

Notes on Bishops in the Free Methodist Church

by Chris Ritter, GMC Episcopacy Task Force

I reviewed the Book of Discipline of the Free Methodist Church and have had conversations with Rev. Ben Tolley, Conference Superintendent for the FMC Gateway Conference centered around St. Louis. Ben has had seventeen meetings with disaffiliating United Methodist congregations. He says that issues surrounding bishops have come up much more often than LGBTQ issues.

Findings of Interest:

1. The Free Methodist Church utilizes a model similar to what our task force is developing for the GMC, in that bishops are above the annual conference system instead of residential within a conference.
2. The FMC recently went from five to three bishops in interest of downsizing. The bishops divide up the work on their own. The regions are not fixed and there is overlap based on giftings. Bishops generally meet with the conference superintendents relating to them monthly via zoom and in person around three times a year.
3. The bishops hold seats on a 25-member “Board of Administration” (currently chaired by a lay person) that runs the workings of the denomination between General Conferences. The BOA meets quarterly and has authority to act between quadrennial General Conferences on certain matters. Prior to General Conference, the BOA grades resolutions to General Conference as A, B, and C and this streamlines the amount of business before the General Conference.
4. Unlike the GMC, the Free Methodist Church USA is only one of thirteen FMC General Conferences worldwide. There is a quadrennial “World Conference” that connects the General Conferences. Bishops around the world do not have a formal connecting structure, but they do interact quite a bit.
5. Bishops serve a four-year term and may be re-elected without limit or mandatory retirement. My friend says that no one has yet served past their prime. He affirms bishops standing for re-election as a healthy thing.
6. Election Process:
 - i. General Conference determines the number of bishops needed. That number remains in effect unless changed by General Conferences.
 - ii. There is a call to prayer by the Board of Bishops and the standing General Conference Board of Administration in the year before the General Conference session.
 - iii. The Board of Administration forms a search committee to seek out candidates and receive nominations from the annual conferences.
 - iv. Candidates must agree to be in the nomination process. Nominations from the annual conference must be accompanied by supporting rationale on a form provided by the search committee.

- v. The search committee “refines” the list of nominees and presents these to the Board of Administration. That board can ask the search committee to consider additional names.
 - vi. Ultimately, a ballot is formed by the Board of Administration and must contain at least two more names than the number of bishops needed. This ballot includes presently-serving bishops who wish to continue in office.
 - vii. The ballot is sent to delegates no later than thirty days prior to the opening of General Conference. A series of video interviews is made available to delegates. The actual balloting happens at General Conference.
 - viii. Once elected, the bishops convene at General Conference and select a lead bishop. The action is brought to the floor for affirmation.
 - ix. Bishops begin officially serving 90 days after General Conference.
7. There is an “internship” process developed by the Board of Bishops for the newly-elected bishop(s).
 8. In the event of a vacancy on the Board of Bishops, there seems to be a balloting process among the delegates of the most recent General Conference. My friend does not recall this ever happening.
 9. A bishop’s decisions of law shall stand unless reversed by General Conference. On occasion a bishop may refer a theological question to a Study Committee on Doctrine who may produce an advisory paper. On matters of polity, the bishops make the determination.
 10. The accountability for bishops reside in the conference of their clergy membership. My friend thinks that, in practice, a fellow bishop would perhaps handle the administration of a complaint or take it to the Board of Administration. A serious moral lapse only happened once in collective memory and this bishop resigned.
 11. Bishops are empowered to delegate their responsibilities in the annual conferences as they see fit. Each conference has a superintendent that actually leads the conference machine. There is discussion in the FMC of letting the conference superintendents run their conferences and appointment-making without the (rather perfunctory) blessing of the bishops. If approved, bishops would only attend the annual conferences to ordain and use their time elsewhere.

From the FMC Book of Discipline

Bishops

¶4100

Bishops are the general overseers of the Church. They lead the Church to fulfill its mission which requires them to be holy examples with skill and experience to provide that oversight. They must understand the nature and purpose of the Church. They must also be able to communicate clearly the gospel, the mission and vision of the Free Methodist Church; possess a

well-cultivated understanding of other cultures; and, identify, develop, and lead godly, competent leaders. Each bishop shall be amenable to the General Conference for the discharge of his/ her official duties and shall be responsible for his/her conduct to the annual conference to which he/she belongs.

The Nomination and Election of Bishops

¶4110

- A. The General Conference shall elect by ballot two or more traveling elders as bishops to serve as the pastoral overseers of various areas of the denomination who shall constitute the Board of Bishops. These are to be persons who exhibit exemplary character and leadership qualities, and who embody deep commitment to the mission, doctrine and theology of the Free Methodist Church. The term of office of bishops shall be four years and shall begin 90 days after the close of the General Conference at which they are elected. The number of bishops to be elected will be established by General Conference action and remains in effect until changed by a subsequent General Conference action. ¶4110 General Administration
- B. The nomination and election process shall be as follows:
 1. Call to Prayer: During the year prior to General Conference, the Board of Bishops and the Board of Administration shall call the Church to prayer, specifically focused on the election of bishops.
 2. Search Committee: A Search Committee will be formed by the FMCUSA Board of Administration each quadrennium to prayerfully seek out qualified candidates and receive nominations from annual conferences. Members of the Search Committee must be spiritually mature. Some of them must also have experience in developing or searching for candidates of significant positions of leadership. The Search Committee must include at least one lay and one clergy member from the Board of Administration. Consideration shall be given to ethnic, gender, cultural and geographical representation across the breadth of the FMCUSA.
 3. Candidate Qualifications: The nominees should have fruitful leadership experience related to the spiritual life and leadership responsibilities noted in Par. 4100 and 4120. Ethnic, gender, cultural and geographical considerations shall be given due attention in selecting nominees for bishop. Potential candidates must grant their permission to proceed through the nomination process. Nominations from annual conferences to the Search Committee must be accompanied by supporting rationale on a form designed and provided by the Search Committee. Sitting bishops, having already been previously qualified, who are willing to continue to serve, will be placed on the ballot with the other nominees.
 4. Procedures: The refined list of nominees, with supporting rationale, will be forwarded to the Board of Administration of the FMCUSA. The Board of Administration may ask the Search Committee to consider (an) additional nominee(s). The total number of nominees for bishops forwarded to the Board of Administration will exceed by at least two the number of bishops currently serving. The General Conference secretary shall compile the nominee

information in standardized format and distribute it, by paper or electronic means, to all delegates no later than thirty days prior to the opening of General Conference. The ballots for election of bishops shall consist of the names of these nominees and the incumbent bishops who are willing to continue to serve.

5. Lead Bishop: Following the election of the bishops, the Bishops Search Committee shall convene to name a Lead Bishop and bring its recommendation to the General Conference for its affirmation prior to the conclusion of the General Conference.
- C. The Board of Bishops shall develop an internship plan for newly-elected bishops. The plan will include training in the duties and responsibilities of the bishop, debriefing on sensitive matters, transfer of materials, informing on pressing and current denominational issues, coaching on matters related to personal preparedness for the office and accompanying the seated bishops on necessary travel for the sake of introduction, transition and relationship building. Such training is to take place commencing upon the election of the newly elected bishop(s) and culminating in the full transfer of authority 90 days subsequent to the General Conference at which he/she/they were elected. Compensation for interning bishops will be determined by the Board of Administration.
- D. In the event of a vacancy on the Board of Bishops during the interim between sessions of the General Conference, the preceding General Conference shall fill the vacancy with an election held by paper or electronic ballot. Existing rules for the election of bishops by the General Conference shall apply.

The Role of a Bishop

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To assist the bishops in directing the Church, these leadership priorities are set forth.

- A. Regarding self and family, the bishop shall:
 1. feed his/her soul (heart, mind, spirit), diligently attending to the means of grace;
 2. love his/her spouse and family, maintaining a household of faith; and
 3. fulfill his/her vows as a baptized disciple and elder called to leadership.
- B. Regarding the General Church, the bishop shall:
 1. lead in word, sacrament and order. The task of the “word” applies to bishops in two regards, to teach the apostolic gospel and to protect the Church from error. Regarding “sacrament” (and worship) the Church gives praise to God, pleads with Him for mercy and receives the grace God mediates to His people. Bishops lead the Church in its adoration and petition of God and in upholding the sacredness of the Lord’s Supper and baptism as means of grace. Regarding “order,” bishops lead the Church by articulating its mission and vision. Thus, bishops must have a deep commitment to the Church’s mission, insight into the complexities of human nature and skill at guiding others;
 2. cast the vision of the Free Methodist Church and inspire its leaders, members and attendees to advance the vision, live according to kingdom values, love God and serve him sacrificially and faithfully;

3. encourage every Church to be a healthy biblical community of holy people, multiplying disciples, leaders, groups and Churches.
- C. Regarding Annual Conferences. The bishop shall exercise or delegate his/her authority to:
 1. multiply godly, competent leaders, who disciple and equip others;
 2. train, ordain, transfer, cite, or suspend pastors and leaders as need and circumstances require;
 3. serve with executive authority as the conference president;
 4. disciple superintendents and conference leaders to:
 - a. grow spiritually and develop professionally in their calling,
 - b. identify, recruit, equip, deploy and encourage godly, competent leaders,
 - c. encourage and equip pastors and leaders to achieve missional priorities,
 - d. develop growth strategies,
 - e. maintain our Wesleyan and Free Methodist distinctives.
 5. serve as chair of the Ministerial Appointments Committees of his/her assigned conferences (see ¶5220);
 6. form new provisional and annual conferences as the needs of the work demand, subject to approval of the General Conference Board of Administration;
 7. decide all questions of law at annual conferences, subject to an appeal to the General Conference. A bishop's decision upon a point of law arising in annual conference session shall be the rule unless reversed by the General Conference.

Retirement of Bishops

¶4150

- A. A bishop may retire:
 1. following his/her sixty-second birthday if the bishop so chooses; or
 2. at any time because of failing health. Disability status shall be determined by the Board of Administration upon recommendation from either the human resources department or the Board of Administration Benefits Committee, based upon medical evidence.
- B. When a bishop, or former bishop, retires he/she shall be given the title of Bishop Emeritus. Such shall be granted by the FMCUSA Board of Administration, provided he/she has given honorable and distinguished service to the Church as bishop for a minimum of six years.
- C. The title of Bishop Emeritus may, due to extenuating circumstances as verified by the conference Ministerial Education and Guidance Board (MEG Board), be reviewed and/ or adjusted by the FMCUSA Board of Administration.

Board of Bishops

¶4200

The Board of Bishops provides primary pastoral leadership of the denomination with ecclesiastical authority to lead and direct the Church, and develop and articulate the purpose, vision, values and expected outcomes of the Church. They shall convene immediately following the General Conference in which they are elected to determine their roles and titles on the

Board of Bishops other than the role and title, “Lead Bishop,” and their assignments for fulfilling their duties and responsibilities as articulated in ¶4120. They shall assume responsibility for the fruitfulness and vitality of the annual conferences and shall recommend to the General Conference Board of Administration changes in an annual conference’s status resulting in merger, closure or realignment.