

Why a New Conference?

This is what the Lord says: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. – Jeremiah 6:16

When we come to a crossroads, we ask for the ancient paths and where the good way is. One of the good and ancient paths that we look to is the birth of the early church. The ancient path was their ability to listen to and be empowered by the Holy Spirit. The first 300 years of the early church were shaped by the movement of the Holy Spirit. Can we become this type of movement again?

The Free Methodist denomination has been in a season of decline due to a changing religious landscape in North America and a lack of adaptive leadership. This has created a need for denominational leadership to evaluate how to shift a declining denomination back into a movement. Honestly, we find ourselves on the verge of a crisis.

The Japanese word for crisis is a combination of the words “danger” and “opportunity.” The FM denomination and our annual conferences find themselves at this crossroad between danger and opportunity. We are choosing to see this disruptive decline as an opportunity to rethink the way we use conference resources to keep our local churches focused on missional movement. We want to see this crisis as an opportunity rather than do nothing. We are choosing to take the good path of opportunity.

Our vision is to become a movement that is multiplying disciples, leaders, and churches. We believe that creating a new conference that strategically aligns our resources will help us be a missional movement rather than simply another religious organization. This will take time to make this shift, and it will require seasoned leaders willing to adapt to a new way of being in partnership together for the sake of the mission “to make disciples of all nations.” (Matthew 28:19)

Our vision requires adaptive leadership. Tod Bolsinger, in his book *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, encourages us to be adaptive leaders. He describes adaptive leaders as people who;

“...develop capacity to lead their congregations through a long, truly transformational process that starts with the transformation of the leaders and requires a thoroughgoing change in leadership functioning.”

There is a process we all go through when we face a significant disruption in our ministry. This process will require adaptive leadership from each person involved. A disruption, first of all, needs to be **named** and acknowledged. Rather than remain in denial, adaptive leaders face the reality that comes with disruption.

The second phase is to **interrogate reality**. We re-examine our assumptions, and we look at what is not working and what is working. To be a movement led by the Holy Spirit requires us to look for the people whom God is moving among.

Once we have faced the current reality, we can begin to **re-envision** a kingdom-focused future. Jesus said to “seek first the Kingdom” (Matthew 6:33), and this is a time to evaluate where we are focusing our resources and energy.

We then begin the **re-design** phase, where we lay out a blueprint for who and what we want to become. We redistribute resources to the new way of being and acting, which we hope will be fruitful and help us to flourish once again. The Biblical analogy of a grapevine reminds us that pruning and cultivation are needed for good fruit to appear.

Work Hard or Give Up - We then face another crossroads that many organizations fail to address. After the re-designing, they give up and do not execute the new vision. The comfort of the old ways pulls us more than the hard work of transitioning to the new thing we have been dreaming about. Adaptive leaders choose to do the hard work of implementing the new vision and plan rather than give up because it is too hard. The problem with giving up is that we slide back into decline and miss the opportunity to be a Spirit-led movement.

Our Conference task force has been praying, discussing, and dreaming about the possibility of a new conference. **Our discussions are a work in progress and will remain so until each conference decides.** We are sharing some of our initial ideas here on how the new conference could be formed. We are focused on the good way forward together in partnership. When we met, we dreamed of what this new conference could be like.

- Resource churches to be launchpads to make new disciples.
- Focus on multiplying disciples, leaders, and churches.
- Moving from a corporate mentality to a covenantal community with shared mission and values.
- More participatory, grassroots work with lay leadership.
- Be nimble and adaptive to the changing landscape.
- Be model agnostic and do ministry that is flexible and creative.
- Decentralize leadership.

How do we envision things in the new conference? When we stand at the crossroads and consider the ancient ways, we see three re-envisioned pathways of walking in the new conference. We can see each potential pathway being supported and resourced in the new conference.

A Path to Evangelistic Disciple-Making – The new conference could create a pathway that equips local churches to become launchpads for making new disciples. Conference resources can be refocused on helping the local church in this area of ministry.

A Path to Planting New Churches – All three conferences are currently working with CDN to call people into the mission field. The new conference could possibly staff a leader to support these called leaders and churches with added training, coaching, and mentoring.

A Path to the Formation of Leaders – With a decentralized leadership focus, the new conference would need to empower teams of leaders to develop leaders for the local church. Rather than a centralized leader, we envision leadership that forms teams in a conference network. We could see regional MEG and MAC teams, missional network leaders, and a conference staff team working in tandem to equip leaders across the new conference.

FAQ

1. **What will the new conference structure look like?** We would all love to know the answer to this question! The reality is that we have some ideas and direction, but until the decision is made to form a new conference, nothing is set in stone. A transitional team of leaders will be formed to help design the new conference's structure.
2. **How could a new conference continue to invest in local church leaders?** The new conference will continue to equip church leaders through training days, pastor retreats, and other events, serving leaders across the expanded conference. The new conference will need to be adaptable in how it includes people, using technology, and hosting in-person events at different locations across the country. We will look to conferences like Acts 12:24, which are already doing this across a wide geographic region.
3. **How could this affect local church leadership?** We anticipate the local church leaders will have the opportunity to work alongside conference leaders and superintendents. These leaders will work in a team led by a lead superintendent.
4. **What if we vote “No”?** Each conference will vote to join together to form a new conference. If a conference votes not to join the new conference, that conference would need to develop its own plan to be a financially self-sustaining movement that brings new vitality to the local churches. This plan would need to be approved by the Board of Bishops.
5. **Will our church’s fair-share rate go up?** Currently, each conference has a different fair-share rate. The total of EPP and ministry shares for each conference is as follows:

Harvest 8.5%, Keystone 8.75%, and Ohio 7.2%. Once the new conference BOA is created, they will need to set the apportionment rate for the new conference's budget. Depending on which conference you are in, the rate may go up or down. We will need to juggle the competing values of creating a conference budget that does not rely on reserves while not overburdening the local church with added expenses.

6. **Will we lose access to the superintendent?** We expect there will be a lead superintendent and assistant superintendents. Each superintendent may be more specialized in their focus. Different leaders may respond depending on what the church needs. There may also be a network of missional leaders who will work more directly with churches. Regardless, you will be able to access a trusted leader within the new conference to help resource your local church.
7. **Who will help our local church in a crisis or when we need support?** Depending on the nature of the crisis, a superintendent would work with your church to help resolve.
8. **How will we continue to form called leaders?** We expect there to be regional MEGs and MACs for the conference to walk alongside candidates for ministry and to provide oversight of ordained elders. The local church will continue to be the calling center for new leaders. One hope for the new conference is to have a MEG coordinator to help candidates in the process.
9. **How will we plant new churches?** All of our conferences currently work with Church Development Network (CDN). Our multiplication leaders across all three conferences have already met to discuss ways to partner together.
10. **What is the overall goal of the new conference?** The goal is to partner with the Holy Spirit to create a stronger new conference. Ecclesiastes 4:7 says, "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." Our goal is ultimately to bring new people into the Kingdom of God and come alongside the local church towards this end.

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