

**June 10, 2018**  
**Celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of The United Methodist Church**  
**Heritage moment: Race Relations**

Fifty years ago, The United Methodist Church was formed at General Conference in Dallas, Texas. The Methodist Church valued unity, but the reality is that before 1968 we were a segregated church. Before 1968, unfortunately, the Church reflected society.

Part of understanding the history of race relations in UMC is understanding the term *conference*. For us, Conference is a noun and a verb; it's an organizational term, a geographical term, and a meeting term. Before 1968, we had Annual Conferences and Central Conferences. An example of an annual Conference would be the Virginia Annual Conference which includes all of Virginia except for the southwestern region, and still does. Blacksburg is in the Virginia Conference, Pulaski is in the Holston Conference.

An example of a Central Conference would be the Native American General Conference, a segregated conference which was concentrated in Oklahoma, Texas, and Arizona but included most Methodist Indian churches wherever they were. African-American churches had been segregated into a separate Central Jurisdiction.

The Evangelical United Brethren Church did not have a segregated church, and challenged The Methodist Church to a plain, mandatory action: For a merger to occur, abolish and dismantle all conferences and jurisdictions segregated by color and race. The Methodist Church reached the required percentage of votes for passage. The merger that created The United Methodist Church also abolished its racially segregated institution.

Everyone knew that this action alone would not resolve the new denomination's race relations issues, so the 1968 Uniting Conference also created A Commission on Religion and Race. The Commission sent integrated traveling teams of clergy and laity, men and women, young and old to annual conferences, districts, campus ministries, men's and women's groups, and youth groups in local churches to advise and consult. They offered to initiate the tough conversations, to say the things that the conference leaders, pastors, and laity were reluctant to say, or didn't want to say, or didn't know how to say. As American Bishop Woodie White who now serves as Bishop Residence at Candler School of Theology has said, "We were bringing black and white people into the same organizational structure when many of these people had never been in the same room." Their primary task was "The opening of all churches for worship to all without regard to race or ethnic background."

In 1972 General Conference made The Commission on Religion and Race a permanent agency of the UMC and required that every annual conference to create its own. The role was expanded to address issues of greater inclusiveness and to increase awareness and impact globally and throughout the Church. Xenophobia - the unreasonable fear or hatred of foreigners, strangers, and anyone beyond a person's familiarity - is worldwide. In Africa, it may be tribalism. In Asia, it may be violence. It may be ethnic discrimination in the Philippines.

As the Commission on Religion and Race celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, too, we're providing resources for more than a dozen ethnicities through paper and online curriculum and training on anti-racism, diversity, unconscious bias, and developing multi-cultural and cross-cultural ministry resources for existing and new church plants. A web-training series features local churches talking about their best practices reaching across racial, cultural, generational, and socioeconomic lines.

We're still dismantling racism and improving relations with all races in all of our policies and practices. Everyone has come a long way and has a long way to go.

Please go to [www.umc.org](http://www.umc.org) to see the tribute video of the Uniting Conference and learn more about the people and issues that shaped the past fifty years, and how the world is a better place thanks to the witness and work of the people of The United Methodist Church.