

Merger of Bethel Methodist Episcopal Church and St. John's Methodist Church

In May of 1967 the congregations of Bethel and St. John's voted to merge. This was an historical moment merging an all-white congregation, Bethel, with a predominately African American congregation, St. John's. At the time Bethel had a membership of 200; their vote was 55-45 in favor of the merger. St John's had a membership of 35; their vote was 24-0 in favor of the merger.

On June 11, 1967, Bishop Ralph Alton, head of the Eastern District of the Methodist Church in Wisconsin, dedicated the merged congregation. Rev. Donald Fadner of Bethel and Rev. Ernest Lofton of St. John's both served the new congregation for the first 3 years. Services were held at the Bethel building at 1502 West 6th St.

St. John's building at 815 Silver St. had many uses. At first it was to be a neighborhood center named "Freedom Inn." Later it became the office of Urban Ministries. In 1980 the building became the Muslim Center. St. John's building burned down in August of 1986.

The merged church maintained two choirs. The white Chancel Choir sang traditional Methodist hymns to the organ. The African American Gospel Choir sang lively spirituals with the piano accompaniment.

Rev. Fadner and Rev. Lofton took turns preaching. Rev. Fadner's (Bethel) sermons often dwelt on social and intellectual approaches to Christianity. Rev. Lofton (St John's) preached the "pure gospel."

Original plans called for Rev. Lofton to direct the church's special

mission in reaching out and serving neighborhood needs. But in their team effort the two pastors switched roles and Rev. Fadner worked on outreach and Rev, Lofton concentrated on internal problems such as stewardship, fellowship and organization.

Among the outreach activities of Bethel-St. John were:

- A Saturday morning club in which 35 neighborhood children, not members of the church, received training in crafts, cooking, and artwork. The idea was to build confidence in the children and help prepare them for life.
- Two Project Headstart classes for pre-schoolers met at the church during the week.
- An integrated Girl Scout troop met at the church.
- The church's Couples Club met regularly for social events.
- The Methodist Youth Fellowship was active under the direction of Rev. Fadner.
- An African American youth, 14-year-old Milton Thompson, was president of the youth group. The 12/10/67 Racine Journal Times article quotes Milton saying, "I think we're all pretty adjusted to the merger. It's given us a chance to exchange ideas and find out good things about people of another race. I'm really glad to be a part of this thing. As far as I'm concerned, it's all worked out very successfully."

In the summer of 1971 Rev. Sammartino took over as pastor of Bethel-St. John.