

Pan-Methodist celebrate together

By Rich Peck

May 1, 2012 | TAMPA, Fla. (UMNS)

Pan-Methodist church leaders join together at the 2012 United Methodist General Conference in Tampa, Fla. From left are: Bishop Sharon Zimmerman Rader, United Methodist Church; Bishop Thomas Hoyt Jr., Christian Methodist Episcopal Church; the Rev. W. Robert Johnson III, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; and Bishop John F. White, African Methodist Episcopal Church. A UMNS photo by Mike DuBose.

After several hundred years of separation, members of six Pan-Methodist denominations have committed to ministry together.

The United Methodist Church is the last of the denominations to adopt the full communion agreement, which was celebrated May 1 during the 2012 General Conference.

The affirmation establishes a new relationship among the African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, African Union Methodist Protestant, Christian Methodist Episcopal, Union American Methodist Episcopal and United Methodist denominations.

Bishop Sharon Zimmerman Rader, ecumenical officer for the United Methodist Council of Bishops, noted that acknowledging past difficulties is part of the process. "We believe this is a significant moment in all of our histories," she said during a news conference preceding the celebration.

For the CME church, an outgrowth of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, this moment is one of lasting significance, said Bishop Thomas Hoyt Jr., who has a long history of involvement with United Methodists through the Pan-Methodist Commission and ecumenical organizations.

"To be in full communion is to be related to one of the great churches of American society and the world," he declared.

"I believe the best for Methodism is yet before us," added AME Bishop John White. "This full communion gives us an opportunity to make our witness around the world."

The Rev. W. Robert Johnson III, top executive of the AMEZ church, which split from John Street United Methodist Church in 1796 "for reasons of injustice," welcomed the chance to heal the relationship. "It is a long way from John Street Methodist Church in New York City to Tampa, Fla.," he said.

There is a temptation to look at the new relationship of the United Methodist Church and smaller black Methodist denominations as a situation of the big fish swallowing the smaller fish, said United Methodist Bishop Alfred Norris, but that is not so. "In this case," he explained, "the big fish and the little fish will be swimming together."

Norris, who has led the Pan-Methodist Commission for the past two years, pointed out that his esteemed colleagues "Hoyt, White and Johnson are as much a part of the Methodist family as I am."

The denominations, which already cooperate on issues such as children and poverty, will now have an opportunity to pursue a broader mission agenda together. "I think this will breathe new life into the commission itself," added the Rev. Stephen Sidorak, Jr., top executive of the United Methodist Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns.

But the "real work" happens at the local church and community level, the denominational leaders agreed.

Hoyt suggested the need for a "sacrament of the coffee cup" to build individual friendships and commit to finding ways to break down barriers and promote justice together.

Issues of race and class are not just sociological but theological, he said, because dealing with such issues "teaches us to get along together."