



Q & A with Bishop Nominee Michael Traylor

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

I want to begin with acknowledging that questions dealing with race and ethnicity, gender, and injustice are sensitive and often provoke fragility (hypersensitivity and defensiveness when one's preferred narrative is threatened). My intention is not to be provocative, but to honor the prophetic tasks of this Kairos season to confront reality, recommit to Kingdom values, and paint an extravagant hope of what the Free Methodist Church was created to be.

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?

I once heard a sociologist explain that once an injustice becomes casual, that it frames the culture in which it occurs. If we define sexism broadly as discrimination against a person based upon their gender, it is part of the culture of the broader evangelical church, and sadly within many churches who identify as Free Methodist. This is most clearly seen in the testimonies of FM women in leadership, and the obstacles they face. It is supported by the lack of women in prominent leadership roles in the Free Methodist Church. It took over 110 years to ordain the first female Elder, and nearly 160 years to elect our first female Bishop. To this day, we have never completed a denomination-wide review of how many women are in leadership or in a leadership pipeline. The old saying that you "value what you measure" comes into play here. Misogynistic cultures rarely have the insight to understand that there are personal, structural, and systemic expression of sexism. This is why we must celebrate courageous voices of women who speak in a Spirit-led prophetic voices, demanding that we confront this sinful reality. Dr Roberta Mosier-Peterson is one of the many voices who demanded better and published a video where FM women could share their stories, their woundedness, and disillusionment, but also their incredible resilience. Misogynistic organizations often see women as cultural

deficit that weakens them, as opposed to Jesus-centered organizations that understand women to be an invaluable and indispensable source of cultural capital, that enhances, enriches, and enlivens the organization.

Interestingly, the few growing denominations have seen their growth largely through the mobilization of women in leadership and leaders of color. The Assemblies of God, which remains one of the fastest growing churches, reported in 2022 that it had ordained on average 5 women a week for the past decade and now women make up nearly 30% of all ordained ministers.

In my current role as Superintendent of the River Conference, I have been mindful of the need to change the expectations regarding women in leadership. As I complete my 5th year in this role, I have sought to change the culture of the FMC by:

- A. Co-Superintending with Amelia Cleveland-Traylor and modeling egalitarian leadership and mutual submission for the first term.
- B. Appointing 8 women as lead Pastors. There was a single woman in the role of lead pastor when we arrived in 2018.
- C. Appointing 2 female Elders as district Leaders (out of 6) to lead our regional ministries and serve in our executive level leadership.
- D. Equipping pastors-in-training with tools to understand the foundational FM egalitarian approach to ministry. Denying candidates for ordination who are unable to affirm and support this.
- E. Expressly sharing with networks and social media groups that advocate for women in ministry, when there is a pastoral opening, with the desire to attract more women in the River Conference.

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- F. We developed specific guidelines with board training to identify and prevent spiritual, sexual, emotional and physical abuse. Our vision is to make all River Conference Churches as “safe places”.
- G. Prayerfully and financially supporting women in ministry or contemplating ministry to attend the WHWC conference. Currently, a TRC female elder serves on the planning team for the WHWC. The goal is to have every female clergy member in attendance.

One of the most difficult aspects of confronting sexism in the FMC is recognizing that role of intersectionality (multiple overlapping power differentials that varies depending on setting). For example, one of the fastest growing edges of the Free Methodist Church are immigrating populations from central Africa, where globally, the majority of Free Methodists live. In the River Conference, we have 8 churches who worship in Swahili. We estimate 1,100 worshipers a week without a single female LMC, CMC, or elder. Attempts to address this have largely been ignored and complementarianism is culturally justified. We have made a proposal to the denominational BOA to develop commissions led by and resourced for international churches who may struggle with the egalitarian approach to ministry. Additionally, we hope to begin to identify and equip hundreds of women in our international churches to respond to the invitation of the Holy Spirit to serve in the church at every level (sounds like a founding “freedom” to me.)

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

One of the primary metaphors for injustice is theft. It is a theft of truth, a theft of personhood, and a theft of property. Underlying the concept of theft, is that everyone has a God-given right to dignity (personhood, Imago Dei), to provide for themselves (property and livelihood), and to experience the biblical concept of community-based shalom. While there is a western Christian impulse to spiritualize the concept of shalom to simply mean peace with God through Jesus, the term has a much richer meaning that encompasses a holistic wellness and wholeness that involves spiritual, mental, emotional and economic health and wellness.

This vision of shalom is described in elements of the Mosaic law, re-emphasized in the prophets, and embodied in Jesus and the Spirit-filled covenant-community that followed Jesus’ resurrection. The prophet Micah, in describing the shalom that will be

administered by the Messiah and embodied by the messianic community stated “All will sit underneath their own grapevines, under their own fig trees. There will be no one to terrify them, for the mouth of the Lord of heavenly forces has spoken” (Micah 4:4). Note the economic security that is part of the peace and justice of the messianic vision.

This understanding of economic justice is also seen in the redistributive and restorative aspects of justice that occurred in Jubilee. It is demonstrated and experienced in the early church that was quite concerned about the provisions of those who were disadvantaged for a variety of reasons (Think Acts 4 and 6). Jesus was so concerned about it that ministering to and among those who are disadvantaged and marginalized, was identified as the most important trait of the disciples life (Matthew 25:31-44).

FM founder, B.T. Roberts recognized the priority for economic justice in caring for the poor but also advocating for collective bargaining among farmers and powerless workers. He would state that “a divine religion is a humane religion. He who would love God most is most ready to sacrifice for the good of his fellow man.” B.T. Roberts did not oppose pew rentals because he disliked fundraising, but because it further separated the treatment of the have and have-nots, and it demonstrated disdain for the poor.

The FMC must remember and celebrate its founding narratives and its value of love-driven justice. There are many organizations that are leading in economic justice such as the Poor People’s Campaign led by William Barber and Liz Theoharris, or community organizing leaders like Rev. Alexis Salvatierra (who was a keynote speaker at the 2022 FM Justice Network conference). Re-emphasizing the biblical call to be communities of shalom and collaborating with Spirit-led organizations to equip our churches to do this in their local congregations is essential.

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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?

People of Latin American heritage are the fastest growing part of the American population. In 2000, the Latino population represented 13% of all Americans, nearly 20% by 2020 and are estimated to make up 30% by 2060. Interestingly, Dr. Robert Chao Romero (Professor of Latin American Studies, Elder in the Church of the Nazarene) recently reported that currently 25% of all Christians in the United States are first or second generation immigrants. While many who are of Latin descent are not recent immigrants, Latinos make up the majority of immigrating people in the past twenty years.

Within the White evangelical church culture, there has been an xenophobic impulse, particularly centered on people of Latin descent. While this impulse is not shared by many White evangelicals, it has become a polarizing theme for many prominent leaders. This became blatantly clear as a former president who was widely supported by White evangelicals, used racial slurs to disparage people of Latin Descent, without significant rebuke or concern by most of his supporters. The Latino Immigrant narrative is the framework that describes people of Latin descent, many of which preceded European settlers in North America by generations, as immoral, unhealthy, lazy and seeking to alter the "American way of life." In contrast, the narrative of European immigrants sought to depict most immigrants as hard-working, industrious and bringing value to their respective community (acknowledging that this was not extended to all European immigrants at the time of immigration, but mostly northern Europeans). This contrast has led many churches to see Latinos as representing a cultural deficit, leading to conspiracy theories that Latinos, along with Black, Asian and Indigenous people are seeking to "replace white Protestants" from their position of being cultural, economic, and legally superior. This xenophobic impulse is not exclusive to people of Latin descent, but has extended to a wide range of non-White persons at different times and seasons.

This extension of this impulse has been felt by many members of the Asian and Pacific Islander communities. The amount of anti-Asian violence has skyrocketed in the past 4 years. Violence and discrimination aimed at Black and Indigenous people of color has also been on the increase for years. "These" groups are not "out

there" but are expressions of our churches, families, friends, co-workers, and communities. In light of these realities, how do we fulfill our calling as peacemakers?

The Free Methodist Church was founded on an abolitionist movement that values cross-cultural collaboration. We must own the fact that we have allowed the cultural sensitivities of the greater evangelical movement to dishonor this value, and frankly our Latino leaders. Despite a tremendous presence within the Free Methodist Church USA, to this date there has never been a Bishop of Latin heritage.

I would work with the Board of Bishops to do the following, Jesus helping us:

- A. Repent of anti-Latino approach and practices.
- B. Develop resources that amplifies our doctrinal and missional approaches while centering a culture-conscious gospel message. (The gospel is unchanging, but its expression is culturally, generationally, and socially specific).
- C. Re-imagine what Cross-Cultural Collaboration can be among Latino communities, where Latino leaders are centered and leading the process.
- D. Empower Leaders who reflect the ethnic, cultural and theological values of those we seek to engage. Doing this strategically and sacrificially.
- E. Empower the Conexion Latina to be a resource for pastors and leaders of Latin descent, as well as for local church and conferences seeking to develop multi-ethnic movements or develop strategies to deepen their engagement in diverse Latino cultures and contexts.

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?

As a Superintendent who has had multiple conversations with diverse pastors and leaders, in churches that span the spectrum from mostly White, Multi-ethnic, to mostly Black. I can tell you that most African American pastors do not see the Free Methodist Church as a safe and supportive place for Black pastors and leaders. While there is the basic tendency for people to practice homophily, the following specifics concerns were shared with me by African American leaders:

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- A. Poor retention rate of African American pastors. (We have lost nearly 50% of our pastor, antidotally)
- B. Lack of opportunities for African American pastors (Few African American pastors in prominent churches)
- C. Lack of African Americans in the highest levels of leadership (No African American bishops)
- D. Lack of organizational advocacy or a history of advocacy to confront injustices against African American people (Silent and even hostile to Civil Rights movement historically, lack of advocacy to contemporary issues)
- E. Disinterest in developing deeper ecclesial relationships with predominantly African American Wesleyan denominations such as the AME, AME Zion, CME, and COGIC.
- F. Affiliations of some churches with political movements (Christian Nationalists) that are often antagonistic to the needs of African American communities.

My approach to changing this is to work with the Board of Bishops, Jesus helping us by:

- A. Repenting of Anti-Black approaches and practices, including our devastating silence towards injustice.
- B. Re-imagine what cross-cultural collaboration can be among African American communities, centering African American leaders to lead the process.
- C. Explore closer ties with the traditional African American Wesleyan-Arminian denominations as a means of learning more about African American communities and the cultural capital that comes from the historic African American Church.
- D. Reject and renounce any expression of cultural supremacy or superiority that often comes with politically informed extreme movements.

Historically, it is important to understand that there is a difference between being an abolitionist who rejects chattel slavery, and someone who advocates for the dignity, worth, and full inclusion of African Americans. Our beloved President Abraham Lincoln helped dismantle slavery, but he is on record multiple times sharing his thoughts on the inferiority of African Americans. The gospel requires both. African American leaders want to be part of a movement where they are joined in their fight against injustice but are also valued and seen as leaders who enhance and enrich the Free Methodist Church. That was part of our founding story, we need to courageously honor our calling.