



Q & A with Bishop Nominee Keith Cowart

These questions were asked by four networks within the FMC and the Bishop Nominees were asked to respond to each question.

1) How much sexism are you aware of in the FMCUSA and where do you see it hampering the work of God the most? What have you done in the past and what are your plans in the future for addressing this issue?

In some ways we have clearly made progress on this front in recent years, evidenced by the election of our first female bishop and the recent report coming out of *The Center for Pastoral Formation* that 50% of our current CMC's are women. On the other hand, we still have only two female superintendents and relatively few women in lead pastor roles. Clearly, those facts would seem to indicate that while we are doing a better job of promoting ordination for women, women continue to face obstacles when it comes to landing opportunities at the higher levels of pastoral and denominational leadership.

The relative absence of women in such roles hampers our movement, first and foremost, because it robs us of the unique perspective women bring to critical conversations and initiatives around missional strategies and effectiveness. It also should not go without saying that fewer women in such roles also makes it more difficult for women who are clearly called and gifted for pastoral or denominational leadership to envision themselves in such roles. I would argue that Bishop Linda's election has gone a long way toward changing that dynamic, but we still have work to do.

That work should include confronting biases against women by helping our people to understand the biblical basis for women in ministry. Furthermore, we must encourage key leaders throughout the denomination (most of whom will be men) to intentionally invest in the development of women through mentoring and coaching, and to use their influence to help open doors of opportunity for women. This is something I was personally committed to doing when I served in pastoral ministry. We ordained six women during my tenure at Christ Community with four more in the CMC process when I left. This is something each of us current bishops has committed to doing, along with

calling every member of the denominational Executive Leadership Team to do the same. We also brought on Deb Walkemeyer to serve on that team to increase the number of women on the team, to serve as an advocate for women at the national level, and to bring leadership to the development of a leadership pipeline for women. Together, those efforts are making a difference.

2) How do you define economic justice? In what ways can the FMC more effectively confront growing economic inequality in the U.S.?

Economic injustice occurs when some people are provided opportunities that are not available to others or when some people face obstacles to economic advancement that do not exist for others. The church ought to be concerned about such things for two primary reasons: God hates injustice in every form and God loves and is drawn to those who are oppressed because of injustice. Our motives for addressing these concerns ought to grow out of our deep convictions that all people are created in the image of God, that God cares about the whole person, and that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has the power not only to save, but to provide a new identity, to heal brokenness, to release the oppressed, to transform both people and situations, and to bring about the abundant life Jesus promised.

I am deeply grateful for our history as Free Methodists around this issue. I have found great joy in telling newcomers to our faith tribe that the FMC was born on the conviction that the church ought to be the one place on the face of the earth where all people stand on level ground. I have to confess, however, that while I'm confident most Free Methodists would agree with that statement, I'm not as certain that we share the depth of our founders' conviction for living it out in practical ways in our communities. We should always be asking if our current reality reflects a clear commitment to our core convictions.

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Without question, addressing the issue of economic inequality is a complex matter. Biblically, not all forms of poverty are treated equally because not all who live in poverty are victims of oppression. Thus, we do not find in Scripture a “one-size-fits-all” approach to responding to those in need. Further, while we should certainly speak with a prophetic voice against economic injustice, economic equality is not the primary aim of the church. What we see in Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35 is not a mandated program of wealth redistribution, but the power of love - fueled by the newly outpoured Holy Spirit - moving those who had more to share with those who had less. After 2,000 years, the most powerful way for the church to address the problems of poverty and economic inequality is still to demonstrate to the world in actual communities of faith what it looks like for a people to be so transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit that sacrificial love expressed in radical generosity becomes such a defining characteristic of the people of God that one would reach the same conclusion today as in Acts 4:34, “There was not a needy person among them.”

3) How do you see the future of the Latino church in the U.S.? Do you have a vision for more cultural diversity and inclusion in print, communication, and leadership? How do you think the denomination can help mentor, raise up and empower Latino leaders into different leadership circles?

The Latino community represents the second largest – and I believe, the fastest growing – ethnic group in the U.S. If the FMC does not recognize and engage this reality, we will miss a huge opportunity to expand our influence and impact on our nation for the Kingdom of God. For that reason, we most definitely need to increase our commitment to celebrating the work of our Latino churches, developing Latino leaders and empowering them for even greater impact.

I have found, however, that Latinos tend to be so missionally focused on the local level that they don't always have significant ambition for leadership on the national level. But that is precisely why we need more Latinos in national leadership. When it comes to missional effectiveness, Latinos are among our most effective and fruitful leaders!

When I was elected bishop in 2019, I had to find my successor as superintendent of the Southeast Regional Conference. Because Latino churches make up a significant portion of the conference, I asked three different Latino leaders to interview for the role. All three turned me down because they couldn't see themselves leaving their local churches. I admire that spirit, but

we must help our most effective Latino leaders to see how their influence and impact could be multiplied by serving in a national role. I am hopeful the newly established “Conexion Latina” will play a significant role in providing a means for Latino pastors and leaders to connect with each other and with the national church in order to help shape our denominational strategy for developing and empowering Latino leaders.

4) The FMC proclaims that we started due to our opposition of slavery, yet we have had minimal success in attracting significant numbers of African Americans to our denomination. Do you see this as a problem and what steps would you take to rectify this going forward?

Without question, the FMC's lack of success in reaching African Americans is a problem, one that is very personal for me. When Pam and I planted Christ Community Church in Columbus, Georgia, we believed with all our hearts that God wanted our church to demonstrate what it looks like to be an Ephesians 2:14 kind of church, one in which people from every ethnic and socioeconomic group in our city would worship, grow, and do life together because Jesus has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility. We are forever grateful that although the journey was challenging and we had much to learn along the way, God made that dream a reality to the degree that my successor as lead pastor was and is today an African American.

While I long to see a similar reality everywhere in our denomination, we cannot underestimate the complexities around this issue. First, we must understand the unique dynamics of this particular ethnic challenge due to our national history and the church's reluctance to speak and live prophetically when it comes to confronting the reality of racism in America. While the FMC took a courageous stand against slavery in the 1860s, it would be difficult to argue that our stand on civil rights in the 1960s and beyond has been equally courageous. Thus, rebuilding trust between white and black Christians should be a primary aim.

Second, we must take seriously the current racial climate in the U.S. In some ways it seems we have actually regressed on this front in recent years to the point that even having authentic conversations around the issue of race can be challenging. While we must be wise when it comes to how we approach such conversations, the church should lead the way in having them. We have the greatest basis for reconciliation and unity in the world (Christ's death, resurrection, and victory over sin), but we must embrace and live out that reality with integrity.

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Third, we need more African Americans in significant roles of leadership in the FMC. As with women in ministry, the absence of African American leaders in such roles sends a message that runs contrary to our stated desire to be a church that looks like the Kingdom of God. On the other hand, the presence of African American leaders will surely open doors when it comes to our ability to reach and engage the African American community.

Finally, we will need to consider new missional priorities. To a large degree, our lack of racial diversity in the FMC is a reflection of the fact that most of our current churches are located in rural areas outside of the South, settings that tend to have little to no racial diversity. If we are to be a church that looks like the Kingdom, we will need to prioritize the planting of new churches in cities, throughout the South, and anywhere racial diversity exists.