

Response to Bill Lee's paper, "Kick Like Hell"

By Tim Lee

(Brite Divinity School)

Let me begin by thanking Rev. Bill Lee for his fascinating paper, a paper that could only have been written by one who has engaged closely with both the crafters of the Merger and the applicators of it, from all three manifestations of our church, the general, regional, and congregational, White and Black. I am also grateful that while reviewing his paper, I was led to read a book he relies significantly in the paper: *Journey Toward Wholeness: A History of Black Disciples of Christ in the Mission of the Christian Church*, by Brenda M. Cardwell and William K. Fox Sr. (CBP, 1990)—an extremely informative and important book.

The title of Rev. Lee's paper is "Kick Like Hell," and the main question the paper seeks to address, it seems to me is: Why has African American Disciples been kicking like hell or been struggling to work the system (which he says is another way of saying the same thing [7]), when the National Christian Missionary Convention merged with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 1969 (7)? And his answer to this question—and the thesis of the paper, it seems to me—lies in his purpose statement (page 2): "I propose to show throughout this paper, that strength or weakness of The Design was not the issue for Black Disciples. Our struggle with the Design is that it did not include us at all." As a respondent, my task is to evaluate his argument, to see whether his thesis follows cogently from the reasons and evidence he presents. In that regard, I have to say while I learned greatly from the paper, I also have some concerns.

The embedded thesis makes two distinct claims: one is that the "strength or weakness of The Design was not the issue for Black Disciples." The other is that "Our [Black Disciples'] struggle with the Design is that it did not include us at all." I find both claims problematic, in light of the argumentation presented to support them. Let me first address the second claim, which, I think, could have been clearer, since it lends itself to at least two interpretations: First, it could be interpreted as saying that there was a subtext to *The Design*, which was adopted provisionally in 1968 and then permanently in 1977: that even though it espouses to be a document for all Disciples, it really has not meant to be a document for African American Disciples. The other possible interpretation is that Black Disciples have struggled with the *Design*—they have had difficulties in leveraging it to benefit African American Disciples—because it did not explicitly mention the Merger.

Between the two interpretations, the first is less convincing. I don't think Rev. Lee is claiming that the *Design* has had a racist subtext. I don't think he is claiming that the *Design* was created in bad faith, insofar as African Americans were concerned, somewhat as the *Declaration of Independence* was created in bad faith, insofar as African Americans were concerned, in that while the *Declaration* proclaimed "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"—there was a subtext that said "these words do not apply to the enslaved people of African descent." While Lee's phrase "it did not include us at all" may appear as if Lee is

charging the *Design* with having a similar subtext, a careful reading of his paper shows that he is not.

The other interpretation is that Black Disciples have had to struggle to work the system because the *Design* does not explicitly mention the Merger. And this *is* a point Lee seeks to argue for in the paper. And this point finds support at several places in the paper: as when he states (on page 3), “Sadly, the Design nor the General Rules do not assure us that the merger agreement even exist”; or when he asserts (4) “The omission of any references to the merger makes the Design weak for African American Disciples”; or when he questions (6), “How does the omission of the merger agreement in the Design impact African American Disciples?”

A key premise he presents is that the *Design* does not explicitly mention the Merger. This is an indisputable fact. A question arises, however: Is an event like the Merger the sort of event that is properly mentioned in a document like the *Design*? Rev. Lee mentions that in 1968 the Central Jurisdiction of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the African American communion, merged with the Methodist Episcopal Church, a predominantly white communion, to form the United Methodist Church (1). Is their merger explicitly mentioned in the *Book of Discipline*, which Lee rightly describes as the governance document of the Methodist church?

Suppose, for the sake of argument, the Merger *is* a sort of event that could properly be mentioned in the *Design*. Further questions arise. Was the omission intentional or not? If it was unintentionally, was it due to oversight? Or was it because it was simply assumed that with the Merger the Black Disciples would sink into union with the body of Disciples at larger, with both parties innocently unaware of the tough challenges such an assumption entail? On the other hand, suppose the omission *was* intentional? What considerations come into play? The *Design* was adopted provisionally at an assembly in Kansas City in 1968, one year before the consummation of the Merger. But as Cardwell and Fox show, already in January 1966, a joint Committee on Merger and New Brotherhood Relations had been formed to begin discussing the merging of the National Christian Missionary Convention and the International Convention of the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ), with the committee comprising five members each from the National Christian Missionary Convention, the International Christian Convention, and the United Christian Missionary Society (108). Cardwell and Fox note, “There remained considerable interest [among Black Disciples] in 'safeguarding the concerns of the Convention in the merger process'” (108). Nowhere in their book, however, do the authors state that Black Disciples urged the Merger be inscribed in the *Design*. At the time, African American Disciples enjoyed the leadership of wise and forceful individuals such as John R. Compton, William K. Fox, and Raymond E. Brown. Therefore, if mentioning the Merger in the *Design* was crucial for African American Disciples, it stands to reason that these leaders would have insisted that that be done. Yet it appears they did not so.

Further questions arise with regard to the argument that Black Disciples struggled with the *Design* because it does not mention the Merger. An unstated assumption here is that if the Merger had been inscribed in the *Design*, Black Disciples may not have had to “kick like hell”—or at least they could have eased up a bit in kicking. But is this plausible? I think not. This is because, as Rev. Lee observes, the *Design* was not designed to have a central power base. (6) He states, “I cannot say the Design is a central government for us. I can say without hesitation that

each part of our church operates independently in internal affairs.” (6) This means even if the Merger had been inscribed into the *Design*, the denomination would not have had a de jure mechanism to have a general ministry, a region, or a congregation carry out policies beneficial to Black Disciples.

So even if the merger had been inscribed in the *Design*, it is most likely that Black Disciples would still had to “kick like hell.” This means—contrary to Lee’s claim in the first part of the thesis—the “strength or weakness of The Design” (1) was indeed an issue for Black Disciples, assuming “strength or weakness” here equates with more or less of central authority wielded by a governance document. It indeed was an issue for Black Disciples that “The General Assembly has no institutional power or authority over any General Ministry, Region or local congregations” when they presented Resolution #47 at the Louisville General Assembly in 1971.

Throughout his paper, Lee uses the metaphor of a minnow kicking like hell inside a whale’s stomach, to get the whale’s attention. So Lee states, “The question that looms is whether all the kicking got the whale’s attention. Many African American Disciples sigh, no.” (9) This metaphor aptly points up the power imbalance between Black Disciples and White Disciples. On the other hand, it obscures some other realities of the relationship. For one thing, the metaphor of the swallow is rather jarring. If we accept this metaphor, do we not also have to accept the scenario of the minnow not only consenting to being swallowed but also conspiring with the whale to devise how it is to be swallowed, before we accept the picture of the minnow kicking like hell inside the whale?

For another, the whale-minnow metaphor as such may be inapt for the merger. The whale implies a system that is huge and coherent, with a centralized processing unit (the brain) and an efficient mechanism of enforcement (the digestive system). There is no way a minnow inside this system is going to last for long, no matter how hard it kicks. Pretty soon, it will get macerated and absorbed into the whale. This metaphor may somewhat describe the situation of the Central Jurisdiction, the Black Methodists, being swallowed by the huge Methodist Episcopal Church. But it certainly fails to describe the merger between the National Christian Missionary Convention and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)—if only because the latter has no centralized processing unit and no efficient mechanism of enforcement.

In this regard, a more apt metaphor for the Black Disciples and the Christian Church (DOC), may be a school of fish—a school of minnows. In this scenario, Black Disciples are a group of minnows that merge with another group of minnows, among which are white minnows, much larger in numbers, and together they form a school of minnows that swim toward some piscine fulfillment. In this merger, Black minnow need not worry about being swallowed up by the other minnows, and if they can swim faster than the other minnows, they can lead the entire school. This metaphor, of course, can be manipulated to make a different point: by conjuring, for example, the picture of a slew of white minnows bullying one small minnow. But compared to the whale-minnow metaphor, it better illustrates some of the genuine gains that have been influenced by the 1969 Merger, gains attested, for example, by many of the leaders in our regions and general ministries of the past 50 years who have been African American—not least the current General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)