

Dear United Methodist Friends,

You may have heard of the Free Methodist Church; you may even know a Free Methodist! But we've found that most United Methodists don't know much about who we really are. Free Methodists were "released" from the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1860 over matters of conviction and our forebearers' understanding of Scripture. We Free Methodists join with you in lament that such a scenario is playing out again; that elements in your beloved denomination have chosen to emphasize cultural accommodation over submission to God's written revelation. We are grieved over these fractures.

We find no joy in reaching out to those who may wish to explore a new denominational home as a result of fissures in the United Methodist Church. At the same time, we recognize there are legitimate and good reasons for pastors and churches to prayerfully consider changing denominational affiliation, particularly when changes in the constitution or theology of their current denomination are substantial. Only in a context of fraternal respect are we prepared to engage in meaningful conversation with those who are considering such a move. We write these lines in the hope that we may clarify both the challenges and opportunities that would be involved for you, the United Methodists, as you consider us, the Free Methodists.

Challenges

While it is probable that some United Methodist pastors and churches might find a mutually beneficial home in the FMC, it is important that we recognize the inherent challenges of size and culture.

- **Size** - The UMC is exponentially larger than the FMC in the U.S., and if even a small percentage of UM churches were to actually make a move to the FMC, it could overwhelm the current makeup of the FMC. We are not prepared to dilute our commitment to living out our mission, vision, and strategic initiatives and; because those are the very things that attract interest in the FMC, we are committed to serious and substantive dialogue before any transitions might occur.
- **Culture** - A similar challenge is that you may simply be looking for a more conservative version of what you already have; but that is not the FMC. What is driving the current discontent for many United Methodists is the hard drift toward a more liberal agenda on social issues and compromise on the authority of scripture. But we must also recognize that the culture in the two denominations is very different. With all the dangers inherent in painting with "a broad brush" it seems fair to say that the UMC has developed a more

bureaucratic system which highly values denominational loyalty and advancement, political influence, clergy benefits (minimum salaries, guaranteed appointments, a top-tier pension plan), and a corporate system of advancement that guarantees a relatively smooth transition from one pastor to the next in the appointment process. The differences between the UMC and FMC on these matters are at least as significant as our theological differences.

These challenges highlight our need to clearly and thoroughly communicate who we are and who we are not as a denomination. Forthright communication should help minimize unrealistic expectations and misplaced assumptions, and at the same time let you know that we are not looking for pastors and churches who are primarily motivated by a desire to leave the UMC, but for those who are drawn to what God is doing in and through the FMC.

Who We are Not

- *A large denomination.* You will be shocked by the size difference, particularly in the Southeast and Midwest. For example, there are twice as many UM churches in the state of Georgia as there are FM churches in the entire United States! United Methodists looking for connection in the FMC may struggle with the lack of critical mass at regional gatherings, such as district meetings and annual conference. At the same time, there are advantages of a smaller denomination, including greater flexibility, a more personal connection with leadership, more openness to partnerships outside the FMC, and the ability to more readily adjust course when the Spirit leads.
- *A denomination of large churches.* The average FM church in the US has a worship attendance of 116. It is true that a higher percentage of our newer churches are significantly larger, but we remain a denomination of mostly small and rural churches. One of our challenges in some quarters of the FMC is a tendency toward “small church thinking” and a bias against larger churches. The plus side of this challenge is that our leadership is confronting this challenge and is highly motivated to continue planting new works, particularly in urban areas of the country.
- *A denomination with high clergy security.* The FMC does not guarantee appointments, nor does it have minimum salaries in many places. We would not make these kinds of clergy-guarantees even if we had the resources to do so. We are not convinced such guarantees lead to more fruitful ministries. Also note that the differences in the way the pension plans are structured is significant, and should be analyzed as a factor in any transition.
- *A denomination with an extensive network of boards, agencies and committees.* The FMC is a very lean organization. We only have three U.S. bishops, 24 superintendents, and very few boards and agencies. Without question, a lack of abundant resources is a factor contributing to this reality. However, the bent of the FMC is toward a relatively lean organization, regardless of the available resources. The FMC believes the denomination should serve the local church,

not the other way around. It is not our aim to become a top-heavy, multi-layered, boards and agency-driven denomination, but one that is committed to the local church as the primary means through which our mission is accomplished.

Who We Are

- *A people guided by passion, clearly expressed in our mission, vision, core values, and strategic initiatives.* Please refer to pages 4-7 of the attached *Earnest Christians for the 21st Century*. These documents help keep our churches united and focused on the essentials of the FM culture. They also reflect the distinct heartbeat of the FMC within the larger framework of the universal church.
- *A people devoted to the authority of God's Word.* Because we believe the Bible is the infallible Word of God, it holds authority over us in all matters. On a practical level, this means that we must orient our lives and churches to God's Word, not the other way around. If a doctrine is clear in scripture, we do not debate its legitimacy, but prayerfully consider how we must respond in faithful obedience.
- *A holy people with a progressive mission.* When you think of the FMC, you would be forgiven for thinking of a people deeply committed to scriptural holiness, but perhaps in ways that seem legalistic and result in a "bunker mentality" that insulates the church from the world. But you might not know that in 1995, our leadership had the courage to call FM's to a renewed passion for our mission in the world and for personal holiness that grows out of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. On a practical level, our membership covenant changed from one heavily focused on specific behaviors as conditions for membership to one focused on membership as a means to transformational discipleship. The result has increasingly been a people no less devoted to scriptural holiness, but equally devoted to progressive strategies for taking the gospel to a lost and broken world. Although you will find us deeply committed to holy living we don't think you would find our commitment legalistic but flowing out of relationship.
- *A leadership friendly environment.* In addition to calling the church to a renewed sense of mission and a more biblical view of discipleship, we are committed to removing unnecessary impediments, identifying desired outcomes and strategic priorities, and clearing the way for Spirit-led and missiologically-appropriate ministries, systems, and structures. To put it simply we say that every FM church, "Placing **mission** ahead of method, our pastors and churches are **free** to strategize and minister in ways which fulfill our **expected outcomes**." Please see the graphic on page 6 of the attached document.
- *A people with a heart for the Kingdom.* While we greatly value our denominational connection, Free Methodists recognize that our ultimate loyalty and devotion is to the Kingdom of God. This conviction permeates everything we do as Free Methodists and opens the door for opportunities to partner with and learn from denominations and ministries outside the FMC.

Could the FMC Be a Fit for You?

The FMC is always open to pastors and churches who are interested in affiliation. If this document resonates with you or your church, we would love to take the conversation to the next level. At the same, we understand that current, practical realities will make affiliation more feasible for some than others.

- Church Planters - The FMC has made church planting a major priority and may provide outstanding opportunities for gifted, entrepreneurial leaders who have a high tolerance for risk and value connection over independence.
- Pastors - Pastors who are looking for appointment to an established church may find fewer opportunities. The willingness to make a geographic move would obviously increase the possibilities.
- Churches - The FMC is very open to affiliation of established churches. The best-case scenario is with an existing church, with a pastor in place, that decides to enter another denominational connection. In the case of a church that is looking for connection and hoping to find a suitable pastor through the FMC, the affiliation process may require more time.

If in the process of prayerful reflection and discussion you find yourself drawn toward a deeper conversation with the Free Methodist family, we will be happy to enter that dialogue. Yet keep in mind that our deepest prayer is for the healing and restoration of the United Methodist Church to its founding Wesleyan dynamics.

May God's guidance be yours in this season of the church,

Matthew Thomas, David Kendall, David Roller
Board of Bishops of the Free Methodist Church-USA