The Methodist Theological School in Ohio and the "Easter Assault on Racial Barriers"[5]

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Abstract

This article traces the stories of four faculty members of the Methodist Theological School in Ohio (MTSO) who, alongside other individuals, were jailed for their integration activism in Jackson, Mississippi in March of 1964. The four faculty members included Van Bogard "Bogie" Dunn, Everett Tilson, Paul Minus, and Jeffrey Hooper. All four were outspoken supporters of racial equality before their arrest, and the persecution they and their fellow protestors faced did not prevent them from voicing their position. Their actions played a pivotal role in organizing for change across the Methodist church and its subsequent desegregation. This historical analysis discusses the events around the arrests in Jackson, Mississippi, and the consequences thereafter. The narrative is based on archival sources and available research on the period.

Keywords: Methodist Theological School in Ohio, civil rights protests, Jackson, Mississippi, theological professors, integration, activism

It was March 29, 1964, Easter Sunday in Jackson, Mississippi. The devout, arrayed in their finest clothes and eager to celebrate the Easter holiday, headed to their local congregation. Known for the Gothic Revival architecture that set it apart as a beautiful landmark, Capitol Street Methodist Church had been standing a dignified watch over the neighborhood for 50 years (Malvaney, 2011), though it has subsequently fallen into disrepair (Figure 1).

As parishioners ascended the front steps and greeted one another, they would have been welcomed in by friends and guided by ushers into the

[5] The phrase comes from "Seven ministers held in Jackson," 1964, p. 14.

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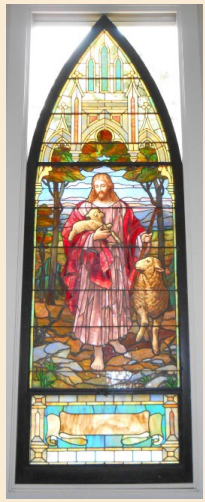
sanctuary. Once seated in the pews, they could enjoy the morning sun illuminating the details of the stained-glass windows. One of these windows remains intact today (Figure 2), albeit relocated to a neighboring congregation (Parkway Hills United Methodist Church, n.d.).

By March of 1964, across Mississippi churches, Sunday mornings had become established as the usual time for staging conflicts over race and racial discrimination (Lyon, 2011). It was on Sunday mornings when African-American students, along with their White allies, would peacefully stand in protest to demonstrate their resistance and ecclesial disobedience throughout the city (Elford, 2023). It was common to see those protests and 'Kneel-ins' outside of churches demonstrating church segregation practices. And it was no different on that March Easter Sunday. After having been barred from entry into the church, two African-American college students accompanied by seven professors from four Methodist seminaries, stood on the steps of Capitol Street Methodist Church under the disapproving glower of those who fought to keep their congregations and communities racially homogenous

Figure 1
The Capitol Street Methodist Church, Jackson, Mississippi

Note: This is the front entrance of the now-dilapidated church (Elmalvaney, 2011).

Figure 2
The Good Shepherd



Note: A stained-glass window originally adorning the Capitol Street Methodist Church in Jackson, Mississippi (Parkway Hills United Methodist Church, n.d.).

Figure 3
Tougaloo College Students and Northern Ministers Turned Away from Capitol Street Methodist Church, October 27, 1963.

Note: Photograph from Dupont, 2013.

(Figure 3; Dupont, 2013; Lyon, 2011).

On the following day, The New York Times recounted the events. In the journalist's account, the ministers from the North "attempted to attend the 11 A.M. services with two Jackson Negro youths"; however, at arrival, the usher stood in front of them preventing them from entering the church "ordering them to leave." The police soon joined, and the usher asked a policeman, "Officer will you take them away." And so the policeman did, arresting the protestors "on charges of disturbing public worship and trespassing on church property" ("Seven ministers held in Jackson," 1964, p. 14). The welcoming embrace of friends and helpfulness of the ushers extended only to White Christians; Black Christians, and their supporters, were greeted by the same individuals with exclusion and hostility.

Nine individuals were arrested for their integration activism on that day. Amongst their ranks were four faculty members from the Methodist Theological School in Ohio: Rev. Dr. Van Bogard "Bogie" Dunn (Dean), Rev. Dr. Everett Tilson (Professor of Old Testament), Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Hopper (Assistant Professor of Theology), and Rev. Dr. Paul M. Minus Jr. (Assistant Professor of Church History). A photograph of the four professors (Figure 4) accompanied one of the newspaper articles about their arrest ("Theological school quartet arrested in Jackson, Miss.," 1964). Three additional professors representing Union Theological Seminary, Drew University, and Garret Evangelical Theological Seminary were also in the group of the arrested. These seven professors were attempting to join the worship service in the company of Bobby

Talbert and David Walker, two African-American students at nearby Tougaloo College, precipitating the eruption of hostility and the arrests of the students and professors (Jones, 1964).

An article published two days after the arrest in The New York Times describes the trial and release of the imprisoned men ("Seven Methodist clerics assail their church," 1964). The presiding judge was not concerned with whether any physical altercation had erupted. Instead, the primary issue was "whether or not a congregation had the right to worship in their own manner…[T]he judge would conclude, the disturbance of public worship came by the mere presence of African Americans seeking to worship at an all-white church. The race of individuals, not their actions or words, constituted the disturbance" (Lyon, 2011, p. 110). All nine men were "found guilty in Municipal Court of disturbing public worship and were sentenced to six months in jail and a $500 fine. They were released under $500 bond pending an appeal to County Court" ("Seven Methodist clerics assail their church," 1964, p. 26). An additional newspaper account revealed the source for the bail: people "associated with the seminary [MTSO] raised $4,000 bail from personal funds, and sent it to Jackson" (Jones, 1964, p. 1). Nevertheless, it was not until approximately seven months later that the U.S. Court of Appeals in New Orleans "overturned the Jackson judge's verdict, and [they] no longer had

Figure 4
The Four Arrested Professors from the Methodist Theological School in Ohio

Note: Newspaper photograph of the four Methodist Theological School in Ohio professors arrested for their attempt to integrate Capitol Street Methodist Church in Jackson, Mississippi ("Theological school quartet arrested in Jackson, Miss.," 1964).

to face the prospect of spending six months in a Mississippi jail" (Methodist Theological School in Ohio, 2014, p. 16).

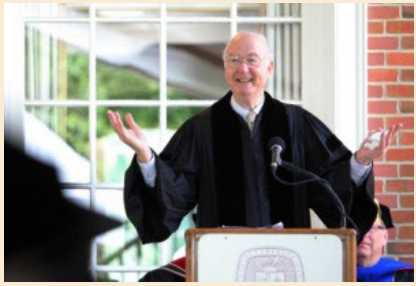
The two African American students from Tougaloo College, Talbert and Walker, did not figure prominently in the newspaper accounts. Most news relegated them to minor supporting roles. However, their movement played a pivotal role in organizing for change (Methodist Theological School in Ohio, 2014). That their story has been almost forgotten in the detailed account of what happened to their allies, all of them well-educated White males, tells a story of its own. Indeed, most sources on the events of the day only mention that seven professors were arrested for their activities. Perhaps as an exception, one article from The Ohio State Lantern noted, however, that all nine individuals (the seven White ministers plus the two African-American Tougaloo College students) were placed under arrest (Jones, 1964). Even the personal archive of the late Dr. Everett Tilson (one of the jailed professors from the Methodist Theological School of Ohio) included news featuring only the ministers. There I found a photocopy of an article from The Delaware [Ohio] Gazette, which named the four professors from MTSO, along with their ages and the addresses of their places of residence, and mentions that "none of [their] wives…were available for comment" ("Theological school quartet arrested," 1964). I also found Tilson's hand-written note on the events: "I, 3 of my colleagues & 3 other meth. theological school professors were jailed on Easter Sunday (3-29-64) for trying to integrate the Capitol St. Meth. Church in Jackson, MS" (Tilson, 1999, p. 100). The article also noted that the men "carried the following written statement" (presumably written on handbills to be passed out):

> Jesus said, "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me." [John 12:32] To exclude some of those whom Christ would draw unto Himself on Easter, the feast of His resurrection, because of color is a violation of human dignity; it is an affront to the Christian conscience; it is a denial of the faith, it is heresy. We are here, as Methodist Christians, to protest this denial of our Lord's resurrection. We call upon all Methodists to affirm the Lordship of the risen Christ by welcoming to His church all those whom He invites. ("Theological school quartet arrested," 1964)

Similar to other news describing their aims and commitments, both *The Delaware*

Gazette article and Tilson's notes did not give any indication that the details were an inaccurate representation of the events of that day. And so the story remained for the next five decades, until, in a series of pronouncements, the details of that arrest publicly emerged. In his Commencement Address at the Methodist Theological School of Ohio for Class 2014, the Rev. Dr. Paul Minus shared "…details of [this] act of civil disobedience, which drew national attention, and discussed how it helped shape MTSO" (Methodist Theological School in Ohio, 2014).

Figure 5
Rev. Dr. Paul Minus Delivering Commencement Address to MTSO Graduates, 2014



Note: Commencement photo. Source: MTSO.

In his address, Minus recounted the events in vivid detail. When they reached the church steps on that morning in Jackson, Mississippi, ushers stopped them and informed them that "it was the congregation's official policy that whites could worship there but not blacks." One of the MTSO faculty, Bogie Dunn, requested to peaceful remain on the steps, "blacks and whites" together but the request was rejected and a threat followed: "if we did not leave," Minus reported, "they would ask the police to arrest us." And so it happened; Bogie Dunn announced that the group would not leave, and the ushers turned to the police to arrest them all. "This conversation," continued Minus, "lasted only two or three minutes. No one raised his voice. It was strangely civil – in fact, it was so low-keyed no one inside the church could know what was happening outside" (Methodist Theological School in Ohio, 2014, p. 15).

In addition, an earlier, 2011 study of the event by Carter Dalton Lyon, published as "Easter in Jackson, Mississippi, 1964" in the Methodist History journal (2011), also offered different details. Lyon collected his insights through audio recordings with people present at the events as well as through later interviews with participants in the events. His findings noted:

> The integrated group…noticed as many as a dozen police officers around the church that began to converge behind the ushers when they sighted the

> group. As the team approached the front steps of the church, a set of ushers hastily ran down and one of them told the group to stop and not come any further. The ushers then formed a line across the stairs and Talbert, Walker, and the seven ministers reciprocated by spreading out along the sidewalk and the grass. After a member of the team appeared to try to walk around the line of ushers, James Cox, the spokesman for the ushers barked, "No end runs!" (p. 108)

With three lines of men, that is, a line of nine would-be worshippers seeking entrance, a line of ushers arrayed on the steps blocking them, and a line of police officers positioned beyond the ushers, this tense moment could easily have turned violent. Rev. Dr. Van Bogard Dunn, the Dean of Methodist Theological School in Ohio, pressed on:

> speaking for the group, [Dunn] announced, "We are Methodist Christians who would like to worship the Risen Lord with you in this church today." Cox responded, "You aren't going to integrate this church. The policy of the official board of this church is to deny admission to all Negroes. You can stand here all day, but you aren't coming in this church." Recognizing the opening, Dunn asked, "Do you mean we can stand here?" The usher clarified, saying, no, they must move on. When Dunn asked why they could not just stand there, Cox explained, "No questions and no answers. If you don't move on at once, I will ask the police to put you under arrest." Dunn restated the desires of the group to worship at the church. Cox then turned to one of the policemen behind him and gave him unambiguous instructions, saying, "Officer, take them away." (Lyon, 2011, p. 108)

The faculty members were outspoken for the cause of racial equality and integration before their arrest, and the persecution they faced for this cause in no way prevented them from further voicing their words and actions (Clark et al., 1964). Contemporary sources give us access to some of their statements immediately after their release. One such example comes in Everett Tilson's essay, where he openly claimed that the Methodist Church lacked concern for the "plight of the Negro in Mississippi and lacks the vision or the will to do anything about it" ("Seven Methodist clerics assail their church," 1964, p. 26).

Tilson went on to argue that the Church was inconsistent with its values, for it was "a strange contradiction that a church would send missionaries to Asia and Africa and not welcome people of African descent to their worship" ("Seven Methodist clerics assail their church," 1964, p. 26).

The Methodist Theological School of Ohio, Integration, and Civil Rights: "We Could not Remain on the Sidelines"[7]

While some civil rights activists were in pursuit of desegregation, their opponents thought the "race problem" was satisfactorily resolved through their de facto segregation practices. Within the Methodist Church, these were embodied in the "Central Jurisdiction," a 1939 ecclesial innovation permitting local congregations to exclude African-American Methodists by assigning them their own bishops, congregations, conferences, and denominational structures (Hahn, 2018). The Central Jurisdiction was the Methodist equivalent to the concept of "separate but equal" and resulted in the treatment of African-Americans as "sacrificial lambs of unity" (Hahn, 2022, p. 6). For this reason, "[a]lmost as soon as the Central Jurisdiction was established, attempts began to get rid of it" (Butler, n.d., p. 2). Increasingly, with the change of time, it was becoming harder to close eyes to injustices that aimed to protect the status quo. As Dr. Carolyn Renée Dupont, Associate Professor of History at Eastern Kentucky University, observed:

> Mississippi's once-placid religious communities transmogrified into civil rights battlegrounds. Many believers passed the civil rights years conflicted and confused, and debates over the meanings of spiritual commitments wracked local congregations. As local leaders feared that the centrifuge of racial turmoil would hurl their parishioners in a thousand directions, Mississippi religious life devolved into a tortured, splintered, and ravaged affair. (2013, p. 12)

The Methodist Church bore deep and longstanding scars over matters of

[7] Drawn from Paul Minus' 2014 Commencement Address: "We believed that the God of justice and mercy was somehow involved in this struggle, and we knew that we could not remain on the sidelines" (Methodist Theological School in Ohio, 2014, p. 15).

race, as evidenced by the role race and racism played in its schisms and reunifications (Hahn, 2022), but there was a growing conviction that there could be no peaceful coexistence between the faithful proclamation of the Gospel message and systems of racial segregation and oppression. The conflict was increasing in intensity between national leaders in the Methodist Church who were supportive of desegregation efforts and laypeople who embraced the Central Jurisdiction as a means to perpetuate their exclusionary practices (Elford, 2023). The result was tension over "…equality, and constant haranguing against denominational leaders constituted a central feature of religious life during the civil rights years. Intense conflict between layfolk and national religious leaders revealed the strength of religious commitments to segregation and white supremacy…" (Dupont, 2013, p. 12). As social institutions sought to preserve the hallmarks of their segregated southern White culture, they fought to prevent integration from encroaching on their congregations (Lyon, 2017). They might not have liked that the military had been integrated, but could do nothing to stop it (Executive Order 9981, 1948). They might not have liked that public schools were being integrated, but they would do their best to discourage it from happening in their schools (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954) Places of worship had become the last bastion of their White identity, such that "many White churches in the South had informal policies that excluded Black worshippers" (Elford, 2023, p. 1).

What had compelled the professors from Delaware, Ohio, to Jackson, Mississippi to travel down there in the first place? Minus tells us they were simultaneously influenced by and influencers of societal developments in which they perceived God at work. The Methodist Theological School of Ohio professors themselves were united in the conviction that the world was:

> undergoing far-reaching change: Longstanding patterns of oppression and injustice were being overturned by powerful new forces affirming human dignity, freedom and equality. That, we believed, was the great, defining fact of our time. We believed that the God of justice and mercy was somehow involved in this struggle, and we knew that we could not remain on the sidelines. (Methodist Theological School in Ohio, 2014, p. 15)

According to Minus, he and his colleagues were part of a broader social

movement inviting northern ministers to stand in solidarity against the perpetuation of racism in the South, as there was a "...tiny minority of Methodists in Mississippi [who] thought we might be helpful in their struggle to overcome segregation in the churches" (Methodist Theological School in Ohio, 2014, p. 14). Minus tells us that the organization "leading the struggle against racial segregation in Mississippi Methodism was concentrated among leaders at Tougaloo College…[where] residents were accustomed to hearing about drive-by shootings into the homes of Tougaloo faculty and staff" (Methodist Theological School in Ohio, 2014, p. 14). Bobby Talbert and David Walker, who had invited the MTSO faculty and others to help in their struggle, played a role in organizing the "ten-month-long church visitation campaign led by students and faculty at nearby Tougaloo College" (Lyon, 2011, p. 99). According to Lyon (2011), their goal was to:

> overcome the barriers of segregation by attempting to worship and engage in dialogue with white Christians at the city's all-white Protestant and Catholic congregations. Ushers at most of the churches routinely barred their entry, citing recent votes by their lay boards to maintain a racially-exclusive attendance policy. (p. 99)

For Methodist advocates of desegregation, their sit-ins, kneel-ins, and efforts to integrate congregations were part of the social movement to undermine the social structures that protected racial discrimination (Elford, 2023). Dupont (2013) noted that between October 1963 and the end of March 1964, Jackson police made more than 30 arrests of individuals seeking to enter segregated worship services, many of them at Capitol Street Methodist Church. Lyon (2011) wrote, "weekly showdowns in front of Methodist churches highlighted the problem of racial segregation in local congregations and within the structures of The Methodist Church itself, a reality that activists hoped would finally spur an end to the policy…" (p. 99). Minus provided further insight into the thinking of Methodist advocates of desegregation: "…first-hand experience of the Southerners' determination to preserve the old ways…[could make] leaders from elsewhere be effective allies in the effort at the Pittsburgh General Conference to turn our denomination more vigorously against racial segregation" (Methodist Theological School in Ohio, 2014, p. 15). The attempts

to accompany African-American worshippers into segregated churches were sincere yet understood as a means to call attention to the problem and build a national consensus for the Methodist Church to change its ways (Lyon, 2017).

Legacy and Influence on the Methodist Theological School of Ohio: "The House of God Must be Open to the Whole Family of God"[8]

The Methodist Theological School in Ohio admitted its first students in the fall of 1960 and celebrated its first graduating class in 1963. The four faculty members, who played a central role in our story, Van Bogard "Bogie" Dunn, Everett Tilson, Paul Minus, and Jeffrey Hooper, were present at MTSO from early in its foundation. Each of these men had his unique individual history and professional trajectory; yet they were all united by a shared commitment to racial equality and social justice, animated by their understanding of their Methodist faith and of the Gospel proclaimed by Jesus Christ. The MTSO website refers to the school's ongoing commitment to social justice activism: "During its formative years in the turbulent 1960s, MTSO established a legacy of Christian concern for social-justice issues. Uncowed by the prospect of arrest and persecution, faculty and students protested racial discrimination, both in the South and closer to home" (Methodist Theological School in Ohio, n.d., para. 3). That MTSO has carried forward this legacy into the present day is evidenced by their statement of distinctiveness:

> MTSO is deeply committed to transformative, sustaining justice as an expansive theological vision consistent with the creative, renewing, resurrecting activity of God in the world. To this end, we create a new imagination for the church of the future through creative work in institutional programs, relationships and resources to promote equity, justice and integrity. We intentionally connect with social justice movements that attend to sustainable social change, transforming both church and world. (Methodist Theological School in Ohio, n.d.)

An editorial published April 15, 1964, in The Ohio State Lantern helps us better understand this commitment to social justice as being rooted in religious

8 Drawn from the handbill of the same title distributed at the 1964 Methodist General Conference (Clark, et al. 1964).

faith ("Public worship," 1964). The editor presented a contrast between the activist, living, incarnational faith advocated by professors Dunn, Tilson, Minus, and Hopper, and the others arrested in Jackson, and the faith advocated by one of their detractors, Otis Maxfield. A Columbus-area minister, Maxfield used his local television show to decry the activism of the MTSO professors as misguided; for him, "...people anywhere must solve their own problems. Whenever we invade other people's territory, no matter how good our motives are, we raise antagonisms, rather than solve them" ("Public worship," 1964, p. 2). The editor of The Ohio State Lantern took Maxfield to task for his statements, noting that the governing documents of the Methodist Church themselves contained statements incompatible with racial discrimination and segregation, concluding that the "racial problem…is not geographical, nor can it be sidestepped. Such problems, whether we like it or not, are everybody's problems" ("Public worship," 1964, p. 2).

Around the time of the events in this article, one contemporaneous account suggested that the Methodist Theological School in Ohio was not immediately aware of or supportive of the actions of the professors who traveled to Jackson. John Mount, the President of the MTSO Board of Trustees, stated: "The men went to Jackson as individuals over their vacation and acted as free, individual Christians. They were in no way acting for the seminary…so it is not a school issue" (Jones, 1964, p. 1). He noted that the school was "planning no aid to the four professors [and] the seminary trustees would make no comment and take no stand until they had heard the facts" (Jones, 1964, p. 1). Nevertheless, Paul Minus reflected that they traveled to Jackson knowing "we were expressing commitments that ran deep and wide in this school; we knew we had your support…the first message from the outside world we received in the Jackson jail was a telegram of support from Methesco students" (Methodist Theological School in Ohio, 2014, p. 14).

Dr. Clyde Manschreek, another professor at MTSO, responding to a reporter's question as to whether his colleagues' faculty positions were in danger as a result of their actions, replied, "Endanger them? If it does anything it might enhance them" (Jones, 1964, p. 8). Indeed, it gave them leverage in rallying others to their cause, including at the Methodist General Conference in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania from April 25 to May 9, 1964, where "[a] plan to abolish the all-Negro Central Jurisdiction of the Methodist Church was debated

for nearly eight hours" ("Methodists debate ending segregation," 1964, p. 16). The debated proposal called for the voluntary re-integration of the Central Jurisdiction congregations into segregated regional conferences by 1967, or threatened a call for a general abolition of segregation at the 1968 Conference ("Methodists debate ending segregation," 1964).

Among the documents in the archive of Professor Everett Tilson, I found a one-page handbill titled "The House of God Must be Open to the Whole Family of God," authored by the seven professors involved in the 1964 Easter integration efforts in Jackson, Mississippi. This document argued that the practice of the Methodist Church "reflects flagrant disregard of the Gospel" and that the "full force of racial prejudice in The Methodist Church has been demonstrated in Jackson, Mississippi in recent months" (Clark et al., 1964, p. 1). Without making it explicit that the authors were among those persecuted, the seven professors maintained that bishops, ministers, and laypeople were "turned away, and, in some instances, arrested and persecuted at the request of the representatives of the churches" (Clark et al., 1964, p. 1). This document called to account not just the church ushers, but the pastors overseeing those local churches, the district superintendents overseeing those pastors, and the bishops overseeing the Methodist Church. The professors argued that because the "...denomination has acquiesced in patterns of segregation, all of Methodism is guilty" (Clark et al., 1964, p. 1).

It is very likely that the professors distributed this pamphlet as they took part in "a large, peaceful demonstration urging delegates to end racial segregation in the Methodist Church. As it turned out, some progress was made down that road, but we were disappointed that delegates did not go further" (Methodist Theological School in Ohio, 2014, p. 16). While the proposal to integrate the denomination was "overwhelmingly approved," one contemporaneous account described a thousand protestors who staged a "singing, swaying kneel-in" decrying the proposals as not going far enough to reverse the racial divide ("Kneel-in scores Methodist stand," 1964, p. 78). As the account summarized, for the demonstrators outside carrying signs reading "Methodism + Segregation ≠ Christian Witness" (Figure 6) or "…placards bearing the words "The Central Jurisdiction Must Go,"…the conference should have settled for nothing short of the immediate abolition of the Negro division" ("Kneel-in scores Methodist Stand," 1964, p. 78).

Figure 6
Protestors during the 1964 General Conference of the Methodist Church

Note: The protestors are calling for an end to segregationist policies during the 1964 General Conference of the Methodist Church ("Kneel-in scores Methodist stand," 1964).

Dunn, Tilson, Minus, Hopper, and others who faced persecution, opposition, or oppression under the segregationist system tolerated by the Methodist Church charted a course of action for those who would follow. As revolutionaries, they saw congruency between the tenets of their Methodist faith and the movements for social and racial justice. As a result of the struggles of those activists, four years later, at the 1968 Methodist General Convention in Dallas, Texas, the Methodist Church embraced the understanding that racial segregation was inconsistent with biblical teachings and the Methodist doctrine, and that it was unjustifiable for a church that claimed to be open to all people; this claim officially signaled an end in the Methodist Church's toleration of segregation (Hahn, 2018). In his 2014 Commencement Address, Minus observed:

> Whatever impact our experience in Jackson might have had on Methodism in Mississippi, its impact on me and on others connected to our Easter Sunday witness was profound. It pointed us firmly in the direction of lifelong, active involvement in the struggle for racial justice and racial reconciliation. It solidified deeply held convictions about the Gospel, the church's mission and our own ministries. It gave us an abiding awareness that our lives can make a difference – and with that came a peace and joy that the world can neither give nor take away. (Methodist Theological School in Ohio, 2014, p. 16)

The stories of these professors, their allies and co-conspirators, the institutional development of the Methodist Theological School in Ohio, and the Methodist church overall are intertwined. These experiences were

transformative not merely for the individuals involved but for the MTSO community as a whole. Furthermore, their persecutions, proclamations, and publications shined a light on the incompatibility of segregation and systemic racism with Methodist doctrine, setting the stage for the subsequent desegregation of the Methodist Church. This crucial foundational narrative has helped the Methodist Theological School of Ohio to maintain its identity and trajectory as an institution deeply committed to social justice; it has inspired generations of faculty, staff, and students thereafter.

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