



## Q & A with Bishop Nominee Matt Whitehead

*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?

From its inception the Free Methodist Church held the value of the full empowerment of both women and men in church leadership and ministry. But early in our history, some leaders renounced this key value which set us back for generations. This created a one-sided, male-oriented, environment that not only curtailed the use of all the gifts available but also robbed the church of being able to benefit from everyone's contribution, both men and women. The marginalization of women is incompatible with a Pentecost understanding of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on ALL flesh.

Clearly, sexism has existed in the FMC. We continue to address this at the Annual Conference and national level. Making sure that local church appointments and other denominational leadership positions are fully available to qualified women is an absolute priority.

In my tenure as a Conference Superintendent and for this last quadrennium as a Bishop, I can attest to the fact that Ministerial Appointments Committees and Ministerial Education and Guidance Boards that I've worked with seriously consider women for pastoral appointments and Superintendent positions.

We still have work to do with some local church leadership teams who have been influenced by fundamentalism and believe that women are disqualified from church leadership. This not only deprives the Body of Christ of gifted women but creates a culture that is in stark opposition to Free Methodist DNA.

Going forward we must encourage the full use of all gifts at every level starting in the local church. We must move beyond merely paying lip service to gender equity and be intentional about recruiting and welcoming all ministry gifts at every level of church life. There is simply too much to lose by not utilizing the gifting of women in Kingdom work.

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

We used to say that if someone was just willing to work hard enough, they could succeed in this country. This understanding demeans those who work extremely hard but just can't seem to get ahead. The poor have always had a special place in the heart of God. The people of God are told to not only look with compassion on the poor but to actively step in and take on the role of advocate for them. Economic injustice occurs when there are political and social systems that unfairly hinders one group's efforts at self-preservation while other groups benefit within the same system.

The place to start is the same response that initiated the Exodus from bondage in Egypt. God said, "I have heard the cry of my people." We must listen to the cry of the poor. We must let them have a voice and a place at the table. Helping to lift those oppressed economically should not be reaching down and lifting them up but coming alongside them where dignity is given and together justice is brought to bear.

Our historical story as Free Methodists is a commitment to serve and honor those on the margins. It is encouraging that in every Annual Conference, local churches are intentionally ministering to the poor in the communities where they are planted. Our global Free Methodist family largely ministers to the poor around the world. This is another example of how the worldwide FMC has so much to teach us about effectively taking the Gospel to all levels of our society.

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**3) How do you see the future of the Latino church in the US? 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 racial makeup of our country is rapidly shifting, which means that the racial makeup of our churches should also be shifting. Welcoming others based upon how much they can become like us is not only a violation of the Gospel but an ineffective way of reaching our communities with the Good News of Jesus.

The health and growth of our Hispanic churches should be a high priority going forward. We have so much to learn from our Hispanic brothers and sisters. This will mean adapting the “look and sound” of our messaging to better reflect the people we are seeking to welcome. We should be developing discipleship materials that are created and overseen by people steeped in the Hispanic culture and language. We should make sure that conference and denominational events include elements of this culture, not just in the songs we sing. We need to have Latino voices at the table where vision is being cast and messaging is being created.

We are blessed as a denomination to have some incredible Hispanic leaders and churches in our movement. We need to think carefully about how to help some of our churches move from being mono-cultural to being multi-cultural.

**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?**

It's difficult to attract people to any group when they do not see people who look like them within the group. The challenge in creating diverse and welcoming communities is how much of what has come to define us are we willing to let go of to create a place at the table for others who are different from us. Going forward people looking at us should see more people who look like them. This will mean becoming far more intentional in changing the look of our denomination.

The addition of our Strategic Catalyst for Love-Driven Justice, Dr. Fraser Venter, to the FMC Executive Leadership Team (XLT) brings an important perspective and voice to the table. Dr. Venter has been given a platform at Annual Conferences, in local churches, and on our AFMEI campuses with great effectiveness and impact. The Bishops, Superintendents, and the XLT must continue to think strategically about how to move forward in confronting racism, prioritizing racial reconciliation, and helping us understand how the FMC can be a more welcoming place for African Americans.

It is critical that we continue to speak prophetically about biblical justice and reconciliation. Our church will need to take a long, hard, and often uncomfortable, look at itself and be willing to admit to places where both conscious and unconscious bias are present. Humility will need to be fostered at every level for us to move forward toward a more Kingdom-reflective denominational family.