

STATE OF THE WORK
Reflecting the 15th and Final Year of the New Day Call

By The U. S. Board of Bishops: Richard Snyder, Joseph James, Leslie Krober, Roger Haskins
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Brothers and sisters in Christ, the predicament of the Free Methodist Church of North America may well be described by this short story from Susan Mulholland, a professional storyteller.

The Overdue Twins

A couple with two children prayed for two more, especially for children characterized by a gracious and kind spirit. The doctors confirmed that they were indeed expecting twins.

The parents prepared for the expected births. They fixed up their small home, painting, buying furniture and the assorted necessities.

Every day, in addition to saying her prayers, the expectant mother would rub her growing abdomen and speak to her twins: "Be nice. Be kind." Over and over she conducted that little ritual, every day for nine months.

The end of the ninth month came with no birth contractions. The doctor said, "Not to worry. They will come when they are ready." Ten months came and then 11 with no evidence of the twins being ready to be delivered.

The parents kept praying for the doubling of their family with gracious and kind children. The mother kept rubbing her tummy, saying, "Be nice. Be kind."

Finally a year passed, and then two and then three, but still no babies, no doubling of their family. The mother seemed to be doing well, and according to the doctor's tests the babies continued in reasonable health. But then five years and 10 and 15 passed and no birth.

Enough is enough. Ultimately, in spite of all the good signs, these now distraught parents demanded their babies. A cesarean section was scheduled.

The surgeon opened the womb with care only to discover the two smallish teenage children saying, first the one and then the other, "After you!" "Oh no, after you." "After you!" "Oh no, after you."

Prologue and Reality Expressions

These following insights from a May 1983 *Christian Leadership* letter by Ted Engstrom and Edward R. Dayton may help us gain insight into Free Methodism in 2000. Then we will apply the story of the long-overdue twins.

1. Organizations are started by a **MAN** (or woman), and during their beginnings they reflect that person and his or her life and worldview.
2. If they progress, they become a **MOVEMENT**. Others are caught up in the vision they espoused and the goals they began seeking.
3. But movements tend to become a **MACHINE**. They tend toward order, discipline, rules, organization, structure, inertia and regulations -- all of which can make them quite machinelike.

4. When that happens, the organization can become nothing more than a **MONUMENT** to those who began it.

In the Free Methodism of the late 1800s, numerous individuals joined with B. T. Roberts to risk everything to spread scriptural holiness and take the gospel to the poor. Free Methodism became a movement. Sadly, we were not able to sustain that visionary passion, and we became a machine.

Whether we will soon become a monument or successfully resist the drift and become a movement once again is still to be determined. Whether we will be able to rekindle the vision and counteract the momentum toward comfort and self-satisfaction remains to be discovered. Can we overcome the inertia that naturally follows the muddying of our "reason for existence"? God knows.

The Board of Bishops is committed to keep calling the church back to its founding mission, to keep praying about our lethargy and to keep leading the way while prodding the willing and unsettling the complacent.

The "New Day" Call and the Overdue Twins

In 1985, the Board of Bishops called for a "New Day." Initiatives were begun to rejuvenate dying churches and plant new ones. We wanted to have babies. But we wanted them to be nice, kind and normal in a Free Methodist sort of way.

We prepared our hearts for having children. We boldly suggested, "Let's have hundreds of children." We even suggested, "Let's have a thousand more children by 2000." We studied new ideas and committed to the call. We bought a new, larger home in Indianapolis. Being close to the airport made it easier for relatives to visit.

We streamlined systems, reduced our house help (staff) and paid off old debts. We analyzed everything that could be analyzed. We counseled with experts and rewrote major portions of the *Book of Discipline*. We narrowed our focus and entrusted the vision to the bishops.

We all tried to be nice, to be kind, saying, "After you." "Oh no, after you." Grace has been extended. Hopes have been periodically renewed. Signs of health are quite numerous, but disease and dis-ease also continue to exist. We keep waiting for the doubling of our family.

In December 1995, church leaders met, prayed, taught and consulted before they issued "A Call to Action." It expressed 10 action points to rally us in our rise from spiritual lethargy. Thousands agreed and "signed on" to let these 10 action points sink deep into our consciousness and ministry.

Our hope of doubling in 15 years has come to naught. Though we have made quantum leaps in attitude, structure and processes, we lost 1,439 members, instead of growing by the targeted 67 percent. Are we that unspiritual? Is the answer that "simplistic"? We think not. What might be part of the reason? Here is some analysis to help guide our thinking.

Though we have planted 250+/- new churches since 1985 which survive, we have also closed 340+/- declining churches which had little hope of resuscitation. There is a net loss of 92 churches (1082 to 990 in 1999). We believe that a higher percentage of today's churches have viability and vitality.

Though we have 300+/- churches that are healthy and growing, we also have 300+/- churches that are declining in an offsetting manner.

Though we have 300+/- churches with pastors and leaders who *seem* to be listening, praying and agreeing that kingdom work should produce fruit that remains, there is almost no evidence of new fruit that remains. Their congregations continue on old plateaus where they've been for decades.

(For more statistics, including overseas, check out the "State of the Work" report on the denominational Web site at www.fmcna.org.)

With 15 years resulting in a membership loss of 1,439, we might be tempted to become cynical and begin to despair. However, as leaders of a struggling denomination, we dare not allow ourselves such a "feel good" luxury of pity or martyrdom. If we yield to such attitudes, our day of ineffectiveness has certainly come and we should just acknowledge it. We are not ready to acknowledge such or to surrender. *We keep praying, preparing and waiting* for significant statistical growth to reflect the new life that we believe really exists among a very significant minority of the church.

The Risk of Not Risking -- Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus' insightful parable about investment pricks the conscience. Three servants were given resources without any specific instructions as to what to do with them. The only thing they knew for sure was their Master's heart and attitudes.

The resources were given in different proportions based on what the Master had observed about their abilities: some more, some less. The Master left, then returned and asked for an accounting.

Two did well and one did very poorly. The one who did poorly explained that he was afraid he might disappoint the Master, so he did the safe thing. He secured the money in a hiding place and returned it with no gain. He was harshly condemned for "living cautiously" (*The Message*).

His resources were taken from him and given to the other two who risked investments and produced more for the Master. Jesus said, "Get rid of this 'play-it-safe' who won't go out on a limb. Throw him into utter darkness."

The point we wish to make is this: *Overcaution in kingdom life is a breach of trust.*

Some Free Methodists are like those first two servants, risking much or all for the sake of the kingdom. The vast majority of growth that keeps our statistical reports close to a break-even point comes from this faith-driven, risk-taking minority among us.

For a significant number (perhaps a majority) of Free Methodists, it appears that we are making a breach of the trust Jesus has placed in us. We are "play-it-safes" who are producing little or no growth for the kingdom.

Though some among us are reacting against what they believe to be excessive emphasis on church growth in the last 20 years, it is interesting to note what John Wesley had to say about growth in a journal entry. Any membership decline is a "sore evil," for growth is a sign of God's grace; "where the real power of God is, it naturally spreads wider and wider." Some of us are experiencing too much "sore evil."

Too many Free Methodists, in spite of the 15-year-old New Day call, are still like the third servant: fearful, irksome to the Lord, living cautiously. Too many of us seem to have little passion for winning the lost or for ministering to the poor. Too many seem to

have compromised our doctrine of holiness, living secularized versions of Christianity. How else can we account for the ongoing ineffectiveness among approximately two-thirds of our churches?

Until there is significant change in more hearts, it does not appear to us that the degree of blessing and anointing for which we all pray will come. Because we have normalized substandard commitment, we have been working against gargantuan amounts of lethargy. There is significant need for repentance, evaluation and recommitment to our foundational identity.

The bishops see good signs everywhere. We believe momentum is building in the right direction. We believe that the Lord may yet honor the intentions and efforts of our immediate predecessors with much fruit unto holiness and joy.

Conference Developments

Superintendent Leitzke from North Central Conference reports on the Church of the Good Shepherd planted out of Olive Branch Mission in September 2000. It launched with a leadership team of 16 adults, and gifted musicians on the worship team. First-Sunday attendance was 144 with 21 responding to the altar call.

Superintendent Young reports that the New Middleton, OH, FMC received nine new youth members recently and commissioned two new lay pastors. They have a vision to start a couple of new satellite congregations in the next five years.

New Pacific Coast Japanese superintendent, David Hino, writes, "Each church is working on a local mission statement and assessment through 'Natural Church Development.'"

Superintendent Rupert of Gateway Conference guided the January launch of the new church called The Bridge in Edwardsville, IL, near St. Louis, MO. It is already averaging close to 100, and there have been more than 20 decisions to trust Christ or renew in Christ. The Greenville FMC provided \$1,000 per month and several dozen loaned people. Also in that conference, Gateway's Hillsboro FMC had more than 20 converts in 2000, and Alton FMC has relocated and is growing.

Wabash Conference's superintendent, David Colgan, reports that a recent Mission Indy rally resulted in prayer and financial support for the Mars Hill FMC revitalization project. Those attending gave \$1,700 and pledged \$685 monthly to support the church and pastor, Don Meier.

Superintendent Doug Bailey of Columbia River Conference reports that West Valley FMC, under the leadership of Pastor Bob Havens, is starting ministry in Emmett, ID.

Maryland-Virginia Conference is working intentionally to create ministries again in Washington, D.C. Superintendent David Harvey also reports New York's intentions to hire a church planting director as they minister to six language groups. The Brazilian and Hispanic ministries are growing rapidly.

Great Britain's superintendent, Allan Ellershaw, reports that Joan Leech sold her home and moved 400 miles to Helston to help plant a new church in Penzance, Cornwall. On Sept. 23, 2000, they received a new church plant in Clayton, Manchester, as an affiliated church with 14 founding members and a congregation of 40.

Superintendent Dan Shinabarger says that in the East Michigan Conference 18 previously plateaued churches are now growing through new converts. The growing churches training in lifestyle evangelism have averaged 12 conversions a year.

From the Great Plains Conference, Superintendent David Kendall reports that the International Center FMC in Kansas City is renovating a building that was given to them. It is in one of the most violent and volatile parts of the city.

Sierra Pacific Conference has expanded from ministry among three language groups to ministry among eight. Superintendent Forest Bush notes that Oroville FMC has committed to community business leaders to work with welfare recipients in instilling qualities that will make them employable. And Orangevale FMC sent a staff member and 20 percent of its congregation to plant a church in a neighboring community.

Pacific Northwest Conference has many developments to report. The conference is providing a three-unit apartment building free to FM students called to urban ministry. A new Free Methodist church was launched in the Woodlands Community near Houston, TX, on Sept. 17, 2000. Northwest Urban Ministries, sponsored by several Seattle Free Methodist churches, completed a summer of ministry with inner-city children, and director Anna Schoenhals believes God is calling them to plant a new inner-city church. Also, Superintendent Matt Whitehead reports that the Quincy (Anglo) FMC launched a new Hispanic Free Methodist church in November 2000. Pastor Daniel Castillo has been on staff for a year in preparation.

The Free Methodist Church in Southern California has seen dramatic growth in African-American ministries in the last four years -- from one to three congregations and from 75 to 675 in worship attendance. Superintendent Steve Fitch is also excited to report a number of apostolic leaders who are committed to daughtering new congregations: since 1990 Long Beach Light and Life FMC under Pastor Larry Walkemeyer has grown from 90 to 900 with three new daughter congregations, and Temecula/Murietta under Pastor Marty Edwards grew from 100 to 500 with two new daughter congregations.

The North Michigan Conference under Superintendent Sam Tinsley reports the leadership of Pastor Nate Gibbons at Saranac, whose congregation has gone from life support (under 10 people) to nearly 100 with regular conversions of seekers.

The Eastern Area conferences have seen 21 new church plants in 21 months and more than 25 new Conference Ministerial Candidates in the last two years. New leaders are being developed through the WAVE District Leader concept.

FM Networks

The developing FM Networks compound our reasons for hope. The bishops want to allow the "frontlines" ministry leaders to network and run apace with the Spirit's momentum. Our FM Networks are developing Spirit-initiated momentum.

- The African-American Pastors Network has doubled since last year.
- The Portuguese Church Network has grown from three to 12 churches and continues to expand rapidly.
- The Haitian Pastors Network is launching as Bishop Snyder endeavors to lengthen their "shortened arms."
- The National Student Ministries Team (NSMT) has just completed its first churchwide training event in many years at Spring Arbor, with more than 50 full-

or part-time paid youth ministers in attendance. Under the auspices of the NSMT, a very successful IYC was held, with approximately 3,700 in attendance.

- The Chaplains Network of more than 100 full-time chaplains is being re-energized by our new endorsing agent, Bob Barnard.

These FM Network apostolic leaders are being set free to move with the Spirit of God and lead us into astonishing conversion and spiritual growth.

Other Ministries

Light and Life magazine received the 1999 Denominational Magazine Award of Excellence from the Evangelical Press Association, which named it the leading denominational magazine in America.

Giving by all 28 conferences to Home Ministries and Missions of the UMC was at its highest level ever as of Aug. 31, 2000, with both categories being at 100 percent or better of hoped-for revenue.

Missions

Free Methodist World Missions (FMWM) Director Art Brown is traveling worldwide to engage with our missionaries and reconnect them following our leadership transition. For the 21st century, he's voicing a vision of many new missionaries. International Child Care Ministries, under the auspices of FMWM and directed by Ann Van Valin, has become perhaps the highest-impact social and spiritual ministry of our entire general conference. As of October 2000, this ministry provides monthly food and practical educational and medical assistance to 16,060 children in 24 countries. Significantly more money flows through this ministry channel than our entire denominational Home Ministries budget.

Latin Area Director David Roller enthusiastically reports that the FMC grew by 11 percent last year, from 34,780 members to 38,724, led by the Dominican Republic, which will soon (2001) become an autonomous general conference. The Central Mexico Mission District grew from 64 to 382 members (600 percent). During its four years in existence it has grown from zero to seven churches.

Africa Area Director Henry Church watches over a new mission in Ethiopia that has grown quickly from nothing to more than 200. Missionaries Dr. Tim and Muriel Teusink now serve in Addis Ababa. Three more countries moved to autonomy and full partnership status as general conferences: South Africa, Mozambique and Burundi. They join Egypt, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, bringing to six the total of general conferences in Africa.

Asia Area Director David Yardy guides ongoing cooperative ventures in the Asia Pacific. Several mission conferences are taking cooperative responsibility to be mission-driven themselves.

New initiatives in Europe were strengthened at the third annual FM European Leadership Encounter. Free Methodists gathered from Ukraine, Hungary, England, Greece, Bulgaria, Portugal, Holland, England, Canada and the United States. Bishop Snyder, Bishop Elford, Art Brown and the Rev. Allan Ellershaw served as the resource team. God bonded His fledgling European FM team for the new millennium. The FMC in Ukraine has received its registration from the government, and the FMC in Hungary has had its first five adult baptisms.

Light and Life Communications

A mammoth cause for praise rises from the work of the Communications Task Force (April 2000). The task force felt that we must get out of ink and off the printed page and into the cyberworld. Initiatives have come from their proposals for a multipronged communication strategy. We believe that the development of this Web-based communications paradigm (as opposed to our print-media paradigm) will provide a cyber-assist to pull us powerfully into the future. We believe that this initiative, which enhances denominational connection, is timely, inspired and will prove to be of crucial significance as we transition to coming generations.

The adjustments within Light and Life Communications are a source of hope. As the magazine continues to be developed, the Web site enhanced and the annual video sent to every church as a vision-casting and inspirational hub, we believe the day is not far off when a majority of Free Methodists and thousands of new Free Methodists will be saying:

"God is powerfully at work here. There is a biblical, God-honoring vision. We are touching the world for Christ, and I am proud to be part of this 'new' movement called Free Methodism."

Working on the Foundations

We hope, because of the willingness of leaders at all levels (general conference, Board of Administration, bishops, superintendents and executives), to take risky yet essential and progressive steps. We have come to believe that the Free Methodist denomination may well have been in more trouble spiritually than anyone really knew. We have come to believe that had the strong call to a New Day not been given and implemented, the story would be even more bleak today for the Free Methodist Church in the United States.

But, thank God, leaders for the last 15 years have agreed: "We have had many forms working against the functions we desire to carry out. We will do what we can to seek God anew even while we adjust the system and free up the forms which limit our vision, our personnel and our resources, which are vital to invigorating the FMC."

The spirit of the majority seems to be that "We cannot dictate what the Holy Spirit will do with us, but we can adjust our hearts and wills, our attitudes, our systems so as to allow the Spirit more elbowroom among us."

III. A CONTINUING CALL TO THE ESSENTIALS

Recently, a concerned layman quizzed one of the bishops. He wanted to know what we were going to do to address the growing reality of small churches that cannot afford to

pay a full-time pastor. The pressure to provide for health insurance has only intensified the level of aggravation on this subject.

The bishop responded by referring to the initiative that represents the primary assignment of this quadrennial's Study Commission on Doctrine: the defining and detailing of the role of deacon in the FMC. This is one of our efforts to focus on the strategic initiative of raising up godly, competent pastor-leaders.

The bishop suggested that our primary hope for churches such as these (along with many larger churches, too) is to empower, authorize and release gifted laypeople to provide pastoral ministry and leadership. He suggested that we have thousands of mature laity taking early retirement from careers, who ought to be giving their seventh decades to be local church leaders and pastors.

These persons are seasoned, sanctified and filled with wisdom. They have spiritual gifts that are being vastly underutilized. Many of them could provide more effective pastoral leadership than has been and/or is being given. They are an incredible untapped ministry resource. The Board of Bishops believes that to the degree we are able to lift up, authorize and set free this group of people as a new generation of deacons among us, to that degree the Free Methodist Church may see renewal in hundreds of our churches.

The Board of Bishops greatly appreciates the permission-giving spirit among our leaders. We thank God that, unlike in several denominations, our doctrinal statements and community standards are not under attack. We thank God that we have agreement in so many guiding statements such as our Community Culture (formerly called Values), our Expected Outcomes and our Vision for the local church:

**A healthy biblical community
of holy people,
multiplying disciples, leaders, groups and churches.**

Based on our acceptance of these, we are calling every local church to health as Spirit-filled leaders work out a plan to fulfill our Expected Outcomes.

The Board of Administration has also endorsed our Empowerment Plan. By means of the attitudes behind these objectives:

- 1) sharing information with everyone via our Web-based paradigm;
- 2) creating autonomy through healthy boundaries via our "Non-negotiable" document; and
- 3) raising up self-directed ministry teams via local permission-giving and our FM Networks -- we hope to jump-start many more of our lethargic pastors, persons and congregations. Once groups are jump-started and captured by our vision, there is no stopping what God can do through us.

The task of leadership at all levels could be described as invigorating the traditional, encouraging the new and launching the essential "next" thing. By God's grace and wisdom, we believe that as we keep doing the hard work of changing the paradigms of how we do church, God may smile upon us and renew the work of our hands.

CONCLUSION

An essay in *Time* magazine (Feb. 3, 1992) called "The Fraying of America" suggested, "The future of any group in America will rest with people who can think and

act with informed grace across ethnic, cultural, linguistic [and we bishops would add religious] lines. ... In the world that is coming, if you can't navigate difference, you've had it."

We submit to you our perception that the Free Methodist Church has been striving mightily to do just this: to think and act with informed grace across ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious lines. We have striven mightily to navigate America's changing paradigm as we have approached the 21st century.

Though the cultural onslaught is contrary to committing oneself as a member of a "denomination," the hunger of the American heart is for authentic community, for belonging, for connectedness, for being known. If we can bring about healthy communities of faith as we preserve our call to "covenant" relationship, our membership statistics will right themselves -- but this too will take time.

In closing we submit a perspective on our historical journey that may provide insight as we seek to become healthy and spiritually whole.

In the first 40 years of our existence as a denomination (1860-1899), there was so much passion for the mission that it carried the day. Our leaders, almost with a martyr's complex, stormed the land, spreading the mother-lode doctrine of holiness.

Yet as we discovered in the next 40 years (1900-1939), we may not have had a balanced concept of personal holiness to place alongside the passion. Once the passion died, the next generation lurched into the ditch of legalism and began the disheartening journey of losing each new generation of youth to other churches or to unfaith. It has often been said among us that we have populated enough congregations in other holiness and mainline denominations to provide growth for them without their having to do any evangelism. There is more truth in those disheartened statements than we like.

In the next 40 years (1940-1979) we sought to rectify our denomination's legalistic bent. Through adjustments of "rules" and "attitudes" we progressed. But we may have succeeded so well that the pendulum swung toward an uncritical involvement in a secularized Christianity that is just as much or more "American" than it is "Christian." Once again, we are faced with the challenge of "recovery" to wholeness.

We are in our fourth 40-year period (1980-2019). The story is being written, and we cannot yet predict this chapter's closing paragraphs. The primary challenge in this, our fourth "era," is to learn whether or not a group can rediscover its passion for the mission of spreading scriptural holiness across the land and taking the gospel to the poor. But this time, the question is even more broad: as we seek to rediscover our founding mission, will we be able to do so out of a balanced theology of holiness and out of congregations that are Spirit-filled, healthy, holy and full of joy in the Lord?

As we provide healthy biblical communities, as more of us begin to live holy lives that have that cutting edge of practical and social holiness, more and more people are going to find the Free Methodist Church to be an expression of the spiritual and relational home for which they long. May the Lord of the church, even the Lord Jesus, come upon us and help us with this challenge and call.

Respectfully submitted,

Roger Haskins, Joseph James, Leslie Krober, Richard Snyder