

Preserving the Past
The DNA of the FMC

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The typical way for us to look at who we are is to trace our family tree. That is fairly simple for us to do. We came from the early church through the first millennium to the western church (Rome rather than Constantinople). Our next branch was with the Church of England after about another 500 years. Then we had the branch we call Methodism about 250 years later, and then the Free Methodist church in 1860, about 150 years ago.

When we look at the size of the tree we are like one small leaf on the whole tree. When we compare ourselves to the world population the ratio is 1 Free Methodist for every 6,800 people on the planet. Translating that into a manageable figure that means about 800 Free Methodists in Wisconsin, in 2008 there was an average attendance of 726 in the Wisconsin churches.

When we look at the time of the church, roughly 2000 years, we make up only 7.5% of the time of the church's existence. So if you look at it from population or by time, we are a fairly small speck of dust on the radar screen.

There is another way to look at who we are and that is not to compare us to the rest of the population but to look at what we are made of. It is a more organic look rather than an institutional look. Like a strand of DNA. It is a look backward that values all who have contributed to who we are. It appreciates our heritage and those who have gone before us to make us who we are.

In [Soul Searching the Church: Free Methodism at 150 Years](#) in a chapter by Howard Snyder, entitled "Seven Keys to Free Methodist Renewal", Dr. Snyder gives us a view into the historical influences on the Free Methodist Church.

- I. *Movement Phase (1860-1890)*. The Free Methodist Church grew rapidly from 1860 to about 1890. Membership growth, the multiplication of congregations and conferences, abundant reports of revival, and other evidence show that for its first thirty years, Free Methodism was indeed movemental. The most rapid growth came in the sixteen years from 1874 to 1890, when total membership went from 7,603 to 21,161 —about 178 percent growth over the three quadrennia. If growth had continued at near this rate, the denomination would have had some 2,000,000 members in North America by the time of its centennial in 1960, whereas total North American membership that year was about 60,000 and worldwide membership was about 100,000.
- II. *Sect Phase (1890-1950)*. With the death of B.T. Roberts (1893), the rejection of women's ordination in 1890, and the loss of the Pentecost Bands, the denomination turned increasingly inward. Whereas John Wesley stressed "all inward *and outward* holiness," Free Methodists in this period focused more inward than outward, narrowing the outward to a few specifics of dress, entertainment, and personal habits. The negative side of this is often lamented, but Free Methodist sectarianism also served a positive function. It enhanced group identity and solidarity. You knew what it meant to be Free Methodist. The "legalisms" served a positive function much as did Salvation Army uniforms and Roman Catholic monastic habits. Foreign missions flourished during this phase, but in North America Free Methodist inwardness constricted mission and limited growth.
- III. *Denomination Phase (1950-2000)*. The principal markers of the denomination phase were two: (1) a shift from agreed, shared disciplines (particularly regarding dress, entertainment, church attendance and devotional life) to individualistic and largely undefined "personal convictions," and relatedly, (2) a drift toward generic, politically conservative U.S. evangelicalism. Few Free Methodists living today can understand or remember this transition.

Although other factors were at work, the main impulses behind this shift were the cultural impact of World War II, the subsequent rise of an affluent and largely suburban middleclass society, and popular entertainment technology. The Free Methodist kid who grew up on a farm in Michigan or in a lower-class neighborhood in Chicago went off to the war, saw the world, came home and married, got a college education on the GI Bill, and became a public school teacher in a growing suburb. The whole denomination shifted, losing its countercultural ethos. Free Methodists abandoned most of their denominational markers (lipstick? plain dress? Prayer meeting?) and mostly became generic evangelicals. Because of the popularity of very conservative Calvinist dispensational thinking, typified by Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth*, Frank Peretti's *This*

Present Darkness, and the *Left Behind* novels, many Free Methodists unknowingly became non-Wesleyan dispensationalists. We absorbed an unbiblical “rapture” theology that was suspicious of efforts at social reform, hostile to environmental concerns, and mostly negative toward women’s leadership.

As a denomination, Free Methodism cast about for definitions of success to replace its historic sense of mission. Options partially embraced from time to time included Church Growth, charismatic leadership and styles, business models such as Management By Objective, megachurch models, Vineyard approaches, Seeker Sensitivity, and the Purpose-Driven Church.

But recently we have seen more encouraging signs: New emphasis on our historic mission, especially among the poor, ethnic church planting in the U.S., new growth in Free Methodist world missions, and the prospering of some of our “overseas” Free Methodist general conferences and of our educational institutions in the United States.

Perhaps the most prophetic recent development is the increasing numbers of women in leadership. If B.T. Roberts was right, this is a long-range road to renewal. The “comparative failure of Christianity” to transform the world, Roberts said, is because women “are not permitted to labor according to their ability, for the spread of the Gospel.” If women had “been given, since the days of the first Apostles, the same rights as men, this would be quite another world” (*Ordaining Women* [1891; 2003 reprint], 79-82).

Was Roberts right? We may yet find out, at least so far as Free Methodism is concerned. The Free Methodist Church is one of a very few conservative denominations that ordain women. In the context of American evangelicalism, we are still countercultural at least on that point.

IV. *Network Phase (2000-??)*. American Protestantism has entered what some call a “post-denominational” phase. The roots of this lie in the anti-institutionalism of the late Sixties and early Seventies, but also in the increased individualism, “localism,” and material prosperity of past decades. Ironically (but typically), as evangelical Christians have become more prosperous they have given away proportionately less of their income, and more of their church giving has remained local rather than denominational or global.

These larger currents have touched us also. Major Free Methodist denominational structures have been dismantled; annual conferences have been reorganized, renamed, or merged; denominational identity and loyalty have withered. As Dean Cook put it, “Diversity is diminishing connectionalism.” Free Methodism in the United States has become a

loose network of local churches pursuing their own agendas and also involved in various other networks. Overall the church has gotten more congregational than episcopal or connectional. Free Methodism today is a network and a network of networks rather than a movement, sect, or denomination.

This shift is both a concern and an opening. Networks can be dynamic, given effective leadership and the renewing work of the Spirit. Networks usually are more flexible than are hierarchical or institutional structures, so they are open to change — for good or ill.

These four phases and shifts sprang from a combination of internal and external factors, as I've hinted. They were partly a response to developments in the larger culture, but they also reflect “normal” cycles often observed in religious, social, and even political movements. Yet this is not predestination; these shifts result from choices people make as they negotiate the narrow path between being *in* the world or *of* it.¹

That is a quick overview of the stages of Free Methodist history but it doesn't get at the real guts of who we are. Snyder goes on to point out our dynamic makeup.

“The strange thing about Wesleyans, and particularly Free Methodists, is that they don't fit neatly into the main categories of Christian history. In a sense they are a hybrid of four traditions: Anglican, evangelical, charismatic, and Anabaptist. Free Methodists are *evangelicals*, but only in some ways. They are *charismatic* in one sense but not in another. They have *Anabaptist* (radical Protestant) roots through Moravianism but also *Roman Catholic* roots through Anglicanism. A complex DNA.”²

What I'd like to propose today is somewhat of a synthesis of ideas from Dr. Howard Snyder and Dr. Robert Wall from Seattle Pacific University. Though I don't quote directly from Dr. Wall, his ideas in *The Embourgeoisement of the Free Methodist Ethos*³ have had a large impact on my reasoning in lining out what of our DNA is essential for us as Free Methodists. This is not meant to be an extensive list, but to serve as a point of discussion for us.

¹ Snyder, Howard, “Seven Keys to Free Methodist Renewal” in Soul Searching the Church: Free Methodism at 150 Years, pps 139-142.

² Ibid

³ Wall, Robert, “The *Embourgeoisement* of the Free Methodist Ethos” in Wesleyan Theological Journal, Volume 25, Number 1, Spring 1990

Anglo-Catholic Strand

The primary strand for us is the Anglo-Catholic strand. While most Free Methodists today might cringe at the very thought that we would have anything at all to do with the Roman Catholic church, those very same persons might be quite happy to join the Roman Catholics in a *Right To Life* demonstration. The fact is we owe a majority of our theological heritage and thought to the Roman Catholic church. Where would we be in our theological progress without the early councils of the church? We would be without an understanding of the nature of Jesus, the canon of scripture, the trinity and on and on the list goes. I'm not saying we should embrace Roman Catholic theology, but in some way we need to understand the deep undergirding we have in our heritage for not only theology but sacrament and ritual.

Our Anglican heritage provided for us a systematic set of theological statements which we call our Articles of Religion. It is interesting that at the formation of the Methodist church there was hardly an adjustment to these statements.

Another important thing we have received from this strand is our ecclesiology. While we operate under a modified episcopacy, we do, none-the-less operate in an episcopal rather than a congregational form of governance. As time has passed for the church we have been moving farther away from episcopacy and closer to congregationalism. For instance, in the former years you have heard stories about appointments. You went to Annual Conference with your bags packed, because you not only didn't know where you were going, you didn't have a say in it. Now, this obviously came out of the radical evangelism of the circuit rider. In fact, to this day, we elders are called to itinerant ministry. Now, however, we don't just ship people off on a whim without their consent. Most conferences have employed some type of interview process to match passions and gifts with ministry needs. Another example is the function of the MEG board in relation to the general church. Once upon a time we had a course of study in the *Book of*

Discipline, that it time grew into a department of Higher Education in the Ministry, which no longer exists, and most of the decision making in regards to ordination rest with the conference MEG board. There seems to be a wide variance of expectation at the course level from conference to conference. One more example would be the change in the way we fund world missions. In former days, good Free Methodists simply gave to World Missions. It is worthy of note, that in the earliest days it was the Illinois Conference that sent the first Free Methodist missionaries to India without the help of a mission board. Around 1890 there was quite a struggle over the method the church would employ to send missionaries. That controversy was centered around Vivian Dake and the Pentecost bands. Dake was a visionary and a bit of a loose canon, but was tremendously successful in engaging young people in radical evangelism. At the 1890 general conference the brakes were put on Dake's efforts to spread the work of the Pentecost bands abroad, and with his untimely death the work at home soon came to a screeching halt.

One of the things we need to wrestle with as a church is what values that are core to being a kingdom church known as Free Methodists are wrapped up in an episcopal form of governance. For example, in the earliest days of the church, if you were going to be a traveling elder, you had to live with a sense of abandon to the world, because your attachments to this world would move every year or so. The strategic advantage of that kind of model was it depended on a strong lay leadership to keep the church moving forward. I'm not suggesting that we return to the thrilling days of yesteryear, but I simply want us to note that changing forms does change meaning. Far too often, we have changed forms for expediency or comfort without asking the deeper question, "How will this form us?" We need to ask in our current system, "Where would a John Wesley Redfield fit?" How could one answer his call to preachers "willing to devote themselves to this work without fee or reward, to live within one meal of the

judgment and yet do their duty.”⁴ There are few places in the North American system where this kind of radical evangelism exists today.

Methodist Strand

“I AM not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”⁵

“Any man of understanding may easily discern, that [Methodism] is only plain, scriptural religion, guarded by a few prudential regulations. The essence of it is holiness of heart and life; the circumstantial all point to this. And as long as they are joined together in the people called Methodists, no weapon formed against them shall prosper. But if even the circumstantial parts are despised, the essential will soon be lost. And if ever the essential parts should evaporate, what remains will be dung and dross.”⁶

Essentials of Methodism are doctrine, spirit and discipline. The fundamental doctrine of Methodism is “That the Bible is the whole and sole rule both of Christian faith and practice.”⁷ It is from the scripture that Methodists preached “salvation by faith, preceded by repentance, and followed by holiness.”⁸

Wesley considered discipline essential to Methodism, but its form was circumstantial. He often called the form of discipline mere prudential regulation, and always considered those who followed to be doing so voluntarily. Wesley considered the classes and bands prudential forms, but insisted all Methodists to attend. The genius of the class was to separate the precious from the vile (that is those who were in earnest from those who came along for the ride.) The genius of the band was the vehicle for sanctification. It is here we Free Methodists are

⁴ Walton, K.M., Western Convention, “The Springboard of Free Methodism.” - Pamphlet

⁵ Wesley, John, The Works of John Wesley. Third Edition, Complete and Unabridged, Vol. XIII, “Thoughts on Methodism” p. 258.

⁶ Ibid p. 260.

⁷ Ibid p. 258.

⁸ Ibid p. 258

now missing our DNA. The continual looking after one another's soul is no longer a vital part of us. The individualism of our culture has superseded our genetic makeup. When have you been part of a group that's primary responsibility is to look after each other's soul? Have you been asked weekly, "What known sins have you committed since we last met? What temptations have you met with? How were you delivered? What have you said or done that you doubt whether it is sin or not?"⁹ These are the prudential questions of Methodism.

At the beginning of Free Methodism, Auntie Coon wrote, "Whenever we met, whether in twos threes or fours, we never failed to inquire, 'How does your soul prosper?' When ministers came to our house we knew it was to pray, and to find out the spiritual state of every soul in that house."¹⁰

Method is derived from two Greek words, *μετα* (which means alongside) and *οδος* (the way). Though not originally meant as a compliment, it turns out to be the core definition of what it means to be Methodist. It means to walk with someone on their journey. It may interest you to know a result of Steve Harper's research on the bands and classes in England. In reading their journals he found that on average, the time from when a person joined the class until the time they had assurance of faith was 2.5 years.¹¹ The part of our DNA we cannot afford to lose from this strand is our walking alongside of each other as we pursue inward holiness.

The Abolition Strand

Early Free Methodists were abolitionists. It is part of our name. When John Wesley Redfield was being examined for his license to preach, he was asked how he stood on the question of Abolition, He answered,

⁹ Wesley, John, *The Works of John Wesley. Third Edition, Complete and Unabridged, Vol. VIII, "Rules of the Band-Societies"* p. 272.

¹⁰ Coon, Mrs. H.A., "*Early Free Methodists*" - Pamphlet

¹¹ Harper, Steve., *Personal notes of Gerald Coates from chapel at Asbury Theological Seminary, 1985.*

“I am an Abolitionist of the strongest type.” “Then I shall oppose the recommendation,” said the brother who had raised the question and was a sympathizer with proslavery sentiment. To be doubly sure that he meant it, when he said he was an Abolitionist of the strong type, he now said, before retiring, “I wish it distinctly understood that if I am granted a license to preach, and that shall add anything to the influence I now possess, I shall certainly use it for God and the slave. So now your eyes are open, and you know what I am and what to expect.”¹²

This position of Abolition was not solely focused on the slave. It was for the poor and disenfranchised at any level. Early Free Methodists were sure of their calling to the poor.

My special mission is to preach the gospel to the poor. I believe that churches should be as free as the grace we preach. The Lord allowed me to be thrust out as I was, because He saw that in this manner this work could be carried on to the best advantage. The work is progressing and I expect to live to see FREE churches all over the land—especially in the cities where the poor are congregated. This is a blessed work!¹³

“All their churches are required to be as free as the grace they preach. They believe that their mission is twofold—to maintain the Bible standard of Christianity, and to preach the Gospel to the poor.”¹⁴

The economic injustice of the pew system was no small matter. Churches raised be support on the exclusion of the poor. Even the Chicago Post called the church to justice

. . . while indulging in the conceits of ecclesiastical architecture, the sweet strains of operatic music, the luxury of a house complete in all its appointments, all in the name and for the glory of God, it is well enough for them to remember that the Protestant poor of Chicago are lapsing into unbelief and darkness, because with the exception of the few Mission churches, there is no place in the House of God for them. . . . No man who labors with his hands will find a place in Grace Church.

¹² Hogue, Wilson T., *History of the Free Methodist Church on North America*, Volume I, Third Edition, 1915, 1938., pps. 266-267.

¹³ Roberts, B. T., *The Earnest Christian*, January 1865

¹⁴ Free Methodist Book of Discipline, 1860

. . .What we say of Grace Church is true of all like establishments in Chicago and throughout the whole country. In them a certain number of lawyers, doctors, politicians, editors, speculators, merchants, and sometimes abortionists meet to loll away an hour and a half of each Sunday, on luxuriously cushioned seats. . . . In all of them, the men who labor, no matter at what, nor how faithfully and intelligently, are practically forbidden as if an angel with a flaming sword stood at the entrance.¹⁵

B.T. and Ellen Roberts not only preached and advocated for the poor. They took personal action:

My husband felt we must get a place for worship in the heart of the city, where the gospel could be preached to the poor. He could see no way of doing it except he gave our home toward it. It was all we had. I looked the matter over. We had three children. I thought of the way the disciples were led, at that marvelous outpouring of the Spirit, when they “sold their possessions and goods and parted them to all men as every man had need.” . . . Let those who have prayed long for blessings not received, begin to feed the poor, clothe the naked, and yield themselves and their substance to the Lord as if they meant it, and He will pour them out blessings that will measure beyond their desires and expectations.¹⁶

The question for us today is this, “What are the systems of injustice for which we are ready to lay our life and reputation on the line?” Where is this spirit of abolition? Have we succumbed to genetic dilution?

Most Free Methodists today probably think the church’s stand on alcohol is related to personal holiness (i.e., keeping one’s self unstained from the world.) Our historic stand however is one of an abolitionist spirit. It is our concern for the poor and those most likely to be enslaved by alcohol that we choose to advocate for abstinence. One probable cause for our genetic dilution is our comfortable lives in the middle class. It is when we kneel next to the drug addict and alcoholic who cry out in prayer for deliverance that our abolitionist spirit is revived.

¹⁵ Snyder, Howard, Wesleyan Theological Journal, , Spring 1996 “To Preach the Gospel to the Poor” quoting article from the *Chicago Post*, reported in *The Earnest Christian and Golden Rule* (January, 1870), 31-32

¹⁶ Snyder, Howard, Wesleyan Theological Journal, , Spring 1996 “To Preach the Gospel to the Poor” quoting, Ellen Lois Roberts, “Give and Receive,” article in *The Earnest Christian*, quoted in Adella Carpenter, *Ellen Lois Roberts: Life and Writings* (Chicago: Woman’s Missionary Society, Free Methodist Church, 1926), 162-63.)

The Renunciation Strand

Simplicity was at the heart of the Free Methodist identity. Consider this statement from Auntie Coon,

When we came out there was not one of us who indulged in light and trifling conversation, joking or jesting, tale-bearing or back-biting, now so common among us. Bias pieces and ruffles, with the fashionable cut of the garment were laid aside, not even a bow found on a hat or bonnet. Holiness unto the Lord might truthfully have been written upon all we possessed.¹⁷

Or this from B.T. Roberts,

If you consecrate yourself to the Lord to dress plain, as he commands, then carry it out in all particulars. Do not let the costliness of the material of your dress be a compensation to your pride for the plainness of the style in which it is made. Do not pay more for one piece of cloth, because it looks better, than you would have to for another that would be equally serviceable. Be consistent throughout. If you do not put on gold or pearls, then do not put on any imitation of gold or pearls. Not only avoid evil, but avoid the appearance of evil. If you lay aside your necktie, do not button your collar with a large brass button that looks like gold. If you have abandoned cigars, do not put a dude smoking-cap on your head. If a young lady can not wear a feather on her hat, then she should not bunch up a quantity of ribbon to take its place. If you have renounced the devil, then renounce the devil's substitutes. If you are a child of God, then dress like a child of God. Formerly hypocrites were described as those who "steal the livery of Heaven to serve the devil in." Now the order is reversed, and professed saints steal the livery of the devil to serve God in. Do neither. Stand out in your true colors, an humble saint of God, clothed with humility, perfectly transparent, a living epistle known and read of all men.¹⁸

As the church has aged, it has left off much of its original call to renunciation, especially in its view toward simplicity. Even the act of simplicity was not a matter of personal discipline, its roots were deep into the social psyche of the

¹⁷ Coon, Mrs. H.A., "Early Free Methodists" - Pamphlet

¹⁸ B.T. Roberts, from Pungent Truths, #140 Dress Should be Plain

movement, one in which one loved the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loved their neighbors as themselves.

When these mores moved from one generation to the next, the forms were held for some time without the concurrent meaning, and eventually the forms fell away. As we look at the world around us we are becoming more acutely aware of the oppression of the poor around the world. The question for us is how will we reflect the spirit of renunciation in our DNA? Will we continue to simply float along as a comfortable middle-class church, or will we take a cue from our founders and forsake all to follow Christ? Will it reach our wallets and bank accounts? As one young inner city Free Methodist preacher recently asked, "Where are the Free Methodists who are willing to sell their homes in the suburbs and join me in ministry in the inner city to the urban poor?"

The Passion Strand

I cannot conclude without noting that it is not a mere sense of desire or duty that motivated early Free Methodists to take their radical stand. They were on fire from God.

O, ministers of the entire connection, I beseech you by the mercies of God that ye AGAIN present your bodies 'a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God. For Christ's sake and for the sake of the people to whom you minister, instead of some of you, looking at the boy preachers whom God has anointed, and sitting as critics upon them, get down yourselves, consecrate clear down through, back to the anointing you once had, until it can be truly said their ministers are a flame of fire. You can have it, none of you are too sick. There are among you, could. God get you in His hands, Wesleys, Whitefields, and Redfields, but the path they took is the one you must take, martyrs if need be for the truth's sake.¹⁹

Advancement in Holiness

God is calling the Free Methodist Church to go forward to a higher type of experimental and practical holiness. There can be no true progress on the part of any church only in so far as there is general

¹⁹ Coon, Mrs. H.A., "Early Free Methodists" - Pamphlet

progress in the experimental knowledge and practical manifestation of holy character on the part of its membership. Here is the secret of much of the weakness of the Church in the present age. The masses of those who have professed faith in Christ are allowed to rest in the fact of having been once converted, instead of being urged ever forward to higher and definite attainments in the realm of grace. To the large majority of Christians, not excepting even those whom the various churches regard as in the class of Christian Workers, Hebrews 5:12-14 is highly applicable: "In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."²⁰

It will be an evil day for Free Methodism if ever this condition is allowed to become general with her membership. Hence the imperative demand that all our people be constantly urged to "leave the principles of the doctrine of Christ, and go on unto perfection" (Heb 6:1)²¹

It appears we may have arrived.

²⁰ I replaced the original KJV with NIV in this quote.

²¹ From "Retrospect and Prospect" A Semi-Centennial Sermon Preached by Bishop Wilson T.

Hogue before the General Conference of the Free Methodist Church, in Chicago, June 18, 1911.