

Pastoral Address

Board of Bishops

Reclaiming our Heritage: Truly a Missional Church

The gospel record is clear and consistent in summarizing the proclamation of Jesus: The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!

As pastoral overseers of the Free Methodist Church we greet you in the name of Christ. We count it a privilege to address you.

We believe God is calling the Free Methodist Church to its best days in the years ahead. We believe God generously invites us into missional partnership, to become co-laborers with Christ in the power of the Spirit as He works to reconcile, restore and recreate persons, societies and the world.

In recent years we have aspired to “know Him and make Him known,” to be a “great commission church” and to be “healthy biblical communities of holy people who multiply ...” We have longed to be an authentically missional church, a people enthralled by the passionate love of our Father God for the cherished missing, indeed for even one more soul.

We do not aspire to a sophisticated spirituality and mission, but to the simple mission of Jesus, directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit for the sake of the world. Jesus said, "... As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21, see also John 17:18). Our mission is just that simple and just that challenging.

Jesus said, "... You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). It happened (and it **is** happening) just that simply, and the world has never been the same.

Jesus said, "... I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not withstand it" (Matthew 16:18). And, that's precisely what happened as:

- the first followers of Jesus were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4)
- they gave themselves to "the apostles' teaching, and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42)
- "everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles" (Acts 2:43)
- "every day they continued ... with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:46-47)
- "all the believers were one in heart and mind ... they shared everything they had ... There were no needy persons among them (Acts 4:32, 34)
- the Spirit spoke to assembled leaders, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2)

- the Word of God spread and filled the first century world (entire book of Acts).

In the first century, God's people in Christ understood themselves to be a new kind of community, among whom the Spirit of God dwelt, by whom the mighty deeds of God were proclaimed, and through whom God welcomed the world's peoples into His kingdom.

As the Household of God, or the Body of Christ, or the Temple of the Holy Spirit, they lived in loving relationships with one another, forbearing with one another, forgiving one another as Christ had forgiven them, repaying evil with good, rejoicing always, and regularly expanding their membership and their impact.

It was said of them, "Look, how they love one another!" And for that very reason their neighbors became curious about the Christ they followed, open to the good news they shared, and were very often reborn to a living hope. The impact of God's people in Christ upon the world became a marvel to their contemporaries. The Acts of the Apostles tells the story in a way that seems just that simple and just that challenging.

Elsewhere in the New Testament when the biblical writers reflect on who they **are** as the people of God, those reflections reveal the same simplicity and challenge in being the church. That is, God's grace works deeply and profoundly in the lives of His people to make them a certain kind of people — a holy people — who then live and serve and follow in the footsteps of Jesus. As a consequence, the gospel is embodied and

proclaimed. Thus, the Lord builds His church, advances His kingdom and transforms His world.

We affirm, again, that *our* mission is just that simple and just that challenging. In the 18th century, the Wesley brothers sought simply to return to the doctrines, practices and ministries of the early church, the church of the apostolic era.

They did not innovate as much as recapture the Spirit of the first to be church. Under their anointed leadership the common people — the *laos* — of God were transformed by the grace of God. They were empowered to become change agents in their world. Such change provided the content of their mission to preach the gospel to the poor and reform the nation.

Likewise, at its inception the Free Methodist Church sought only to recapture the spirit of “primitive Methodism” and thus “save the church” from decline and death. As the early Free Methodists conformed to the Biblical standard of Christianity and preached the gospel to the poor, they also changed their world.

In the 21st century we must do no less. Therefore, rising to the simplicity and the challenge of being church will surely mean reclaiming our heritage and embodying that heritage for our time, just as B.T. Roberts and the Wesleys did for their times.

Before the next general conference, we will observe the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Free Methodist Church. Could there be a more fitting way to observe the anniversary than claiming anew our heritage, and truly being the church — profoundly disciplined and powerfully on the move with the Spirit in making disciples? Surely, to embrace the scriptural way of holiness, to care passionately for the lost and the least, and to share our God’s concern for the whole world would be a most fitting form of celebration.

Yet, to reclaim this heritage and carry it forward in mission we must squarely face its challenge to our *status quo*. We must follow the example of the faithful of Israel and the Church through the centuries. We must first become a repentant people.

The Israelites regularly remembered their story and repented of their failure to live up to their Creator and Redeemer God’s plan for them, and then sought renewal as they looked to the future (for example: 2 Kings 22-23, Nehemiah 8-9, Psalms 85 and 106). The Church has often wisely followed Israel’s example. When renewal has come, it has come in the wake of repentant seeking after God.

Therefore, at the beginning of this general conference we call the Free Methodist Church to join us in repentance for our failures to respond fully and adequately to the Word of God and to the work God would do through us by His Spirit.

Although we celebrate recent signs of renewal and vitality in the church, we long for more. Indeed we yearn for a fresh, 21st century visitation of the Holy Spirit that will gather us up into a movement that embodies our Wesleyan heritage. We are convinced that plateau and decline are not the will of God for the people called Free Methodist, nor are they compatible with the future to which the Lord Jesus calls us.

How shall we respond to the clear picture of the missional church in the New Testament, the heritage that is ours, and the Spirit's invitation to reclaim that heritage?

In Luke's gospel Jesus said, "... Unless you repent, you too will all perish" (see Luke 13:2-9). That was Jesus' word to the devout who wanted to know. We believe this is Jesus' word to us in this generation. Unless we cultivate a deeply repentant spirit, we will not become the holy and loving people He calls us to be, and we will not reflect the beauty of Jesus to a broken and scarred world. Apart from such repentance, we will be of little use in the Father's ongoing search for the cherished missing, and we will not participate in, nor be agents of, the kingdom Jesus brings wherever He is welcomed.

We conclude our *address* with an invitation to enter into the kind of repentance that will align us with what God wants to do in our churches and conferences across the nation.

We have not been as faithful and fruitful as Jesus calls us to be. Therefore, we repent. We

repent for:

- Failing to take seriously the Word of God and, worse, taming that Word to fit our North American culture and thus too often conforming to the socio-economic *status quo*.

Here are two illustrative sets of questions:

First, why is it that as discretionary income has risen for most North Americans in general (not all but most), including many long-time members of the FMC, per member giving still has **not** risen, but has actually decreased so that often funds on hand for kingdom ministry are inadequate? How could this happen at the same time we strenuously insist that the Bible is our ultimate authority?

Second, if a group of FM folk were to discuss issues of war and peace, would it have anything *different* to say from what could be heard at a political party caucus? And would **what** is said and the **way** it is said, **clearly** reflect the spirit of Jesus?

Wherever such domestication of God's word happens, we repent!

We repent for:

- Embracing a form of godliness but denying its power, precisely at the point of our holiness message. Our legalism that professed a concern for holy living, but

choked us into Pharisaic modes neither holy nor loving, hindered instead of helped people find their way home to God — such legalism we repudiate.

We have professed to care deeply about what James calls pure and faultless religion that God our Father accepts, and have delighted in scrupulously protecting our selves from the pollution of the world, but failed to care for the orphans and widows with the same, or any, intensity.

We have cared deeply about sins that can be seen—e.g., some of the more obvious addictions of the day, but have sometimes accommodated sins that cannot be seen (anger, pride and greed). We repent!

We repent for:

- Grieving the Holy Spirit by limiting His work among and through us. Out of fear we have disdained or rejected His mighty presence and power in any form that was uncomfortable and unconventional to us.

Over the years our fearful responses to some people's openness to the Spirit and to their honest experiences with the Spirit, have stifled them or driven them away. And, in the process, we have unwittingly sent away God's blessings. We repent!

We repent for:

- Failing to focus on the priorities of the kingdom — seeking His kingdom first,

reaching in love to those outside His family, championing His causes for the good of all — and instead focusing on other matters of personal and local congregational interest.

Most of us know about churches that have hesitated to offer their facilities to assist drug recovery programs, provide shelter for the homeless or welcome the displaced — primarily or only because they might make a mess of our facilities. We repent!

We repent for:

- Expressing impatience and arrogance by trying to make the church grow by human strategies and strength, and then taking pride in our own accomplishments.

We have sometimes felt more frustration and impatience at being small, in decline and of little significance relative to other churches and ministries, than we have felt grief over the potential loss of people who are cherished by our Father in heaven and missing from His household. We repent!

We repent for:

- Turning from counting the cost to weighing the relative benefits of following Jesus, and thus failing to embrace Jesus' way of self-sacrificing love.

Some people have traded in a life of cross bearing — where one's way of daily

living reflected a radical yes to Jesus — for decals, bumper stickers and tee shirts that proudly display a fish with the name of the crucified and risen Jesus on it.

Wherever such a trade occurs among us, we repent!

We repent for:

- Assuming the position of a privileged insider in the things of God, superior to outsiders, rather than offering ourselves as instruments (servants) of God's rescuing reach toward others.

We repent for:

- Allowing fear to keep us from doing what God calls us to do, in particular, abandoning our heritage of a gospel for the poor.

These things of which we repent are among the most grievous aspects of our *status quo* that impede a full appropriation of God's grace for our time.

Now, your list may not correspond exactly to ours; you may include things we have omitted or may delete things we have included. We could discuss or debate the list.

But let's not go there. Instead please discern the spirit behind the list. Why would we even compose it? Because we earnestly desire the fullness of grace and the fullness of the Spirit God has promised.

We puzzle over the awesome demonstrations of God's power in other branches of the Free Methodist family. We who have so many advantages, so many different kinds of resources readily available — and yet, the most abundant fruitfulness occurs in other places.

Can we learn from our sisters and brothers? Could **we** follow **their** lead in repentance and faith, in profound turning toward, and dependence on, God?

Not to produce something, or to prove something, but to please the One who loved us and gave Himself for us and for all, and who now wants to share His joy with us — the joy of loving people into a kingdom way of life (one more soul at a time, then another, and another and another)!

And so, we invite you to join us in repentance and faith in obedient submission to God.