

# **Black Methodism: Legacy of Faith**

EcuFilm DVD #6291

## Study Guide

Prepared by Lewis V. Baldwin, Ph.D.

### Table of Contents

I.	Introduction: Summary and Overview of the Video	1
II.	Audience: Persons for Whom the Video is Designed	4
III.	Preparation: How to Use the Video	5
IV.	Discussion: General Questions and Issues	5
V.	Sources: Materials for Further Study	7

#### I. Introduction: Summary and Overview of the Video

Black Methodism: Legacy of Faith is an educational resource for group study. Thirty-one minutes in length, this DVD, featuring Hilly Hicks as host and narrator, explores the history of African Americans in what is now known as The United Methodist Church. Particular attention is devoted to the origins of Black participation in the Methodist movement, John Wesley's association with African converts, Methodism's long struggle with segregation and issues of racial inclusiveness, the commitments and contributions of African Americans to United Methodism, and to the mission priorities that confront Black United Methodists as they seek to remain vital and relevant today and in the future. The resource is best understood when broken down into these historical periods.

Early Beginnings, 1758-1787: After opening with demonstrations of how preaching and music figure into the legacy of faith of Black United Methodists, the resource introduces viewers to the earliest involvements of people of African descent in the Methodist story. Here the film centers on John Wesley's baptism of two West Indians from Antiqua in 1758, and the subsequent establishment of the first Methodist chapel in the new World by these new converts. Also covered are the contributions of African-American clergy and laypersons to the formation of various Methodist societies in colonial America. The work of Harry Hosier and Richard Allen, popular Black preachers and circuit riders who represented their people at the organizing conference of Methodism in Baltimore at Christmas in 1784, is highlighted. The reflections of William B. McClain, a United Methodist preacher and professor of homiletics and worship at Wesley Theological Seminary, add significantly to the drama of the account. This part of the story ends with the rumblings of discontent among African Americans over developing patterns of segregation in Methodist congregations.

Dissension and Division, 1787-1865: The film focuses on the ways in which segregation in Methodism intensified and crystallized as the number of African Americans in local congregations increased. The exodus of Richard Allen and his followers from the St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church (M.E.) in Philadelphia in 1787, due to segregation in worship, is underscored. The resource then shifts to the Allenites founding of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) in 1794 and the A.M.E. denomination in 1816, a movement that inspired the rise of other black separatist churches within Methodism. Although not mentioned in the film, the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (C.M.E.) was organized by ex-slaves in Jackson, Tennessee, in 1870, signaling yet another break with the structures of White Methodism.

The founding of African Zoar Church within the structures of the predominantly White M.E. Church receives attention, placing in bold relief questions about why some African Americans remained with the White Methodists in spite of racism and segregation. The story of African Zoar Church is presented in such a way as to suggest parallels with other Black churches that developed under the auspices of White Methodist structures in this period. Examples are the founding of the African Zion Church in New York in 1800, Ezion M.E. church in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1805, and African Hampstead Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1817—all of which maintained ties to the M.E. Church over certain periods. The film makes special references to the contributions of African Americans who preserved such links, especially in the area of music.

This part of the resource concludes with references to the growing debates in Methodist circles over slavery—a development which resulted

in the 1844 split between Northerners and Southerners in the M.E. Church. The ways in which this schism foreshadowed the general split between the North and the South, leading up to the Civil War, are also considered.

Institutional Change and Outreach, 1865-1900: Here the film takes into account the responses of both White and Black Methodists to challenges in the social and religious arenas in the immediate Post-Civil War period. The important work of the Freedman's Aid Society, organized in 1866 under the M.E. Church, North, is stressed in terms of the establishment of schools, colleges, seminaries and other institutions for the basic training and religious education of African Americans.

The General Conference's approval of the ordination of Black preachers and of all-Black conferences are also treated here. This part suggests the continuation of patterns of racial exclusiveness already deeply rooted in Methodism.

Emerging Issues of Inclusiveness, 1900-1939: The resource raises the issue of how African Americans continued to challenge White Methodists on the question of racial inclusiveness. The mounting levels of frustration and discontent over segregated policies and practices in Methodism are examined. Special reference is made to the struggle for Black bishops, which resulted in the election and consecration of Robert E. Jones and Matthew E. Clair, Sr. in 1920. The continuing contributions of African Americans to the Methodist style and ethos, particularly in music and education, are seen as positive features despite lasting patterns of racial segregation. At this point, the hymns of the Methodist preacher Charles A. Tindley and the educational activities of the Methodist layperson Mary McLeod Bethune receive special coverage. This part of the film is enhanced by the information and insights shared by Cynthia Wilson-Felder, accomplished musician and Methodist layperson, and Leontine T. C. Kelly, the first Black female bishop in United Methodism.

The attention given in the 1939 Plan of Union, which culminated in the creation of the all-Black Central Jurisdiction and five geographical jurisdictions for White annual conferences, marks an appropriate climax for this part of Methodist history. The remarks of retired Bishop James S. Thomas and Methodist layperson Barbara S. Thompson place the 1939 plan in the proper context of the general quest for a *united* Methodism in the early twentieth century.

Toward a United Methodism, 1939-1968: Viewers are exposed to the spirit of frustration, uncertainty, and determination which followed the implementation of Methodism's 1939 Plan of Union. From the film, one senses that efforts to rid church structures of every vestige of racial discrimination were revitalized in the era of Civil Rights, coming to a head

in 1964, when the General Conference mandated that the Central Jurisdiction be abolished by the time of the 1968 merger between The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren.

The resource depicts the submerging of Black conferences into the United Methodist system in 1968, and the neglect of the priorities of African Americans. These are treated as developments which made necessary the organization of Black Methodists for Church Renewal (B.M.C.R.) as a voice of advocacy. B.M.C.R.'s targeting of social justice as a critical issue in United Methodism in 1968 is discussed in connection with the general quest for civil rights by Methodist preacher James Lawson. This effort led to the founding of the Black College Fund, signaling the end of yet another period and the beginning of a new era in The United Methodist Church.

The Continuing Struggle for Inclusiveness and a Relevant Social Gospel, 1968-Present: Here the film covers important strides toward inclusiveness in United Methodism since 1968. The election of 30 Black Bishops since that time is highlighted, and so are the increasing numbers of Blacks as district superintendents, annual conference leaders and general agency staff persons. The inclusion of Black gospel songs and hymns in recent editions of *The United Methodist Hymnal* is portrayed as another indication of the church's struggle to transcend racial exclusion. The presence of African Americans, Hispanic Americans and Native Americans at the 1992 General Conference is shown as well. References to the enduring faith, spirituality and liberating experiences, which numerous Black men and women are still bringing to United Methodism, add immensely to one's understanding of the state of the church today.

The Future of Black United Methodists: The resource closes with comments on the future mission of Black United Methodist Churches. The current efforts of some of these churches to deal with Aids prevention, homelessness and other human problems are cited as examples of the course that future ministries in local congregations should take. Finally, the need to strengthen Black United Methodist Churches for the 21<sup>st</sup> century echoes through the reflections of Joseph Roberson, a former executive director of B.M.C.R.

## II. Audience: Persons for Whom the DVD is Designed

The resource is designed first and foremost for United Methodist audiences with a deep interest in ethnic and racial variety in the tradition. However, because the contents mirror the struggles of all churches, denominations and the nation as a whole with issues of diversity and multiculturalism, it can be meaningful and appealing for any audience.

Showings should include all persons who are interested in American church history and in the nature of Christian witness in a society still fragmented along the boundaries of race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality.

### III. Preparation: How to Use the DVD

Before viewing the DVD, teachers should read this guide thoroughly, and if possible, at least one book on the history of African Americans in United Methodism. A list of possible sources is included at the end of this study guide, with the most important ones indicated by an asterisk. As a second step, teachers should preview the DVD before showing it to an audience. Third, a series of issues and questions based on the resources should be outlined in advance to evoke active participation in discussions. Finally, teachers should carefully plan and conduct viewing sessions, taking into account timing, the composition of the audience and the nature and extent of the discussion process.

### IV. Discussion: General Questions and Issues

After viewing the DVD, set the tone for serious reflection and discussion by asking general questions. Examples are:

- A. What about the resource did you find interesting and thought-provoking?
- B. To what extent did it challenge your long-held views concerning Methodism?
- C. Did it affect your understanding of faith, of the function of the Christian Church, of the nature of Christian witness?
- D. Should this DVD be shown to all United Methodists? To persons in other denominations? To others in your congregation?
- E. What lessons can one learn about the human struggle and the human spirit from viewing this DVD?

The discussion should then shift to more specific issues relative to the history of African Americans in United Methodism. Such issues might include:

- A. Factors that made the Methodist style and ethos attractive and amendable to the earliest African converts.

- B. Early African pioneers in Methodism.
- C. The precise nature of Black contribution to the shaping of United Methodist history and traditions.
- D. What Black United Methodists have in common with the Wesleyan and Methodist tradition generally (i.e., church organization, hymnology, social gospel).
- E. Why the story of African Americans has so often been isolated from the accounts related to the Methodist Episcopal tradition.
- F. The ways in which Black Methodism found a special or unique expression within the broader framework of Episcopal Methodism.
- G. Why African Americans have been a major issue at every turning point in American Methodist history.
- H. How Blacks within the United Methodist tradition have related throughout their history to Blacks in the A.M.E. Church, the A.M.E. Zion Church and other traditionally Black Methodist denominations.
- I. The significance of racial factors in the life of The United Methodist Church today.
- J. How The United Methodist Church's historic struggle with race might inform its capacity to deal with classism, gender discrimination, homophobia and other divisive issues today and in the future.
- K. Suggestions as to where Black United Methodist should go in the future in terms of their ministries and missions.

Discussions concerning Black United Methodists in relation to contemporary and future ministries and missions would be equally interesting and enlightening. Black United Methodists are confronted with many of the same challenges that Blacks in the historically Black Methodist Churches face. However, the challenges confronting Black United Methodists assume a somewhat different character due to their continuing ties to White church structures. With respect to the present and future, it is appropriate to ask: What specific gifts do African Americans bring to The United Methodist Church? What in your view has been the most important contribution of African Americans to United Methodism up to this point? What special callings do Black United Methodist Churches have today, especially in relation to drug addiction,

homelessness, neighborhood crime and to other problems in society? What does the video lead you to feel about the possibility of genuine multiculturalism in United Methodist life and worship? What can non-Black Methodists learn from the experiences of Black United Methodists? How would you assess the possibility of Black United Methodists and other Black Methodists working toward common goals in a unified fashion today and in the future? Is organic union possible or desirable? Such questions are not irrelevant for those who claim roots in the movement that began with John Wesley.

Other issues of importance will undoubtedly surface in the course of serious reflection and discussions. Discussions should always be conducted in a manner designed to insure the greatest possible input or contribution from each participant. Listing comments, ideas and questions on a blackboard or flip chart would contribute greatly to the smooth flow and continuity of discussions.

V. Sources: Materials for Further Study

Baldwin, Lewis V. "Languishing in the Backwaters of African Methodism: Small Black Methodist Churches, 1805-1985," unpublished paper (1985).\*

Baldwin, Lewis V. and Wallace, Horace L. Touched by Grace: Black Methodist Heritage in The United Methodist Church. Nashville: Graded Press, 1986.\*

Brawley, James P. Two Centuries of Methodist Concern: Bondage, Freedom and Education of Black People. New York: Vintage Press, 1974.

Crum, Mason. The Negro in the Methodist Church. New York: The Editorial Department of the Board of Missions and Church Extension of The Methodist Church, 1951.

Culver, Dwight W. Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953.

Hagood, L. M. The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Cincinnati: Cranston and Stowe; New York: Eaton and Hunt, 1890.

McClain, William B. Black People in the Methodist Church. Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1984.\*

Norwood, Frederick A. The Story of American Methodism: A History of the United Methodists and Their Relations. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974.\*

Richardson, Harry V. Dark Salvation: The Story of Methodism as it Developed Among Blacks in America. New York: Doubleday, 1976.\*

Shaw, J. Beverly F. The Negro in the History of Methodism. Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1954.\*

Shockley, Grant S., ed., Heritage & Hope: The African American Presence in United Methodism. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991.\*

Thomas, James S. Methodism's Racial Dilemma: The Story of the Central Jurisdiction. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992.\*

To a Higher Glory: The Growth and Development of Black Women Organized for Mission in the Methodist Church, 1940-1968. Cincinnati: The Education and Cultivation Division, Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1968.

\* Primary Resource Material