

THE FREE METHODIST CHURCH TODAY

Rev. Bruce N. G. Cromwell, Ph.D.

The Free Methodist Church was birthed in 1860 when Benjamin Titus Roberts, a pastor in the Methodist Episcopal Church in New York, recognized that he could no longer serve in harmony with that denomination's practices. Speaking out against slaveholding (and being heavily involved in early abolitionist movements), as well as against the practice of renting seats within churches, withholding women from full service in congregations, and the formulaic approach to the Holy Spirit in public worship, he and other like-minded Methodists were expelled and gathered to form the new Church. With "freedom" a common theme in many of their concerns, the name "Free Methodist" was adopted.

Quickly spreading from New York to Illinois, Kansas, and across the country, early Free Methodists rallied around the dual call to "spread Scriptural holiness across the land and to preach the gospel to the poor." Today, Free Methodists continue to live out seven contemporary expressions of our historic freedoms. These include:

- Freedom of all races to worship together in unity.
- Freedom for the poor to be treated with dignity and justice in every church around the world.
- Freedom for women and men to be treated respectfully and to use their gifts equally in every church, in the home, and in the world.
- Freedom for laity to be fairly represented in the governing bodies of all churches.
- Freedom from spiritual, political, social, or conceptual alliances that compromise or subvert the exclusive allegiance we profess to Jesus Christ.
- Freedom to engage in worship that is moved and inspired by the Holy Spirit.
- Freedom from sin's power through full surrender to God.

Today the Free Methodist Church is found in 106 countries around the world, with over 1.6 million members worldwide. And it continues to expand. Only 4% of total world membership is found in the United States. With the population of the US being 4% of world population, we rejoice that the FMC reflects this worldwide reach and representation. Women and men continue to be called into the mission field, and the expansion of the denomination reflects both workers who go into new fields as well as those who send them with support in prayer and giving. In 2024 our churches in the US gave 3% more to Free Methodist World Missions than was given in 2023. Certainly not a large increase, but growth, nonetheless. And in an increasingly skeptical and secular society, we rejoice at how God is continuing to shape and guide the Church!

Across the nation and around the world, Free Methodists trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to visit our churches and communities as we seek an ongoing Spirit-fueled movement in

our day. With a passion to see the wounded healed, the broken-hearted encouraged, the lame walk, the dead in spirit brought back to life, and the darkness overcome with the light of Christ, we work together with God's Spirit to see the Kingdom of God advance.

That said, the Free Methodist Church desires to not focus so much on inward, institutional momentum, but rather outward to a hurting world. We know that whenever any church begins to focus on its own existence it has already lost its way. Rather, we strive to see all Christians and all communities of Christ seek to give themselves away in service to the Lord, wherever they may be in the world. We know that if we seek first the Kingdom and God's righteousness, other things, including perhaps momentum and movement, may be added to us as well.

United in our vision and mission, though not uniform in the make-up of our congregations, Free Methodists are diverse in locations, contexts, and cultures, and we seek to welcome and engage women and men from every language and nation. Our churches are knit together in a connected identity, yet different in every town, village, and city. That identity is referred to as "The Free Methodist Way." This is summarized in five distinct expressions: life-giving holiness, love-driven justice, Christ-compelled multiplication, cross-cultural collaboration, and God-given revelation.

Live-giving holiness reminds us that our call to be holy as God is holy was never meant to be a burden, nor an impossible task, but rather a gift that frees us for life that is truly life by delivering us from the destructive power of sin. As part of the Holiness tradition, we continue to preach sanctification as something that God can work in an instant but yet is also a process of continually submitting to and being conformed to the image and likeness of Christ. And though sanctification can often slip into legalistic moralization, we preach that it is not about perfection in every action and thought as much as perfection in love.

Love-driven justice refers to the way in which we demonstrate God's heart for the world, valuing the image of God in all women, men, and children. It calls us to act with compassion to the oppressed, resisting such oppression, speaking out against bigotry, prejudice, and hatred, and working to steward well creation. Believing that life is sacred, from conception to death, we welcome the immigrant and the stranger, as well as all people regardless of race, culture, sexual orientation, gender identity, or even religion. And though we have a sexual ethic and believe there are certain ways to live that honor God, as well as ways that devalue life and elevate personal preference over God's will, we do not tolerate any behaviors that shame or devalue any people whom God loves.

Christ-compelled multiplication reflects the redemptive movement of Jesus Christ, destined to fill the whole earth. His life, ministry, and approach to discipleship was incarnational and relational, pouring His life into a few with the expectation that they would follow His example and pour into others. Such exponential growth happened, then, when women and men had their lives transformed and empowered for service. This expectation continues to drive

the Free Methodist Church, as we believe the redemptive movement of Jesus should permeate every level of every church, with the found reaching the lost, disciples making disciples, leaders mentoring leaders, churches planting churches, and movements birthing movements. Ordinary people can still do extraordinary things when we trust in the power of God.

Cross-cultural collaboration responds to increasing suspicion of “the other” in our world with a desire to see people from every nation, culture, and ethnicity united in Christ and commissioned to carry out His work. We hold fast to the promise that we have been made one in Christ, even as we dedicate ourselves to becoming a more diverse Church that looks like the Kingdom of God, moving beyond colonialism and ethnocentrism in favor of collaborative partnership in God’s global work. Freely sharing our own gifts and resources, we in the United States are challenged and inspired by the faithfulness, perseverance, ceaseless prayer, theological insights, and spiritual wisdom of our sisters and brothers around the world.

God-given revelation recognizes that the Bible is our final authority in all matters of faith and practice as the inspired word of God. Though Free Methodists draw on the Wesleyan heritage of discerning truth through the lenses of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, we keep Scripture primary. We do not subjugate the Bible’s timeless truths to cultural norms or social trends, even while we try to authentically communicate and apply its truths with sensitivity to current cultural dynamics.

John Wesley focused on the doctrine of salvation and the relationship between grace, faith, and holiness of heart and life. Current Free Methodist Bishops Keith Cowart, Kaye Kolde, and Kenny Martin continue this focus, desiring to fully align our lives and our movement on the unshakable belief that the Holy Spirit is guiding our steps. Our ongoing prayer is that everything from our structure to our service would be led by God’s will, for God’s glory, and we are willing to follow God’s Spirit wherever it would lead us.

Bruce Cromwell is a superintendent in the Central Region Conference of the Free Methodist Church. He has over 3 decades of pastoral experience, serving 7 Free Methodist Churches in 4 states. Dr. Cromwell has been an ordained elder since 1996.