

**The Rev. Bernard “Skip” Keels, executive director
Methodist Action Program
Wilmington, Delaware**

Do not copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think... Romans 12:2

Segregation and racism keep The United Methodist Church from truly uniting. And at times, I wonder if we're still in the shadow of the Central Jurisdiction.

Until 1968, the Central Jurisdiction was the sixth jurisdiction of The United Methodist Church, designated for African-Americans only, despite the fact that the other jurisdictions were based on geography.

Yet, the United Methodist General Conference 2000 demonstrated that all is not racially just.

During the conference, there was a service of reconciliation – a worship remembering the racist actions of the church, dating back to the early 1800s – and a request for forgiveness and reconciliation. The historical racism resulted in a split from the Methodist Church, leading to the formation of the Colored (now Christian) Methodist Episcopal (CME), the African Methodist Episcopal (AME), and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) churches.

What year was the worship service taking place? The guests sat in the balcony. The rest of the conference – predominantly white – sat on the lower floor.

It's this kind of modest mishap that bruises and hurts people – relegating them to a second-class situation. The rules and bar of the conference should have been suspended and the guests in the balcony should have had an equal role in planning the service.

We really have got to be more Christological in the way we welcome the “others” and embrace the stranger — those whose cultures and customs differ from “our own.”

- Denominational ad campaigns cosmetically try to eliminate the racial and cultural divisions. Yet, across the United States, a black church sits on one street corner; a white church sits on another.
- *The Book of Discipline* says clergy are appointed regardless of race or culture. As a former district superintendent, I can tell you, it's just not true.
- The denomination has a unique language promoting institutional racism. *The Charter for Racial Justice* says, “we affirm the rights of racial and ethnic minorities...” The denomination develops resources for African-Americans, Koreans, Hispanics. Who is the “we”? By de facto, everyone else is white? “Ethnic minority” and “ethnic local churches” are terms with which the denomination needs to struggle -- they are segregating terms, not inclusive.
- In the United States, “white flight” has brought abandonment of city churches — those beautiful edifices not functioning with their new neighbors or within their communities. We've become a church without an urban ministry agenda.

On Pentecost Sunday 2004, in Newark, Delaware, parishioners of Newark United Methodist Church, the church to which I was senior pastor, read the scripture from Acts 2:2. They read it repeatedly, fifteen times — each in their own language. Before my arrival, the church had been 99% white.

That image showed me what The United Methodist Church can be. That Pentecost morning, a common gospel was shared from a United people ... and I was glad that I was part of The United Methodist Church and could experience the spirit of the Lord and the birth of the church that Sunday. It was a monumental experience.

In God's kingdom, Jesus embraced all of us. I came to model that as a pastor. I wasn't black or white, I was a pastor.

As the church, we've got to get away from our comfort zone and realize that in Christ there's no east or west, black or white, rich or poor.

The church has to find a way to model being The Church of Pentecost:

- Pastors should be trained in seminary to be multicultural, and bishops and cabinets must put on multicultural lenses in the appointment-making process.
- Decision-makers must not assume that whites can only pastor "white churches," and African Americans can only pastor "black churches," etc.
- Members need to advocate for "the other."
- The church must dare to risk in order to be united. At General Conferences, all should be able to participate — regardless of their language, culture, or race. In the central conferences and around the world, pastors should have a pension program equitable to that of pastors of the United States.
- The church must realize that the people in the pews are eager to reunite our families. The institution is reluctant. Diversity at events like Schools of Mission across the country can be a model for the denomination. There, women from diverse backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and racial/cultural heritages come together.
- The church needs to stop the persistent struggle over homosexuality and realize that when we isolate one thing as being more egregious than others, we have "logs in our eyes," and we're not focusing on feeding the hungry, stopping war, ensuring universal health care, etc. All of us have sinned before God's eyes. Racism, adultery, sexism, pedophilia — these persist in separating us from the mission and purpose of our call to be the church of Jesus Christ.

In God's kingdom, full of diversity, Jesus came to embrace all of us. It's time for the church to move beyond comfort zones, embracing the purpose in our hearts to live in the Christ zone.