern and Western religions. Delegates representing Christianity, Islam, Baha'i, Buddhism, and Jainism were in attendance. AME Bishop Benjamin Arnett participated as one of the main keynote speakers and was the only Black person represented on the program. Delivering a message, "Christianity and the Negro," he stated: "We do fervently pray and earnestly hope that the meeting held this day will start a wave of influences that will change some of the Christians of this land in favor of the brotherhood of man, and from this time forward they will accord to us that which we receive in every land except this 'land of the free and home of the brave.'"³ Bishop Payne also made his last public appearance at this event, dying later in the year.

The Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America (FCC) arose out of a meeting of representatives from 29 denominations at Carnegie Hall in Philadelphia in 1905 and was officially organized in 1908 in Philadelphia. The FCC was founded as an outgrowth of the Social Gospel Movement of the early 20th century, with its stress on issues surrounding labor, social inequality, urbanism, and poverty. The AME Church was active in the life of the FCC from its inception.



Ms. Hallie Q.
Brown

The World Missionary Conference held from June 14-23, 1910 in Edinburgh, Scotland is viewed as the starting point for the modern ecumenical movement. This watershed event brought together 1215 delegates from around the world centered on the missionary theme, "The Evangelization of the World in This Generation." Eight commissions reported to the assembly on different aspects of mission work.

Leadership of the conference came from the lay Student Christian Movement: American Methodist John Raleigh Mott and Scottish Free Church member J. H. Oldham led the meeting, and Alexander Bruce, sixth Lord Balfour of Burleigh and lay member of the Church of Scotland, served as President of the Conference. At this "World" Conference, most of the delegates represented American and European missionary societies with less than 20 from the non-Western world and no more than eight African Americans.⁴ The AME Church

³ Barrows, J. H. (2018). *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World's First Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893*. Toronto: Hunter, Rose & Co.

⁴ Stanley, B. (2009). *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*. Grand Rapids,



was represented by four people: Ms. Hallie Quinn Brown (President of the Women’s Parent Mite Missionary Society), Bishop Cornelius Thaddeus Shaffer, Rev. William Wesley Beckett (Secretary of Missions, later Bishop), and Dr. John W. Rankin (later Secretary of Missions).

1910-1950

The 1910 Edinburgh Conference ushered in a wave of activity to promote interchurch Christian cooperation across denominational lines. Three key movements emerged: Faith and Order, Life and Work, and international Missionary Cooperation/Evangelism. Several conferences were held to coordinate these movements and representatives from the AME Church were frequently present and participating. Bishop Sherman Lawrence Greene served on the Continuation Committee of the World Conference on Faith and Order and attended the 1937 World Conference on Life and Work in Oxford, England and the 1937 World Conference on Life and Work in Edinburgh, Scotland.



Bishop Sherman L. Greene, Sr.

Other conferences were held to promote the global Christian Youth movement. In 1930, Bishop John A. Gregg attended the World Christian Endeavor Conference in Berlin, Germany and gave a keynote address and Reverend (later Bishop) Howard Thomas Primm and Reverend Andrew White, Sr. (later Secretary-Treasurer of Christian Education) represented the AME Church at the 1939 World Christian Youth Conference in Amsterdam, Netherlands.



Bishop Richard R. Wright

The World Methodist Conferences were also key places to advocate for racial justice and globally highlight the situation facing African Americans. At the 1911 World Methodist Conference in Toronto, Canada, Rev. (later Bishop) Richard Robert Wright, Ph.D. delivered a speech on the church and social morality. He stated that, ‘It is principally in the attitude of Whites toward negroes’ that a ‘negro has no rights that a White man is bound to respect’ he said, and that ‘social’ and ‘psychological attitude’ created ‘a dual standard of social morality.’⁵

Between 1918 and 1932 representatives from the three major Black Methodist denominations — African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, and Colored Methodist Episcopal—evaluated plans to form one religious body known as the “United

Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.

⁵ Ecumenical Methodist Conference, Carroll, H. K., & Chapman, J. (2018). *Proceedings of the Fourth Ecumenical Methodist Conference: Held in Metropolitan Methodist Church, Toronto, Canada, October 4-17, 1911*. Toronto: Methodist Book and Pub. House.

Methodist Episcopal Church.” During this period the clergy and laity of these three Black denominations debated the advantages and shortcomings of the Birmingham Plan of 1918 and the Pittsburgh proposals of 1927 which sought to create a single Black Methodist organization. By 1932, it became apparent that the attempts to merge the three major Black Methodist denominations would not surmount internal divisions.⁶

Alexander J. Allen, the son of General Officer, George Wesley Allen of the *Southern Christian Recorder*, at the General Conference of 1940, was elected to the AME episcopacy. He was elevated from his full-time position as Secretary of the Cleveland Division of the American Bible Society to the bishopric. After he assumed the ABS position in 1931 from the pastorate of Allen AME Church in Dayton, Ohio, the 1932 General Conference noted this ecumenical achievement and granted him the status of General Officer. When he became a bishop, his successor, V. C. Hodges, assumed the same AME/ABS status.

The AME Church actively participated in the life of the Federal Council of Churches. Various lay and clergy persons served as AME Church representatives to the Federal Council of Churches including: Bishop William A. Fountain, Bishop Charles Spencer Smith, Presiding Elder John Bradford (4th Episcopal District) Presiding Elder Cain P. Cole (6th Episcopal District), Reverend (later Bishop) Carey A. Gibbs, Reverend Wayman A. Jennings (12th Episcopal District), Reverend Eugene H. Kelly (5th Episcopal District), Mrs. Rebecca Lassiter (1st Episcopal District), Dr. Sadie T. M. Alexander, Mrs. (later Dr.) Jamye Coleman Williams (later Editor, *The AME Review*). In 1948, the AME Church was represented on the FCC’s Executive Committee by: Bishop Reverdy C. Ransom, Bishop Joseph Gregg, Bishop Frank Madison Reid, Sr., and Reverend (later Bishop) Joseph Gomez.⁷



Bishop
Frank
Madison
Reid, Sr.



Bishop
Reverdy C.
Ransom

While the FCC addressed broad issues of labor inequality and poverty, it failed to seriously address the needs and concerns of African Americans.⁸ This situation prompted the organizing, in 1934, of the Fraternal Council of Negro Churches (FCNC) by Bishop Reverdy Ransom who also served as its first

⁶ Dickerson, D. C. (1983). *Black Ecumenicism: Efforts to Establish a United Methodist Episcopal Church, 1918-1932*. Church History, 52(4), 479-491.

⁷ Wright, R. R. (1948). *The Encyclopaedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*. Philadelphia: Printed by the Book Concern of the AME Church.

⁸ Ransom, R. C. (1993). *The Pilgrimage of Harriet Ransom’s Son*. Ann Arbor, Mich: U.M.I. Books on Demand.



President. The FCNC would become the preeminent African American ecumenical group and would not only include independent traditionally Black denominations, but also representatives from Black members of majority White denominations. The FCNC's most productive period was during the 1940s and 1950s when it advocated for policies through its Washington DC bureau.⁹

In 1948, the World Council of Churches (WCC) was founded in Amsterdam culminating over forty years of interchurch work that had been delayed by World War II. Bishop Greene served on the Constitution Committee for the provisional Conference of the World Council of Churches in 1938 in Utrecht, Netherlands.

1950-2000

In 1950, the Federal Council of Churches merged with twelve other organizations to form the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America in the wake of the successful launching of the World Council of Churches. Bishop Frederick Douglass Jordan would become its First Vice President during the 1960s.

Following the trend in shifting from periodic conferences to stable structures, the World Methodist Council was formed in 1956 at the 9th Ecumenical (World) Methodist Conference in Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. Bishop Sherman L. Greene was elected as its Vice President and served from 1957-1961. The World Methodist



AME Church delegation to the 1966 World Methodist Conference in London, England



Bishop Decatur W. Nichols (r) and others at the 1956 WCC Central Committee Meeting

Conference continued to be an important venue for the AME Church to advocate for Civil Rights and racial equality on an international scale. In 1961 at the 10th World Methodist Conference in Oslo, Norway, AME representative Rev. Archibald Carey from Chicago delivered a speech discussing the AME Church's involvement in the Civil Rights movement and highlighting the participation of AME members Rev. Oliver Brown and Mrs. Rosa Parks among other Black Methodists from AME Zion, CME, and the then Methodist Episcopal Protestant Church.¹⁰ At the 13th World

⁹Sawyer, M. R. (1994). *Black Ecumenism: Implementing the Demands of Justice*. Valley Forge, Pa: Trinity Press International.

¹⁰Gravelly W.B. "African American Methodism" in Abraham, W. J., & Kirby, J. E. (2013). *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Bishop Talbot (I) and others at the 1989 WCC Executive Committee Meeting in Moscow, USSR (now Russia)

Methodist Conference held in Dublin, Ireland, Dr. Kathryn Middleton Brown would become one of the first laypersons elected to serve on the Presidium of the World Methodist Conference and a Regional President of the World Methodist Council serving from 1976-1981.

The demise of the Fraternal Council of Negro Churches in 1964 left a void in interdenominational relationships among Black Churches in the United States. While the National Council of Churches in the United States was viewed as the main Christian ecumenical venue, Black ecclesiastical leaders still felt that the organization did not do enough to address their specific concerns and a specific venue was needed for African American Christian denominations. In 1978, AME Bishop John Hurst Adams helped found the Congress (now Council) of National Black Churches to bring together the major Black Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal denominations to share resources for advocacy and action.



Bishop John H. Adams

As its ecumenical involvement increased and its interdenominational affairs became more complex, there was a growing desire to centralize and adequately fund and direct the AME Church's ecumenical endeavors at the highest levels.¹¹ Bishop Frederick Douglass Jordan was designated as Director of Ecumenical and Urban Affairs by the 1968 General Conference. In 1980, the General Conference combined the "Office of Ecumenical and Urban Affairs" with the "Office of Church Polity."¹² The AME Church is the first (and to date only) Black Methodist denomination with a full-time ecumenical representative at the Episcopal level.



AME delegation to the 1981 World Methodist Conference in Honolulu, Hawaii



Bishop Philip R. Cousin, Sr.

The ending of colonialism led to a proliferation of national councils of churches to coordinate Christian fellowship among denominations in newly independent nations across the world. AME clergy and laity in the Caribbean and on the African continent would become key members in many of these organizations, helping to strengthen the Connectional nature of the denomination.

¹¹ Gomez, J. (1971). *Polity of the AME Church*. Nashville, Tenn: Division of Christian Education of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

¹² Dickerson, D. C. (2019). *The African Methodist Episcopal Church. A History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



The period also saw members of the AME Church rise to senior leadership in several ecumenical organizations. Bishop Frederick Douglass Jordan became co-chair of the Consultation on Church Union (now Churches Uniting in Christ) in 1972, becoming the first Black clergyman to lead this interracial effort to combat racism and promote organic union among nine Christian churches across racial lines.¹³ In 1975 during the 5th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi, Kenya, Dr. Sylvia Ross Talbot served as Vice Moderator of the Central Committee and was the first Black woman



Dr. Sylvia R. Talbot at the 1975 WCC Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya

to give a plenary address to any World Council of Churches assembly. In 1983, Bishop Philip Robert Cousin, Sr., then serving as First Vice President of the National Council of Churches of Christ, USA was elevated to the office of President after the resignation of the incumbent early into his term. Bishop Cousin was reelected for an unprecedented second two-year term in 1985 and served until 1987. In 1986, Mrs. Edith White Ming was elected to serve a five-year term as the President of the World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women. To date, she is the only President to serve this body who was elected from a Black Methodist denomination. In 1991 during the 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra, Australia, Bishop Vinton Randolph Anderson was elected to serve as the North American Regional President becoming the first (and to date only) representative from a traditionally African American Church to hold that office. During his seven-year term he advocated for the inclusion of social justice initiatives as well as racial reconciliation.



Bishops McKinley Young and Vinton Anderson at the 1998 WCC Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe

2000-present

At the advent of the millennium the global ecumenical movement as well as the ecumenical environment in the United States began to shift. Globally, the center of Christianity is decidedly moving towards



AME delegation to the 2011 World Methodist Conference in Durban, South Africa

¹³ One part of this discussion was reevaluating the proposals for a plan of union between the AME, AME Zion, and CME churches that were discarded in the 1920s. See Trueblood, R. W. (1970). *Union Negotiations Between Black Methodists in America*.

the South with charismatic denominations growing exponentially while at the same time Christianity in Western Europe and North America is in a steep decline. Despite these changes, the AME Church continues to participate faithfully in ecumenical involvement around the world, bringing its social justice emphasis to bear believing that Christian unity is needed more than ever before.

A key event for the AME, AME Zion, and CME churches was the “Great Gathering,” held in Columbia, South Carolina in 2010. This was the first time that all three major Black Methodist denominations had gathered en masse for any type of activity. The Pan-Methodist Commission would also become a key place of engagement for Black Methodists during the 2000s leading to the signing of a full communion agreement between the United Methodist Church and the historically Black Methodist denominations in 2012 in an attempt to redress the racial divisions that prompted the creations of the Black denominations in the 18th and 19th centuries.



AME Bishops at the Great Gathering in Columbia, South Carolina in 2010

Several AMEs rose to ecumenical prominence during this time period. Mrs. Jacquelyn Dupont-Walker would serve as the Vice President of the CUIC as well as a long-tenured member of the National Council of Churches Governing Board. She was instrumental in the National Council of Church’s constructing an anti-racism platform in the 2010s. Dr. Dennis C. Dickerson, while a General Officer, became Secretary, Vice Chairman, and then



Mrs. Jacquelyn DuPont-Walker, Bishop Jeffrey Leath and Rev. Dr. Jennifer Leath at a CUIC Meeting in Dallas, Texas



Dr. Dennis C. Dickerson presenting a Bible to Pope Benedict XVI as chair of the American Bible Society

Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the American Bible Society serving from 2006-2011. Bishop Sarah Frances Davis led the restructuring initiative for the World Methodist Council from 2006-2011 and was elected as the Vice President of the World Methodist Council in 2011 at the 20th World Methodist Conference in Durban, South Africa. She served until her death in November 2013. Bishop John F. White served on the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches as a proxy for Bishop



Black Methodist Youth and Young Adult Leaders in Atlanta, Georgia in 2015

McKinley Young from 2008-2013 then in his own right from 2013-2021. He would also be elevated to the Executive Committee. Rev. Dr. Jennifer S. Leath was elected to serve as the Moderator of the Joint Consultative Group between the WCC and Pentecostal Churches from 2006-2013. In 2015, a Black Methodist Young Adult Convocation was held in Atlanta, Georgia bringing together the youth and young adult organization leaders of the AME, AME Zion, and CME Church as well as representatives from the United Methodist Church. This meeting initiated a variety of partnerships on projects and activities between the organizations and was formalized through the Pan-Methodist Commission.



Rev. Maria Kapere

Throughout the ecumenical movement, AMEs have served as senior level staff to various organizations at the state, national, and global level. Reverend Maria Kapere and Reverend Suzanne Mutale served as Executive Directors for the National Councils of Churches of Namibia and Zambia respectively. Mr. John Thomas III served as elected Staff Coordinator for Youth and Young Adults for the World Methodist Council from 2011-2016. Mr. Thomas would go on to be elected in 2016 as a General Officer in the AME Church serving as the 21st Editor of *The Christian Recorder*. In 2003, the Rev. Garland F. Pierce joined the staff of the National Council of Churches, USA as the Associate Director for Education and Leadership Ministries. He went on to serve as the Associate General Secretary for Education and Leadership Ministries for the National Council of Churches, USA. From 2011-2016, he served as the Senior Assistant to the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, based in Geneva, Switzerland. In 2016, Rev. Pierce was elected as a General Officer in the AME Church serving as the 6th Executive Director of the Department of Christian Education.



Rev. Suzanne Matale



Bishop White with Pope Benedict XVI



Bishop McCloud visiting Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in 2006 with the National Council of Churches, USA.



Ecumenical Service at the 2012 General Conference



AME, AME Zion, and CME delegates to the 2019 World Methodist Council Meeting in Seoul, Korea



Rev. Pierce leading a World Council of Churches delegation to Mother Emanuel



AMEs attending the 10th World Council of Churches Assembly in Busan, South Korea in 2013

■ ECUMENICAL OFFICERS



AME delegation to the National Council of Churches, USA meeting in 2006



AME delegation to the 2016 World Methodist Conference



AME member DaRosa Bigford serving as a steward of the 10th World Council of Churches Assembly in Busan, South Korea in 2013



Bishop Sarah Frances Davis with Pope Benedict XVI in the Vatican



Bishops Cousin and Guidry and other members of the Pan-Methodist Commission in 2006



Pan-Methodist Bishops celebrating the full Communion resolution at the 2012 General Conference of The United Methodist Church