

THE CHRISTIAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL
CHURCH - DEATH OR MERGE?

BY

R. GEORGE PLUMMER

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Isaac R. Clark 4/14/69
Isaac R. Clark, Advisor

Charles B. Copher 4/15/69
Charles B. Copher, Dean

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Motivation for the Essay. As a loving son of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, I find it a Christian Mandate to write this essay on a critical issue which disturbs me in the depths of my being -- namely, about the life and health of the communion to which I have made my life's commitments. For, I have come to see clearly that the life of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church can be cut short, if it does not make a critical decision in the near future relative to its survival in our complex, competitive age.

As a consequence of this need to make critical discussion for survival, we find discussion among informed laymen and clergymen pointing to a New Reformation or Rebirth in the life of the Church -- an intelligent concern to discover forms that are relevant to the new shape of needs in our age. And, one of these relevant forms being discussed has to do with "denominational mergers," wherein weaker communions might combine their strength in order to meet complex challenges "with power."

And, it is at this point that my personal anxieties have been aroused. For, there is talk "within our zion" about the possibility of refusing to accept this "way of escape" through merger, especially among older members who are "emotionally devoted to the past." Thus, it is highly possible that "our zion" will be left behind, since the

resistance against change is powerful within our church body.

As I think of the critical decision that "our zion" must make, I am reminded of the story of Lewis Galdy of Port Royal, Jamaica, West Indies. There can be few places in the world with a more colorful and romantic past than Port Royal. It was a stronghold of the buccaneers under the great and terrible Henry Morgan, trading center of the island, chief mart and clearing house for the slave trade. And, Port Royal by the end of the seventeenth century had become the richest and the most wicked city in the world with a population of 8,000 or more inhabitants in 1692.

However, this thriving wicked port became the victim of a destructive disaster utterly and completely and without warning. For, on June the 7th of that year one of the worst earthquakes in recorded history shook the town to its foundations, and plunged the better part of that city beneath the sea forever. Hundreds were crushed beneath tons of falling masonry and stone, as houses collapsed like a pack of cards. Hundreds were drowned, while many, trapped beneath falling walls and beams, suffocated to death or faced a slow and frightful end from starvation or loss of blood. There was death in all shapes and forms.

And, yet, amidst this terrible carnage an extraordinary, and miraculous thing occurred. A man was swallowed by one of the great shocks which tore the earth, and by another set free again. Lewis Galdy was that man. He was told to run to join some of his comrades, so as to escape the shock, but, he refused to join his friends. As a result, he was swallowed up in the great earthquake.

Like Lewis Galdy, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church is now being told to run to join its comrades, so as to escape the shocks of our complex, competitive age. The warning is clear, and has been clear since the infancy of our church. But, up to now, we have been merely passing through the "talking stage, and dragging our feet," on the issue of merge with the A. M. E. and A. M. E. Z. communions for nearly one hundred years.

Thus, it might be that our zion could be swallowed up in our present earthquake. And, it is out of this real possibility of the death of our zion that I raise my voice as a warning.

Probably, this warning will also go unheeded. For, it is my conviction that our zion, for the most part, is too content with jazzing at its past glories, and too dazed by the present upheavals to make the "dash for the exist of merger."

But, one fact is sure. Either we make the decision to "escape to live," or embrace the "clutches of death." For, the C. M. E. Church is slowly dying, and will probably be "stone dead" in the next decade, if the fact of merger does not become a reality for it.

B. Problem of the Essay. The specific issue with which the author is concerned has to do with the possible merger of three predominantly Negro communions -- the C. M. E., A. M. E., and A. M. E. Z. denominations. For, the reality of survival with effectiveness has been a "haunting ghost" of these three bodies ever since their inceptions. And, that surviving reality has possibly been the major cause for their "merger discussions" through the years, as each has found itself living

a "hand to mouth existence" throughout their lifetime.

But, the "merger discussion" have merely been just that -- mere "talk" with no concrete steps toward "action." "Meetings" have been held; "resolutions" have been made; but no "contracts" have been signed. "Talk without action" has been the "alpha and omega" of merger considerations up to this point.

At present, all three communions are currently engaged in "merger talks" within the Consulation On Church Union -- better known as "C.O.C.U.," wherein nine denominational bodies are considering merger. And, which it is possible that some kind of merger will be effected by this Consulation, it is still highly unlikely that the C. M. E. Church will become a part of that merged enterprise. For, there is evidence of "dragging our feet" in that Consulation, too.

However, "dragging our feet" in the Consulation is not of prime concern to this writer. For, I am convinced that the most natural and most meaningful "union for the C. M. E. Church is with the A. M. E. and A. M. E. Z. communions. For, all three share a common -- historically and socialogically. And, if these three communions merge "first," I am convinced that such union will give us a "position of strength" in the large Consulation.

Thus, this essay is concerned primarily with merger consideration between these three predominantly Negro communions. Possibly some insights for the larger Consulation will emerge from the discussion herein. But, such larger implications will be a "by-product," but not the specific problem of this writing.

C. Method of the Essay. The problem of this essay will involve a historical, critical approach. In chapter two, a brief sketch of merger considerations by the C. M. E. Church will be presented. In chapter three, a brief critique of some illnesses of the C. M. E. Church demanding merger will be given. And, in chapter four some positive arguments "for" merger will be set forth.

II. MERGER OF THE C. M. E. CHURCH

The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church came into being almost one hundred years ago, having its inception under the most trying and unfavorable circumstances. The Civil War had just terminated, and the black slaves were declared to be free. Wandering aimlessly in their "free plight," concern and thought was given to them by the Methodist Episcopal Church South, concerning what was considered best for them in terms of a church. An offer was made to them concerning the formation of a "Colored" Methodist Church. They gladly accepted. And, thus, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church was formed.

However, it was not long after this newly found life that problems of survival forced this body to think of merger. For, in the year 1872, one of the first bishops of the C. M. E. Church -- Bishop William Henry Miles, born a slave in Springfield, Washington County, Kentucky, December 26, 1828 expressed deep concern for merger when he asked the question, "Is there not some way by which the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, the colored members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church can effect a union that will be satisfactory to all?"

Nine years later in 1881, Bishop L. H. Holsey, a native of Columbus, Georgia and founder of Paine College in Augusta, Georgia was appointed by the College of Bishops of the C. M. E. Church to act as a

liaison officer to inquire of Bishops of the A. M. E. Church concerning whether a merger could be perfected. No definite answer was given; but, the records of the College of Bishops of June 1, 1881 stated: "This matter was discussed and it was agreed upon that an organic union with any other 'body' is not desirable, because we do not believe that the Glory of God will be promoted." It was further stated that on June 2, of the said year, Bishop Holsey should meet with Bishop Turner, and confer with him again.

Since 1881 many conferences on merger have been held but nothing substantial and concrete had been done. For instance, on February 12, 1908, a conference was held in Washington, D. C., engaging the leaders of the three Negro Methodist bodies, and nothing was done.

Again, on June 30, 1915, another conference was held in Cincinnati, Ohio between the A. M. E., A. M. E. Z. and the C. M. E. communions. The purpose of this meeting was to consider having a "freedom" of the Negro Methodist Churches, but nothing was done at that time either. Three years later, another meeting was called on April 3, 1918 in Birmingham, Alabama to adopt what the Bishops called an organic union. And, still, the result was "no action."

On January 23, 1964 at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D. C., ninety-one representatives from the three Negro Methodist Churches gathered together to analyze the structure, policy and laws of the churches. This body finally concluded that they were basically the same in all these matters. As a consequence, an "acquaintance meeting" of the bishops of the three communions was held at Lane Tabernacle C. M. E. Church in St. Louis, Missouri, on April 22, 1965. This meet-

ing was designed so as to "create an atmosphere through personal acquaintance and exchange of ideas" for merger.

The culmination of these "merger talks" took place in Atlanta, Georgia on December 15-16, 1965 at Big Bethel A. M. E. Church. This event was a historical occasion for me, personally -- since I was there in the midst of the great speeches, drama and pageantry calling for a "merger in fact" of the three communions. During this "big meeting," the following issues were discussed with "apparent" concern:

- 1) A complete new structure and a new organization to replace the old, and bring a unified Methodist Church with a new out look.
- 2) An age old thought of Bishop Miles regarding the possibilities of merging and a corporation in the areas of publishing and education as a beginning point.

Three years later in 1968, a similar conference of the dignitaries of the three bodies was held in Washington, D. C. and, again, the "fellowship" was great. But, nothing other than that was developed in the "great meeting." Thus, the history of this merger movement is now at the same point where it began -- with "talk" and "more talk," with "meetings" and "more meetings," but with "no concrete action being effected."

III. DEMANDS FOR C. M. E. MERGER

It is a truism that every "effect" must have a "course." And, thus, it is my intention here to point up some existential problems that "demand" a necessary merger "infact." Therefore, three genuine grievances demanding merger will be set forth.

A. Ministerial Demands. No denomination can survive without ministerial leadership in the local churches. And, in order to have such leadership, there must be a continual program of ministerial recruitment and replacement, since ministers die like all other creatures.

But, the problem of recruitment and replacement in the C. M. E. Church is critical, since there is a "conspiracy" by other church bodies to steal "potential C. M. E. talent" for their own communions. And, the "conspiracy" is "working" -- since these other bodies are attracting these young men with "better salaries," "good retirement program," and other "fringe benefits."

And, why should this "conspiracy" fail? Are we so "naive" that we think that such "empty slogans" as "dedication," "spirit," "Great C. M. E. Church" can compete against the realities of live to "potential ministers?' Do we still think that "alert young men" today will "fall for" these "time-worn cliches?"

Sometimes, it appears that the C. M. E. Church is self-deceived about this matter as Lester Maddox is about the "glories of

segregationism." For, nobody today is fooled by that "old crap." And, it is a mystery that we have not lost more "potential recruits" than we have -- purely a "divine mystery," having nothing at all to do with the C. M. E. Church facing up to its "divine obligation" in this critical matter of "ministerial recruitment and replacement."

B. Educational Demands. Closely related to the critical issue of recruitment and replacement in the issue of "ministerial education." For, it is unthinkable in this day and time to consider an "uneducated ministry."

And, by the same token, it is also unthinkable to consider "ministerial education," without "educational resources" -- namely, a substantial amount of "money." And, again, the C. M. E. Church faces a "crisis" in this area.

Over ten years ago, the C. M. E. Church began a cooperation venture of accredited ministerial education with three other denominations at the Interdenominational Theological Center. This is the one and only venture of the C. M. E. Church in theological education at present. But, this one and only venture is at the "crisis-point," as far as the C. M. E. Church is concerned.

Being like "poverty victims trapped in the ghetto," the average C. M. E. student is being continually "laughed at" by Baptist and Methodist Seminarians. To be sure, we C. M. E.'s do have a building at the Center. But, why must we rent most of our dormitory rooms to outsiders? It is not due to our failure to attract "potential C. M. E. students" in the light of our "merger resources."

Why have we C. M. E.'s become the "laughing stock" at the Center? Where is the "C. M. E. pride" that we have been boasting about through the years? Where are the twenty-five students that we contracted to support in the formation of this educational venture? How long will the C. M. E. banner be "dragged in the dust" at the Center? This educational dilemma of ours demands an answer -- a "financial answer" merged resources.

C. Denominational Demands. The two preceding mentioned crises of the C. M. E. Church are merely parts of a larger crisis of the C. M. E. Church. For, the crisis in "Ministerial Power" and "Educational Power" are symptoms of the larger crisis in our "Denominational Power." For, as we review the entire program of the C. M. E. Church, we find "want prevailing the denomination."

For instance, every Episcopal District finds itself "in want," as it endeavors to carry out its "divine obligations." Even the Bishops themselves are in need of "salary increases" for maintaining themselves and their offices and staff. But, where is this "money" to come from?

I doubt seriously whether our "over-assessed laymen" will volunteer to reach "deeper into their pockets." For, the C. M. E. laymen are "up in arms now" about their current assessment -- at the point of "rebellion," as any local pastor can verify. So, "to whom shall we go" for the resources desperately needed to carry on the "divine obligations of our zion?"

Thus, the C. M. E. Church finds itself "sitting on a keg of dynamite" -- ministerially, educationally, and denominationally. Its very existence is "at stake," unless it can find some means by which it can "de-fuse the explosive situation." And, it must find this means "right early," since I am convinced that the "time - fuse is set to blow up" in the 70's.

Further, I am convinced that such explosion will occur at the "grassroots" of our zion. For, the laity is far from happy to the point of "revolution." Already, we have begun to lose members to other communions -- in addition to those still on our rolls as "dead, non-paying members," and the youth whom we cannot "keep until their maturity."

So, those "loyal laymen" who are left with us "holding the bag," are being "pushed to the point of no return." And, they are "for" the merger, for the most part. For, out of their "desperation," they are beginning to realize that there is no need to be "stalling on the merger" -- since all three communions share a common genesis, and a common polity, and a common cooperative spirit between local churches of the three communions.

IV. ARGUMENTS FOR MERGER

In the foregoing chapter, we set forth three existential problems in the C. M. E. Church demanding some kind of radical resolution. And, the recommendation for each problematic demand was merger.

However, there are still some powerful arguments in the C. M. E. Church "against" merger. So, here we come to refute those powerful arguments -- which we find to be two fold in nature.

A. Bargaining Position Argument. One of the fears of those "against" merger in the C. M. E. Church has to do with the "quantitative - bargaining position" of the C. M. E. Church as over against the A. M. E. and A. M. E. Z. communions. Now, it is most difficult to determine accurately what the "actual memberships" of the three communions are, since all three bodies put out "public relations figures" concerning their "membership power."

But, whether one considers the "publicity statistics" or the "actual statistics," the C. M. E. Church is the smallest of the three predominantly Negro Methodist bodies. Thus, this "quantitative minority position" raises an "inferiority complex concern" among some members of the C. M. E. Church regarding our position in merger considerations -- and especially as it relates to the A. M. E. Church, with which the C. M. E. Church has waged "guerilla warfare" in history. So,

this "quantitative fear" about being swallowed up is real, and is founded upon some historical facts.

But, as real as this "quantitative fear" is, this factor must be considered in a larger context of meaning. For, in the fact of merger, none of the three bodies will escape being "swallowed up" -- neither the largest nor the smallest being able to maintain its "distinctive identity" in a merged enterprise. Each of the three bodies -- whether large or small -- will have to "give up something" to form a newly merged enterprise -- meaning the "death" of all three distinctive entities in the "new corporate entity." So, the argument about the C. M. E. Church being "swallowed up" is a meaningless argument, in the light of the fact that the A. M. E. and the C. M. E. Churches would have to "die also" in a merged enterprise.

Further, the argument about "quantitative bargaining power" is untenable, when one considers the larger implications of merger. For, the basis for merger considerations has to do with the question of "life or death" of all three bodies -- the existential question of whether each will "die" in going its own separate way, or will endeavor to "live" through "losing its life in a larger resurrection" through merger.

For, as it now stands, the decision for all three is either a "lonely unique death" or a "merged renewed life." For, the "handwriting is on the wall" against any "weak body" in this complex, competitive age. This impersonal age of ours has decreed that "only the strong can survive" -- a decree applying to all institutions, including churches.

So, not only is this argument about our "quantitative bargaining position" untenable; but, it is also "stupid." For, in the midst of our "death," the C. M. E. Church is "idiotic" to be "dragging its feet" in terms of a question about its "minority position." For, the real question is either "no position" to bargain from or a "minority position" to bargain from before it is too late -- since we cannot change the fact that we are "dying" and that we are "dying from being too small" to survive alone.

To be sure, the issue of merger does raise this problem of our "minority status." But seen in the context of "life and death," this issue of "minority status" is a "minor" question indeed. For, the C. M. E. Church needs "additional power for the living of these days." And, the only foreseeable means by which it can gain this "additional power" is to "die in order to live" in a merged enterprise -- where all three bodies would be enabled to stand together as "one body under one Lord with renewed power."

B. Power Structure Position Argument. The previous negative argument in the C. M. E. Church about its "quantitative position" relative to merger is more than likely a "scale technique" to cover up the real argument against merger within the C. M. E. Church -- namely, the real argument that has to do with the "crumbling of the established power positions in the C. M. E. Church." Like the segregationists who cloud up their real arguments against desegregation, we have "high potentates" in the C. M. E. Church clouding up their real arguments against merger with "scare techniques" about being "swallowed up."

Bishop C. H. Phillips, one of the most outstanding leaders in C. M. E. history, must also take credit for leading in this "scare technique." For, in the General Conference of 1918, he sets forth a "segregationist policy" that has been followed throughout the years, when he argued against merger as follows: "I have rights and interest in my own church that are naturally inherent and coherent. Its welfare to me is of first importance."

Now, that statement like the "separate but equal doctrine of segregationism" has been law and gospel for C. M. E.'s against merger ever since this "high potentate" uttered it -- standing unchallenged within our ranks in our merger considerations since that time. And, though Bishop Phillips must be admired by all for his unmatched contributions to the C. M. E. Church, that statement can no longer go unchallenged for two reasons.

On the one hand, that statement suggests strongly that the C. M. E. Church is a "prize possession" of whoever happens to be in the "driver's seat" of the C. M. E. Church. For nothing in that statement suggests that our Lord Jesus Christ -- who died for the C. M. E. Church, by the way -- has "naturally inherent and coherent rights and interest" in the C. M. E. Church as "His First Importance."

No Siree! Bishop Phillips is merely suggesting his own "vested rights and interest" as being of the "first importance." And, it is my contention that the C. M. E. Church cannot be maintained merely to preserve the "rights" and "interest" of the "power structure" -- not even the "rights" and "interest" of that outstanding figure in C. M. E. history, "Bishop C. H. Phillips."

Granted that we owe Bishop Phillips a "debt of gratitude" for all of his labors. But, we cannot grant him our "very existence" as payment of that "debt." Honor, yes! Memory, yes! But, our "very being, "No!!"

So, while we are arguing in favor of merger, wherein the C. M. E. Church will "die in a sense," we are arguing "against" continued identity in the "Phillip's tradition," wherein the C. M. E. Church will "die for real" in this complex, competitive era. For, the "die is cast." Either we choose the "way of Christ for life;" or, we choose the "way of Phillips for death." And, I am convinced that such "either-or" is no real alternative -- since the "segregationist way of Phillips" leaves nothing but the "death of the C. M. E. Church" as the "necessary consequence" of not choosing the "way of life."

On the other hand, that statement of Bishop Phillips strongly suggests that he could speak for the C. M. E. Church for "all times" and for "all circumstances" -- namely, that Bishop Phillips could make an "eternal decree" out of his "omniscience."

Now, it can be granted that Bishop Phillip's statement could have been most meaningful at the time when it was uttered then -- when the C. M. E. Church was growing and was relevant for Black People in that era of our history. But, this writer refuses to grant that such statement is meaningful for the C. M. E. Church now -- when the C. M. E. Church is dying and is irrelevant to the emerging needs of Black People in our present era.

For, at that time, Black People were more resigned to a "second class status" in society, and thus more resigned to a "second class

church" for the living of those days. But, now, since the new awakening in 1954, Black People are beginning to repudiate every vestige of "second class status" -- including, a "second class, irrelevant church" such as the C. M. E. Church." Something "new" must emerge, if it is to make an appeal to the "New Black Consciousness" today.

So, what we are saying here is that Bishop Phillips' statement belongs to a "past era" -- a "past era" that will not be resurrected, no matter how much we might admire Bishop Phillips. And, I am suggesting here that there are "new rights" and "new interests" that are "naturally inherent and coherent" in terms of what any church must be in our day and time, as of "first importance." And, I am further suggesting that what is of "first importance" is the "exact opposite" of what Bishop Phillips advocated in that speech in 1918.

Thus, in spite of the powerful "segregationist argument" of Bishop Phillips, the times are demanding that the C. M. E. Church "merge with all deliberate speed" or "face death" in the 70's -- both from the viewpoint of obeying our Lord, and from the viewpoint of serving men. That is the conclusion of this whole matter -- "merge" or "death" for all three of our "impotent communions."

Now, even though I am concerned with what the other two communions will decide on this matter, my primary concern has to do with the decision of the C. M. E. Church. So, I close this essay by leaving this question with my C. M. E. brethren to ponder over: "How about it men. Which do you choose -- merger or death?" As for me and my house, I say: Merge Baby, Merge!"

