

# Nation & World



News throughout our nation and world relating to United Methodists of the Holston Conference

## NINE DENOMINATIONS MOVE FORWARD TO COMBAT RACISM

**MEMPHIS, Tenn. (UMNS)** – After 40 years of conversation, leaders of United Methodist Church and eight other Christian groups – representing some 22 million believers worldwide – joined hands Jan. 20, vowing to worship, witness and work together from this day forward as Churches Uniting in Christ.

The nine member denominations of Churches Uniting in Christ also marked the

Martin Luther King Jr. birthday celebration with a public march and by signing a pledge on behalf of their churches to take the lead in fighting racism and white privilege in their communities, the nation and around the world.

After 40 years of dialogue about how to unify across denominational lines (and after failed attempts in the 1970s to create one “superstructure” church), the member churches of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) agreed to maintain their denominational identities and structure for now.

However, at their 19th Plenary in Memphis they declared their intent to move from just consultation to tangible acts of cooperation, and so disbanded as COCU and reconvened under the new name “Churches Uniting in Christ.” Member churches include the African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); Christian Methodist Episcopal Church; International Council of Community Churches; Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); United Church of Christ; and United Methodist Church.

For local churches, this means that they will be encouraged to do joint mission, cooperate in new church development, and recognize and observe common baptism and other worship celebrations. And local congregations of the participating groups – including Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Disciples – may amend their church signs to reflect their affiliation with



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### In Prayer:

*Leaders of the nine member denominations of Churches Uniting in Christ join together in prayer on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tenn., where civil rights leader the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed in 1968. Bishop Elias Galvan (second from left) represented the United Methodist Church.*

the organization, such as “First United Methodist Church:

member, Church Uniting in Christ.”

Most importantly, say leaders of the nine member churches, local Christians will be challenged and encouraged to work together on what the uniting churches have called their No. 1 moral agenda item: wiping racism off the face of the earth.

“While each communion is retaining its own identity and decision-making structures, we are pledging before God to draw closer in sacred things, regular sharing of the Lord’s Supper and mission work, especially a mission to combat racism together,” explained the Rev. Bruce Robbins, top staff executive of the United Methodist Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns in New York.

“Let it be recorded that, in a nation still deeply distorted by the sin of racism, Christians gathered in Memphis to say, ‘In the name of Christ, this must stop!’” said the Rev. Michael Kinnamon, a professor at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis and top executive of the

Consultation on Church Union.

The Consultation on Church Union began in 1962, with four denominations discussing possible union. Its original goal was to make unity tangible by bringing participating churches together as one body. The effort at a superstructure stalled, but nine denominations, including the United Methodist Church, stayed the course and moved the talks in a new direction. Unity of purpose replaced “organic” union as the goal.

With the involvement of three historically black Methodist denominations, the consultation was further challenged to expand its notion of Christian unity. How could churches unite across denominational lines, when their ranks were torn by racism? As a result, the nine churches declared that the first call to action as Churches Uniting in Christ would be aimed at battling racism. At their 18th Plenary in 1999, the members adopted an “Appeal to the Churches: To Seek God’s Beloved Community.” The letter was

signed during the 19th Plenary in Memphis. (For a copy of the “Appeal,” visit [www.holston.org](http://www.holston.org) and click on

“Expanded Nation & World News.”)

For United Methodists, the call is particularly significant because the three historically black Methodist churches in COCU-Churches United in Christ began after racial segregation in the “mother” Methodist church led some blacks to create their own denominations.

“Racism is one of the ‘pinch points’ for our church and for Churches Uniting in Christ,” said Bishop Fritz Mutti, head of the United Methodist Church’s Kansas Area, addressing United Methodist delegates and observers at the Memphis gathering.

“If our church is unwilling to confront racism and white privilege, then we will have failed at our primary reason for coming together (with other denominations),” added Bishop Melvin Talbert of Nashville, Tenn., ecumenical officer for the United Methodist Council of Bishops.

► *Burton of Nashville, Tenn., is editor of Interpreter magazine.*

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### Christian Unity