

Report from the Chair of the Board of Administration

Before reporting on the activities of the Board during this past term I want to thank the conference for the opportunity to serve the Free Methodist Church in Canada for the three terms you have given me, the last of which involved being Chair. It has been rewarding to develop an understanding of the organization, function and challenges of a connectional church in a nation as large and diverse as ours. It has been an honour to work with board members, the National Leadership Team, and staff, as well as having the opportunity to meet ministers and lay members from many of our churches. I appreciate the grasp that our NLT has on the challenges facing our denomination and local churches in today's society, and their dedication to improving our ability to face them.

This past term was destined to be one of change. We had recently completed a Life Plan process and consecrated a new bishop to lead us. Either of these events would have initiated transformation by themselves, and together we would expect a synergistic effect. Combining this predisposition to change and the impact of a pandemic we end this term quite different from how we started it.

Our Guiding Principles: One of the outcomes of the Life Plan was a desire to better understand our identity: who we are. How does one explain what a FREE Methodist is without referring to the unique conditions of 19th century American life in which the church was founded? And having done so, the question becomes, what is the relevance to today? The new 'frees' were an attempt to express the applications of the past as contemporary principles for today and the future. *Freedom* from sin can still be expressed as the hope of forgiveness, transformation and love that comes from God's grace. We are *free* to follow God, rather than the secret societies of the past, or the political and social pressures of today. Advocating *freedom* from state sanctioned slavery reflects the principle of being *free* to pursue social justice in whatever era we live in. Although these principles will not appear in the Manual, we have found them helpful as we have discussed today's issues. Of note is the fact that Free Methodist conferences in both California and the United Kingdom have also developed contemporary language for our historical principles.

Continuing the Shift from Management to Policy Boards: Part of this shift is to give our leadership team greater responsibility, while ensuring accountability. In the past the guiding 'committee' for each department was comprised of BOA members. These were good people, but not necessarily experts in that area of ministry. We have moved to teams of individuals with appropriate expertise in each area, including a liaison from the BOA, who meet regularly with NLT members. We have shifted the accountability that used to lie with the BOA sub-committee in three ways: development of a stronger Personnel Committee (now Team) with greater expertise in performance appraisal; departmental budgets are still approved by an elected body, this being the BOA rather than the sub-committee; and, ministry plans are reported to the BOA at each major meeting. The exception is Administration and Financial Services which, as is

common in many organizations, retains greater board representation on its committee. Finally, the Manual indicates that the BOA has a specific role in holding the bishop accountable between General Conferences. We have strengthened our efforts to that effect by designating that a lay member of the Personnel Team leads the bishop's performance appraisal, and that an *in camera* session is held during all major BOA meetings to develop support and guidance statements for the bishop.

Re-organization within Departments: In recent terms our NLT has been challenged by the work load of connecting with churches. Several medical, as well as sabbatical, leaves have had to be taken. Churches have desired, and required, more face time with our leadership, and travel in our country is time consuming. How do we improve the level of contact with churches while also alleviating the work load? Both Church Planting and Church Health have added a group of coaches to their departments. Regionally based, first responders, implement practices intended to address problems early, or to prevent them from developing at all. A second re-organization has been to relegate some administrative work load to staff. What was seen as a temporary solution during personal leaves has become a means of alleviating a heavy administrative load. For example, Susan DePlanche has taken leadership in the credentialling program. As a result of both church health coaches and credentialling co-ordination, the previous positions of Leadership Development and Church Health have been combined.

New or Changing Activities: Three programs have been initiated during this term: a prayer co-ordinator has been appointed and is quite active; a team has been developed to connect with our chaplains, both military and institutional; and, a team has been designated to enhance our connection with retirees. Our Intercultural and Global Ministries area has continued the increase in emphasis on intercultural opportunities within Canada. Historically we have underperformed in terms of our engagement with indigenous peoples, the Quebecois, and many of the newcomer groups to Canada. The Intercultural Engagement Team is looking at ways to improve those interactions, as well as continuing engagement overseas, including our program in International Child Care and a stronger relationship with Tearfund.

Task Forces: At the 'Gathering' in April, we outlined three task forces and subsequent activities in three areas of growing concern to our movement. Although we are an egalitarian denomination, fully endorsing women in ministry, we have not been as supportive of women in this role as we should have been. One task force sought to identify how we could improve that support, and the BOA is taking action on their recommendations. Although we recently affirmed our doctrinal stance on LBGTQ, we did not address how to best demonstrate Christ's love for that community and their families. This is a very real issue for more of our church communities than we have probably acknowledged. The report of the task force on this topic is directing our exploration of these questions. Finally, we have a task force gathering information on Racial Justice and Ethnic Equity and how the FMCiC has been, and should be, engaged in this area (remember we are *free* to pursue social justice).

Covid: It is safe to say that no one was prepared for the changes required to face the covid pandemic. Early in the shut down decisions had to be made quickly and alternative arrangements made for many functions. The NLT and staff developed ways to reduce or

eliminate the need work in the office. As for so many of us, working from home and virtual meetings became part of everyday life. The BOA had held some topical meetings by telephone or video conferencing, but had never held a major meeting, typically lasting two days, using a virtual system. We are doing that now, and have become comfortable with such discussions. However, it remains to be seen how this experience impacts our future normal. The same can be said for General Conference itself. Our staff have led us in the development and use of a system to present motions, debate, and hold votes. However, our sense of comradeship and ability to develop new relationships among our ministers and lay delegates remain a question. The challenge in the next term will be to combine our past and present methods into the new future.

The Board: Our board members are not there to represent their home church, rather to determine what is best for the movement. We each face the challenge of setting our own local church outside our meetings and identifying with the whole. During this term we have prayed for each Free Methodist church in Canada. We have attempted to have a BOA member attend each of the Regional Gatherings. We began the term with a diverse group of members, with representation of lay vs ministerial, regional, gender, racial, and linguistic differences. The balance was not perfect, but many voices were present. Some attrition occurs in all boards and, in this case, with a fourth year added to our term, it was greater than normal. Restoring the balance of diversity is an opportunity for each session of General Conference. We implemented a supportive appraisal of each board member during this term, which proved to be a very positive team-building activity. I want to thank all of the board members for their service and wish the incoming board, both continuing and new members, an affirming experience over the next three years.

Thank you again for giving myself and each of the board members the opportunity to serve the church in this way. Our thanks to Bishop Cliff, Mark, Jared and Marc for their leadership to the FMCiC and to the many committee members and staff who have contributed to our movement during this term.