

President's Address
Free Methodist World Conference

Obedient to the Heavenly Vision

Bishop Chauke, and members of the Free Methodist Church hosting us here in Zimbabwe, esteemed bishops, and respected lay delegates from around the world, denominational mission directors, honored guests—my brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

The theme of our conference is “Obedient to the Heavenly Vision.” You will know that this phrase comes from Acts 26:19. The Apostle Paul was standing before King Agrippa, trying to help him understand that God was doing something new among his people around the world. Paul himself had been overtaken by the heavenly light and he was given a vision of God’s grace and mercy, not only for himself as an individual, but for all humankind. This persecutor of the Church was converted to Jesus, and filled with the Holy Spirit. He remained obedient to that heavenly vision as long as he lived.

In a recent letter to me, Bishop Emeritus Gerald Bates wrote, “I think of world phenomena such as urbanization, globalization accompanied paradoxically, by ethnic splintering, technological power, terrorism, militarism. All of these (and others) touch every corner of our world and put almost unimaginable demands on leadership.”

“Over against these, the church is a counter-culture, giving her witness, opposing self-centeredness whether individual or corporate, substituting in its place a 'brother's keeper' ethic of love and concern. It opposes the exploitation of the poor and the compromise of human dignity derived from the image of God. It introduces as a 'wedge of newness', a Kingdom of power and hope, the 'new tribe in Christ Jesus' (Eph. 2), thus transcending tribal and national boundaries in the interest of a deeply shared mission. It forms relational networks, as the Apostle Paul and his colleagues did in New Testament times. Across these dynamic networks there is a flow of new understandings of the gospel, resources to assist one another with new opportunities and when needed, help to rescue people and churches in crisis.”

As members of the Free Methodist World Conference, we stand with other Christians around the world, committed to being obedient to the same heavenly vision. Like Paul, we are being sent into the world “to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sin and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Christ” (Acts 26:18).

With hearts full of passion for Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, Free Methodists around the world are being obedient to the heavenly vision and the call of the Lord Jesus to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe everything that He has commanded us. The gospel message is going out. Lives are being changed. There is movement and spiritual advance in our denomination.

Yet, we must be reminded that unless we remain obedient to the heavenly vision, we can become crippled and weak as a church. No one wants this to happen. Therefore, we must be alert, vital and healthy Christians, who have the Great Commission of Christ at the center of all that we do.

Every organization, including denominations has a life cycle. The **first** stage of the cycle is called a **movement**. There is great enthusiasm and plenty of activity.

Yet if the movement is going to fully develop in a mature way, it must move to a **second** stage. Here, there are **systems** to support the vision of the movement. Otherwise, the movement will eventually disintegrate into chaos and confusion.

This second stage is where we are as a denomination worldwide. Praise the Lord! There has been much mission activity all around the world; and as a result of this, thousands of people have come to faith in Jesus Christ. The former mission fields have grown and matured into General Conferences. Now there must be a way for these growing national churches to be linked to each other to work with one another to reach those who have not yet responded to the gospel.

The **third** stage of the cycle is called **bureaucracy**. In this stage, the **movement** begins to slow down. People become preoccupied with themselves. They change their focus from the heavenly vision to structures. Some structures are necessary. Bureaucracies have too many structures. Often, they hinder the creative work that God is doing and wants to do. We must be very careful that the Free Methodist Church does not become a bureaucracy. If it does, one of two things will happen: the denomination will become weaker and weaker until it is rendered ineffective; OR, there will be a very powerful movement for change from within to shake off all the unnecessary restrictions to regain a renewed flexibility to respond to the compelling vision that birthed the denomination in the days that it was primarily a movement.

Let's think for a few moments about where we have been. On June 29, 1999, in Anderson, Indiana, at the final meeting of the Free Methodist World Fellowship, Dr. David McKenna, under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, gave a stirring address to the assembled delegates. In his challenge to us, he gave a brief overview of the history of the Free Methodist movement and then laid before us elements of a vision for the future. What he said connects us with where we have come from and where we are going now as a World Conference. Here is a summary of what he said.

In 1860, this denomination was born in North America and it grew quickly as aggressive evangelism and discipleship characterized its passion for the lost. This is **movement**. Then, according to Dr. McKenna, in 1894, the North American General Conference made an unfortunate decision to withdraw from aggressive evangelism, turned in on itself, and as a consequence, it lost its momentum for the next 70 years. This is **systems** becoming a **bureaucracy**.

In 1960, when the denomination was 100 years old, a new vision was birthed. The Free Methodist World Fellowship was formed. These visionaries saw a global church embracing all nations and all peoples in the unity of fellowship, membership and ministry. Under their leadership, the viewpoint of the denomination was reversed from looking inward to looking outward once again toward new frontiers. The speed and growth of the church outside North America took off in many fields and has literally shifted the center of gravity for the Free Methodist Church from North America to this continent where we are meeting.

Then Dr. McKenna made these telling observations as he asked the question, "What can we learn from our history?" He answered, "We learn that momentum in the church comes from natural movements that are consistent with the biblical vision. We also learn that strategies inserted from above (by others) or imported from outside can neither maintain nor regain that momentum." He is warning us against bureaucracy!

In other words, we must always be guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit to fulfill the vision of the Great Commission. Our ways of doing this must have some flexibility so that the strategies and structures that we create are appropriate for different contexts and ultimately designed to support obedience to the vision that God has given to reach the lost.

Later in his address, he challenged us to be a global church Then he warned us that this would mean a radical change of outlook. To the North American church, he said, “Practically, a global church cannot be a reality until we (North Americans) have a reversal in viewpoint and a revolution in action in which North Americans think locally and act globally.” As a North American, I heartily agreed with what he said to us. And I went away taking to heart the challenge that he gave to North Americans to pay the price to have this “reversal in viewpoint and a revolution in action”. I made a personal decision to use all my powers of influence to move us in North America to intentionally think locally and act globally. And I have had the privilege of serving with an Executive Committee that has also been committed to this challenge.

At the same time, I would take this moment to speak a careful word of exhortation to the non-North American church. You are growing rapidly. This is wonderful and we praise the Lord with you. But you must continue to develop maturity in ministerial and lay leadership and in ministry systems as you assume more and more responsibility for determining your destiny under the Lordship of Jesus.

To all of us I would say, we need to develop international relationships so that we know each other well, we trust one another, and so have the basis to work together as partners to see the gospel message spread in existing countries as well as in unreached nations and people groups. This is why it is so important that we have a vision-driven, properly functioning World Conference. It is also the reason why we must make a way for all the bishops to meet together. It is only possible to know each other well, to trust one another, and to have the basis to work together as partners to see the gospel message spread if we are meeting together in a spirit of humility and mutual love and respect.

This is the philosophy behind the Constitution which we will consider together tomorrow. It is a document that recognizes the maturity of the General Conferences around the world and calls on all leaders to stand together as partners ready to serve, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, to see people won to Christ, effectively disciplined and trained, and then sent out in His name to make a difference in the world.

At the conclusion of his address, Dr. McKenna talked about the promise of the future. He imagined what the Free Methodist Church could be like in 2010, when it is 150 years old.

He saw the Free Methodist Church celebrating its 150th anniversary by becoming “a global church” under the auspices of a fully developed World Conference. We are on our way!

He saw the first General Assembly of the World Conference in 2010 meeting at a strategically located world class city at a location in the two-thirds world. This meeting is strategically located on the continent of Africa to recognize that, in terms of size, the Free Methodist Church is strongest on this continent.

He saw the mission of the global church stated in the distinctive terms of biblical holiness and compassion for the poor.

On this point, we still have work to do. But, we have begun. We are placing before you a statement on sanctification that describes biblical holiness more clearly. The strategic planning of the World Conference Executive over the past four years imagines relationships of international mutual respect and cooperative action that could bring this to pass. In the future meetings of the World Conference, the eight Area Fellowships and the Bishops Council, these important issues of biblical holiness and compassion for the poor can receive focus. When we gather, Jesus, the Lord of the Church, will challenge us to focus on those things which are dearest to His heart. These are very important to Him. The question will be whether we will allow him to speak to us about this and whether we will be obedient to the vision He gives.

Dr. McKenna saw the adoption of a missionary model to define the character of the church in its outreach. We must stir one another to fulfill the missionary passion of Jesus in a holistic manner that presents the life-changing gospel and ministers to the whole person. Spiritually, people will be transformed. Mentally, they will be disciplined and trained to live wholesomely, with compassion and concern for others. Physically, the needs of their lives and their communities will be addressed through sustainable social development strategies.

Dr. McKenna saw the principal application of Methodist governance and structure to the church on a global scale, in which clergy and laity work together, committed to a common constitutional authority. Your World Conference Executive has been working very hard to imagine a matrix of international relationships that are both faithful to our Methodist heritage and flexible enough so that we can respond to the challenges and opportunities of the modern world that the founders of the Methodist movement could never have imagined.

As we become a World Free Methodist Conference, the goal is to define a way in which we can work together, keeping issues of authority and empowerment in healthy balance, so as to release the church (and not restrain it unnecessarily) to go forward to proclaim the holistic gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We must recognize that the variety of contexts in which we minister demands a strategic will to be mature yet innovatively flexible.

This is not new to Methodists. This has been characteristic of us all the way back to John Wesley, who, while having deep respect for the essentials of the historic church, was always imagining and inventing creative ways of getting the gospel out to the world. For example, he broke into highly structured, aristocratic England with the innovations of evangelistic field preaching, the class meeting as an essential ingredient of discipling converts, and the Annual Conference with his preachers, not to do routine business, but to use as a means to instruct and stir up passion for the vision that Jesus has given to the church. History tells us that the leaders of the Church of England hardly knew what to do with John Wesley because of his innovations and so, sadly, they barred him from their pulpits. May we not repeat their mistake!

We stand at a crossroads as a denomination. We need to decide whether or not we are going to be a vision driven movement. Are we are going to press forward with all of our energy to establish Free Methodist ministries all around the world that resonate with the heart of our Lord Jesus and minister holistically to people everywhere? **OR** are we going to become encrusted in preoccupation with self-centered structures ... and suspicions ... and a self-protecting, self-centered, safe vision?

I am for the former. We must be obedient to the heavenly vision. We must have movement and vision based systems. Bureaucracy must be resisted. We must be passionate about what has always been important to our Lord Jesus. We must pay attention to wisely balance authority and empowerment in our ministries.

In eternity, when we stand before God and before the generations that follow us, we want to be able to say with deep joy, “We were obedient to the heavenly vision. We refused to be distracted by lesser things. We had our eyes fixed on Jesus. We put all our strength into faithfully following him and focusing on what is dearest to his heart. We were obedient to the Heavenly Vision!”

I must express my appreciation for those who have served with me on the Free Methodist World Conference Executive Committee during the past four years. This first World Conference Executive has been made up of the following individuals, and I would ask them to stand.

Vice President: Bishop Jim Tuan; **Secretary-Treasurer:** Rev. Mary-Elsie Wolfe, who is not able to be with us because she has a baby, and so acting in her place is Rev. Dan Sheffield; **Members at Large:** Bishop Emeritus Noah Nzeyimana (Burundi), Dr. Norman Edwards (USA), Mr. Edmundo Rodriguez (Mexico).

It has been a wonderful privilege to serve God together, to dream together, and to do our best to try to discern God’s will for the future. May I also report to you that the Free Methodist World Conference was requested to intervene in matters interior to these General Conferences: the **Democratic Republic of Congo** (Reconciliation meetings at Bukavu, February 7-10, 2002) , **Dominican Republic** (internal disciplinary matters), **Rwanda** (Reconciliation meetings at Kibuye – October 20-23, 2002), **Egypt** (High Court appeal against the General Council of Evangelical Churches of Egypt, December 2002)? We pray God’s blessing on our efforts.

Let me also draw to your attention two documents that I hope you have read: “**A Proposal to Amend the Constitution**” and “**World Conference Executive Committee Recommendations.**” These incorporate wisdom that we have gained from these interventions and other experiences. We will deal with the matters contained in these documents later in the Conference.

In conclusion, I will repeat what I said earlier. We must be obedient to the heavenly vision. We must have movement and vision based systems. We must be passionate about what has always been important to our Lord Jesus. We must pay attention to wisely balance authority and empowerment in our ministries. In eternity, when we stand before God and before the generations that follow us, we want to be able to say with deep joy, “We were obedient to the heavenly vision. We refused to be distracted by lesser things. We had our eyes fixed on Jesus. We put all our strength into faithfully following him and focusing on what is dearest to his heart. We were obedient to the Heavenly Vision!”

**Delivered by Bishop Keith A. Elford, President
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