

*Searching for the Soul of the Free Methodist Church*  
Linda Adams

Since Doug Newton reminded us yesterday of the need for reciting our history to one another and gave us a glimpse into his own personal history in the Free Methodist Church, I'll begin with some personal reflections, as well.

I am a daughter of the Free Methodist Church—and, I guess you could say, if the Church has grandchildren, I'm one of those, too. The Most Holy Faith was passed on to me not through my Grandmother Lois and my Mother Eunice, but through my Grandmothers Lola and Fern, and my Mother Estella. And, apparently unlike Timothy, I was privileged to be guided and influenced also by my Father Ken and my Grandfathers Vernon and Robert, all of them being Free Methodists, and Grandpa Cleveland being a pastor in the East Michigan Conference.

The Cleveland Grandparents' influence was mostly indirect, since they both died when I was fairly young, but Grandma Cleveland's funeral is my earliest vivid memory of a worship service, and I will never forget the singing, or that strange, undeniable mixture of grief and joy. (By the way, the song "Until Then" was introduced as a favorite song of hers, and I just figured out about a month ago that it was basically a contemporary song when she loved it! It was written in 1951 and she went home to be with the Lord in 1963, I think.)

Both the Beardslee clan and the Cleveland clan have stayed close over the years, and we've created some opportunities for "recitals" like Doug was talking about yesterday. For instance, both sides of the family have organized reunions for several days at a stretch, and included interviews with my parents' generation, which were videotaped for posterity, and family trivia games that my cousin and sister created to counteract the curvature of memory. Oh, yes, and the thousands of Aunt Thelma's slides...

My most personal insights into Grandpa Cleveland came when my mom transcribed his diaries from the war years and distributed them to us all a few years ago. Besides the many descriptions of worship services, prayer meetings, and visiting musicians, there was the delightful, recurring sentence, "After dinner Mother and I walked over town for an ice cream." Ahh, *now* they're a real couple! It also takes the edge off some of the stories of poverty that I've heard. They only could afford meat once a year, but they found a way to get ice cream. (I guess I come by that vice naturally...)

One more memory along these lines needs to be indulged, since this is a historical gathering. My family only attended the East Michigan Family Camp on Sundays, since our home conference was Southern Michigan, and that's where we went for a whole week or ten days. So every year we got to East Michigan Camp for the final Sunday, in time to hear Eileen Bovee sing "The Holy City." I don't remember any of the colorful displays that play on Doug's memory screen...so it makes me ask whether I'm that much younger than you, Doug, or whether the Michigan camp meetings cooled off earlier than the Western New York ones. Speaking of cooling off, I remember sweltering in the tabernacle, and coming back over to the Cleveland tent to drink from the common metal dipper that hung by the water bucket outside Grandma's tent. I knew about germs by then, so my drinking from the Cleveland dipper was a conscious choice to catch whatever my family had. Thankfully, I caught more than the dipper passed on.

The church of my childhood was a very different church than Doug tells about. I grew up in the Free Methodist college town of Spring Arbor, Michigan, on Planet Big Church. Once a month we children were dismissed from the Sunday morning service to go to JMS, and two ancient ladies, Mrs. Heltzel and Edna Lohr, captivated us with flannel graphs and tales of foreign missions. I can't even remember which one of them told the story the day I memorized Isaiah 53:6 and gave my heart to Jesus, but the visual image of that flannel lamb straying from the fold and "the Lord laying on Jesus the iniquity of us all" is in my head for life. Mel Gibson quoted from the same chapter and gave me some multi-million dollar new images, but they haven't replaced that formative one.

I must say that the church was pretty "safe and comfortable," to repeat some words that were used last night in a cautionary way, until my teen years. Then, thank God, the Asbury Revival of 1970 broke out and spilled over to us. When the Holy Spirit moved in a mighty way over the next months and even years, all the ordinary ways of doing church went out the window. We were literally at the church seven days a week for many, many months. Our high school youth group went from sitting in the balcony, chewing gum, passing notes and flirting with each other, to front and center, right down in the middle of the Glory Circle. We knelt at the altar for hours, weeping and repenting and worshipping. We laid hands on people and they were healed! We sang and testified and watched the Holy Spirit fall on people in convicting power, eliciting instantaneous confession, reconciliation, and restitution. We took on the local high school, gathering for prayer before we got on the busses in the morning, pasting so many Jesus stickers all over the building that they had to make a rule against them! We proclaimed, "Once you've tasted the sweet wine of Jesus, everything else is just Kool Aid!" (Ironic metaphor, coming from a bunch of teetotaling teenagers!)

We also found out that the passion of Revival can bring in its wake controversy and secret meetings that end up in church splits. When our beloved pastor mysteriously left to start a non-denominational church just up the road, amid accusations of tongues-speaking and fanaticism, I pleaded with my parents, "Why don't we go with them?" My dad's answer was simple—maybe oversimplified. "We are Free Methodists." That explanation never set too well with me.

To add a sweet footnote from a few years later, that new church nurtured my future husband in the faith when he came to Christ at the age of 26, so our marriage reunited the two congregations for a day...

It was in the Spring Arbor church in 1972 that I received my call into ministry. Retired missionary Alice Taylor preached, and at least dozens of young people, mostly college students, streamed down the aisles to respond to the call of God to ministry. I didn't know what that would look like—I never dreamed I'd be a pastor, having never seen a female pastor, but I "signed a blank check" and gave my life to God for whatever he wanted of it.

So how on earth does a commitment to urban ministry emerge from a background like mine? That's where the story takes some geographical twists and turns, and gets too long to tell. But that's also where the Usable History of the Free Methodist Church kicked in consciously. When Dwight Gregory came to Spring Arbor College with a hokey little hand-written flyer that said "Go East, Young Man (or Woman)!", John and I took him up on it. He was planting a church in New Jersey and needed some free co-laborers. Well, we didn't do it for free, they paid us \$12.50 a week. But Dwight and Howard Olver

and Howard Snyder and Donna Saylor and all the people we started meeting annually at CUE (that's Continental Urban Exchange) were in the process of recovering the passion of the founders. They saw huge urban populations with minimal access to the gospel, and they were going to make a dent. They had a goal worth sacrificing for—actually a dual goal, with a familiar ring—to spread the message of biblical Christianity in the cities, and to preach the gospel to the poor.

For at least a dozen years, CUE became John's and my primary "conference." More than any other place in the denomination at the time, CUE represented for us passionate worship, intercessory prayer, and a welcoming of people who didn't fit the Free Methodist mold—African Americans, Hispanics, and, as I was coming to find out, people like *me*—in that oxymoronic "women pastors" category. I think at the time I was searching for the Free Methodist soul, and I found it at CUE. (The history of that movement and where it exists today is another discussion, for a different symposium.)

All that autobiographical stuff aside, let me now give full attention to the question of *this* symposium. When I agreed to speak today, I sent an email around to a few friends, asking for their feedback. Here's what I wrote to them:

"The symposium is a cross-generational dialogue on what is the essence of Free Methodism. Is there any core of who we are that needs to be preserved from the "melting pot" of "generic evangelicalism"? What is that? What is our soul, our key identity, our unique charisma that we are charged by God to live out, and to bring to the larger Body of Christ and to the world? Are we truly meant to be "just Christians" or is there something important also about being Free Methodists?

I know there's some feeling that we keep casting about for the latest solution or paradigm that will help us reach the lost, accomplish our mission, grow, etc...yet over the decades it starts to feel like a loss of soul while we chase fads and methodologies. We change structures, we drop unhelpful denominational quirks or legalistic traditions, but what should we hold on to?"

Once I started thinking about this, I began to notice this quest all over the map among American churches. Christianity Today reported that the Southern Baptists are trying to change their name. They are not primarily a Southern US denomination, in fact they have churches all over the world, so their name is misleading and unhelpful. But to disconnect "Southern" from "Baptist" would be to lop off one of the golden arches! It's their logo, their tag, their identity. It's not going to be an easy transition, I predict.

I also read about Max Lucado and his local congregation's "morphing" the Church of Christ. He and several others have publicly repudiated their cardinal doctrine of baptismal regeneration, and his church has added instrumental music to two of the three worship services. Probably most of us would applaud those changes, at least the doctrinal one, and say it's a good thing to outgrow your denomination's limiting distinctives if they're *wrong!* But who's to say which of our distinctives need to be outgrown and which need to be preserved at all costs? That's the sifting that Stan encouraged us to do. To shape the tradition by how we choose to receive and pass on the heritage, with its mixed bag of strengths and weaknesses.

When I sent my email about this symposium, and when I sat down for coffee with several different pastors, I got a lot of different perspectives. One was defensive, "Who

says we've lost our soul?" (I told him I didn't think anyone was accusing us of that, but that it doesn't hurt any person or group to take inventory every once in a while.) As individuals, we *are* a soul; we *have* a body. We take our bodies in for an annual physical. Since the soul is more intangible, we might decide we need to haul it in for an occasional diagnostic once-over. The same goes for a denomination. I am not insulted by the question.

Another interpreted the question as "When are we at our best?" and answered it, "When we give people a second chance. We believe in restorative grace, so when pastors or other people fail, we have a process to help them move toward wholeness. Our process orientation toward grace gives people the opportunity to move on with God from any place on the continuum." That is a rather unique way to define our identity, but I would have to say that it would probably be the characteristic that most people at my local church would lift up as the undeniable mark of New Hope Free Methodist Church.

Another pastor asked, "Do we have to distinguish our soul's characteristics from other holiness or Wesleyan groups? Isn't our best self their best self? We all want to follow John Wesley in defining the *summum bonum* as "perfect love." I proposed to her, just because my family sits down to talk about how to be the best nuclear family we can be, that doesn't mean we have to define it differently or similarly to my sister and her family. It may be that we come up with exactly the same concerns and constellation of traits, but it would be highly unusual.

I had dinner with Howard Snyder to pick his brain (as I've done quite frequently over the years) and he emailed me this "quadrilateral." (He's not too fond of the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" so his tongue must be in his cheek.) If we're being balanced and looking to synthesize, it's harder to pin it down or pigeonhole our identity. All four of these movements are a part of our history and our current identity, in differing degrees. For instance, in the upper left corner, we cherish the sacraments and value tradition, in common with the Anglo-Catholic part of our heritage. Secondly, the evangelical strain of our identity highlights the need for personal conversion, the commitment to the authority of the Scriptures, and a mission-driven pull toward reaching the lost, expressed in church growth perspectives and a continuous yearning for revival. But that's not all of who we are...we also have strong roots, through our founders, in social holiness, social justice, a concern for preaching the gospel to the poor and obeying the ethical demands of the Scriptures. This perspective we share in common with Anabaptists. But we are more than that—in common with the Charismatics, we also emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in giving gifts and making holiness possible. We own a heritage that holds firmly to the possibilities of love that sanctification brings. And we believe that a biblical synthesis holds these all in creative tension. How much easier it might be to just "land in a corner!" But we want more than that. Our "soul" lives in the middle of the page!

Another person I talked with about this quest wanted to phrase it as "What is our unique charism? What gift does God want us to give?" His answer was holiness....real, experiential, Holy Spirit filled, disciplined, but not legalistic or judgmental, holy love. That key doctrine, wed to vital practice, must remain alive in groups of people—and that is our high calling and privilege.

In my adult lifetime, I have seen us embrace several new paradigms or methodologies to help us "get the job done." For example, each of these had their day: Church growth seminars, Growing a Healthy Church, Small Groups as The Paradigm, Contemporary

Music, CEO Leadership Model, Seeker Sensitive Approach, Purpose Driven Approach... And we have not always been concerned with the theological underpinnings or presuppositions of these movements. One pastor said to me, "We're pragmatists. We use whatever works. That's the way to get missional." He was defending that approach.

But several of the pastors I met with feel that we as a denomination have gradually changed our expectations of pastors to push us toward "success," variously defined. When we go to various conference and regional gatherings, hungry for some soul food, we get fed the latest, greatest way to get more productive. We leave wearied by the sinking feeling that we've yet again observed a "successful thing" that we can't duplicate. One pastor even used the provocative term, "We've *prostituted* ourselves on the altar of productive ministry."

My own confession is due now. I am a graduate of the Beeson Doctor of Ministry program at Asbury. I saw many wonderful things, and I learned a lot, some of which I've had to unlearn. I also resisted some of what I recognized there as being very out of touch with FM sensibilities (and I believe biblical sensibilities) regarding the poor and marginalized and several other Wesleyan themes.

But my confession is this. I heard with my own ears the pastor of Kwang Lim Methodist Church in Seoul, Korea, tell us that he prays 3-4 hours every morning. He showed us the little prayer closet off his office where he spends the hours from 5 to 8 AM every day, plus the all night vigils and regular fasts, etc. And I read with my own eyes where Paul Yonggi Cho says the same thing about the Yoido Full Gospel Church's phenomenal growth...that the secret is prayer. Prayer Mountain, prayer retreats, daily pre-dawn prayer sessions which members are required to attend... But, like the other American pastors who visit there, I must confess that I was impressed with their devotion and then went on to try to copy their strategic organizing rather than their strategic prayer. If one paragraph of their book tells of their prayer life and 100 pages tell about organizing cell groups and growing a church of hundreds of thousands, my American self will jump to the "doable" part and miss the whole point.

Every pastor I know has shelf after shelf of expensive notebooks, filled with one program after another, each guaranteed to revolutionize our ministry or grow our church. With very little to show for it.

One key is the issue of ministerial identity. Eugene Peterson sounds the cry over and over again, that we can too easily lose our soul by "running a church." The demands of the job description are not the right ones; if we simply fulfill our people's expectations, or even our superintendents' expectations, we can easily lose our soul along the way. Busyness and "running a church" cannot be the HEART of our ministry, but we fall prey to that pressure. For instance, Peterson says he and his wife "run a house,"—yes, they take out garbage and pay bills and paint the porch—but they don't think of their life together as "running a house"! They are nurturing and sustaining and celebrating a Christian marriage! They are a cameo of Christ and the Church! Running the house is just the functional necessity.

So we as pastors often get caught inside our own heads with the identity of a "church-runner" rather than a shepherd; the "cure of souls" is no longer our priority, and even our own souls get neglected in the process. Do we keep a Sabbath? Do we immerse ourselves in the Word of God? Here's a novel question: What would it profit a

denomination if we were to gain the whole world, but lose our own soul? And what would we give in exchange for our soul?

If these issues of ministerial identity are true of pastors, are they also true of superintendents? Look at our conference websites. Mostly, you'll see forms and calendars and statistics—you might have to click several times before you see evidence of what we're really supposed to be most passionate about! We might also raise the question of the identity and role of the bishopric, along these same lines.

Another question that keeps coming up is how we translate our original impulses for freedom (the four freedoms, which in our literature have now become five!). Maybe the "FREE" is supposed to mean new things in the New Day. I have an African American woman in my church who came from a tradition where you have to dress to the nines every Sunday. For her, the "free" in Free Methodism means you don't have to wear a girdle, pantyhose, and heels to church! What is our core commitment to freedom now?

One of those commitments was to freedom of the Spirit in worship. A few weeks ago several people from my church joined a community worship event at a Wesleyan Church. I was sitting with 8-year-old Monica. A man from Family Life Radio got up and preached, and his style was "old fashioned." When he built up a good head of steam, he got loud! Three times, when he was speaking so loudly that she couldn't be heard, Monica yelled into my ear, "That guy can really preach!!" The third time, he stopped "really preaching" right before her last two words, so everyone in our section turned around and smiled at us. But I wondered, is Monica missing something at our church? By her definition, she's never heard any "real preaching" from me—I talk with people. But beyond issues of style, have I lost something in passion? If I really believe what I'm saying, maybe it needs to come across more forcefully sometimes. Have I been seduced by a "seeker sensitivity" that has made me avoid intensity for the sake of not "weirding out" the visitors? I've got some soul searching to do.

I have spent a few years of my life worshipping in churches that are not Free Methodist. The thing that brought me back home was our position on women in ministry. That is one of the things that cannot melt into the pot! Our founder valued that freedom, and spent a lot of his "leadership change" (to use Maxwell's analogy) fighting for it. Do we teach it, and model it, and faithfully pass the baton to the next generation? Is equality in the New Community something people can feel when they come to our churches? It is in mine—but I fear it isn't always the case.

In this one short event, it obvious that all we can do is raise the questions, and stimulate good dialogue about our "heart and soul." My prayer is that we'll live out the very best of biblical Christianity, and that as we do so, it will fulfill the vision of our forebears and, most importantly, the Lord of the Church. It's an honor to participate in the process. Let's be prayerful together that we live from the center of who we are, and faithfully embody the soul of Free Methodism in the new millenium.