

TO BREAK EVERY YOKE

by John Hay, Jr.

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? -- Micah 6:8, NASB

"Every church seeking justice and showing mercy to the poor and disenfranchised"
--from "Profile of a Healthy Church," Free Methodist Mission Statement, 2003

As a local pastor and participant in Wesleyan/holiness movement ecclesiology near the beginning of the 21st century, this is my question: "*What place ought 'doing justice' to have in the common ministry life of a Free Methodist believer, pastor, and congregation?*" I explore this question in this paper and live it in my active life as a pastor. It should not be quickly or easily answered, for the conclusion determines whether or not 'doing justice' will have a greater or lesser place in preaching, planning, resource allocation, servant leadership, community engagement, and volunteer investment and deployment in a local setting.

"What place ought 'doing justice' to have in the common ministry life of a Free Methodist believer, pastor, and congregation?" However difficult the question, *it should be answered*—with conviction and subsequent action. If it is determined that 'doing justice' should have only a secondary place in a believer, a pastor, and local congregational life, then let us get on with what it is felt that this branch of the body of Christ is supposed to be doing and developing at local levels, and let us fan the flame of 'doing justice' that we feel is more appropriately located outside the parish setting. If it is determined, however, that 'doing justice' should have a more central place in the life of believers, pastors, and local congregations, then the urgency of pressing Biblical justice issues in contemporary American society and on the global stage compels us to engage unhesitatingly, wholeheartedly, and unflinchingly.

Based on a 145-year history of published books, periodicals, articles, Conference minutes and an ever-evolving *Book of Discipline*, it's clear that 'doing justice' has robust meaning and practice among Free Methodists, particularly in the years before the onset of the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy. The abolition of slavery and open access to—if not outright preference for—the poor are two justice issues that are part and parcel with the formation of the Free Methodist Church in 1860. Early Free Methodists advocated intensively and insistently for the freedom of all human beings and free access for the poor at every level of the church. A continuing thread of emphasis on seeking justice has been maintained as an important descriptor in official Free Methodist documents

and periodicals up to the present. Granted, this thread has been sometimes Spartan. For instance, new Free Methodists being oriented to membership with the 1978 book, *Belonging!*, would have had little inkling that doing justice was a part of the denomination's history or current interest. But any pastor reading the 1998 edition of the *Pastor's Handbook* would be moved by the passion for justice expressed in a 12-point statement co-authored by Bishop Gerald Bates and Harold Olver titled "A Social Urban and Ethnic Agenda for the Free Methodist Church in the Nineties." Most recently, the 2003 denomination-wide mission statement includes in the local profile of a healthy congregation: "Every church seeking justice and showing mercy to the poor and disenfranchised." There is no question: the history and challenge of 'doing justice' is well-embedded in the denominational DNA. The precedents and practices of 'doing justice' are ample. The more pressing question, to me, is this: what range and in what manner should 'doing justice' have in the life a believer, pastor, and local congregation as we move into the 21st century?

While my inclination is to assert that 'doing justice' should have a more central place in my life as a believer, my leadership as a pastor, and our common life as a Free Methodist congregation, it seems to me that explicit acts of 'doing justice' are currently more exceptional and set apart from the spiritual disciplines and service priorities of most Wesleyan/holiness believers, pastors, and congregations. This heightens the urgency and complexity of the question.

Could it be that we know justice is *not* being done and we know that it *should* be done but that we don't believe it is the role of the individual believer, local pastor, or local community of faith to be about 'doing justice' as a matter of principle or priority? Perhaps we believe justice should be done, but that more important than 'doing justice' is church growth, evangelism, conversion, discipleship, and membership development. Will we 'do justice' after we get these other ministry priorities well underway? Will we get around to it? Do we feel that adequate justice is being done through these other priorities? Or do we leave 'doing justice' to specialized ministries within our congregations, to organizations represented in the Association of Human Service Ministries (AHSM) of the Free Methodist Church, to para-church organizations, to political influence groups supposedly acting in the best interests of Christianity, or to secular justice advocacy groups? In other words, do we believe that 'doing justice' is a specialized ministry and not a central imperative for our local believers, pastors, and congregations?

Or, do we follow what seems to have become the dominant practice of most Wesleyan/holiness believers, pastors, and congregations (following the lead of many contemporary

evangelical churches): revert to letting acts of charity, compassion, mercy, and philanthropy supplant or substitute for the Biblical mandate to 'do justice?' If it is appropriate to 'show mercy' in parish ministry, why is it not equally appropriate to 'do justice' in this setting? Are we satisfied to provide local, national, and international relief for the oppressed and support philanthropic care for those who are repeatedly wounded by society's injustices, or shall we also engage the imperative of Isaiah 58: *"loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke," "set the oppressed free and break every yoke," "do away with the yoke of oppression," "spend ourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed?"*

CLARIFYING THE QUESTION

I have found Harvie Conn's definition of evangelism most helpful as I reflect on ministry as a Wesleyan/holiness pastor in an urban setting. Conn says, emphatically, "evangelism is preaching grace and doing justice." This combination, which Conn likens to two oars necessary to row a boat upstream, is reflected in Wesley's Methodists and in early Free Methodism. *"What place ought 'doing justice' to have in the common ministry life of a Free Methodist believer, pastor, and congregation?"* If we can clarify what 'doing justice' means, maybe we have a better opportunity to assess its historic place in Free Methodism and in local Free Methodist ministry today. Here are some biblical and theological underpinnings that help me focus the terms and question.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS ON 'DOING JUSTICE'

Biblically, Isaiah 58 goes a long way to contextually define 'doing justice.' Here, as in most other Old Testament references, justice is about fairness for the oppressed, right relationships in the marketplace, remuneration for inequitable treatment, and opportunity to stand on common ground. While the later Greek terms of justice are more legally defined, these earlier Hebrew understandings of justice are more about relationships between people. I am convinced that one challenge in 'doing justice' today are the overwhelmingly Greco-Roman interpretations of justice that dominate the Western worldview. But the words and imagery in Isaiah 58 is not legal or punitive. These images are unmistakable: slaves' chains are to be loosed and slaves emancipated; people treated like oxen under a tightly-tied yoke are to be released and every instrument of control, manipulation, and abuse broken. Message: *"do away with the yoke of oppression."* Application: slavery, human trafficking, permanent economic subjection, and advantage-taking of laborers is unjust and must cease. Isaiah's concern is that the people of God, if they are to be a people who reflect who God is and if they are to be *blessed* by God, will do business in radical distinction from what other people try to get by with.

Isaiah 58 also helps us delineate justice from mercy. Verse 6 calls for actions that permanently change social norms and reform economic practices. Verse 7 calls more for mercy and hospitality: "*share your food with the hungry,*" "*provide the poor wanderer with shelter,*" and clothe the naked. Acts of mercy are needed to relieve immediate crises and human indignities. Acts of justice are needed to prevent or rectify the crises and indignities that tend to be repeatedly visited upon vulnerable individuals and groups. Mercy and hospitality bring us into a relieving relationship with neighbors in distress, while seeking justice brings us into solidarity with oppressed neighbors and into a transformation of policies, practices, and structures that once directly harmed them and simultaneously forfeited the spiritual integrity of people called to reflect God's character.

There is a tendency to lump justice and mercy together and separate both from the message of salvation and call to kingdom living. Isaiah 58 is one of several Old and New Testament passages that will neither allow us to merge justice and mercy nor disconnect justice and mercy from salvation and faithfulness as a covenant people. Faith in God is connected to faithfulness to neighbors in our daily personal and marketplace practices. Personal salvation is linked to corporate, community, and international policies, with the bottom-line question being: "what does it do to the poor?"

The Bible's collective witness to 'doing justice' and the call to give attention to it were certainly on the minds, in the hearts, and evidenced in the actions of our theological and denominational forebears. Biblical references to justice were not something for academic debate and genteel discussion and then left for optional or occasional action. When read with an immediate awareness of the poor, oppressed, distressed, denied, marginalized, and disregarded, the Bible's many passages calling for justice in response to the poor, laborers, aliens, slaves, women, and prisoners became a prophetic testimony against the dominant culture and careless practices of the church. The Biblical witness to 'do justice' was read, proclaimed, and applied with a literalness and urgency that animated the Wesleys and, later, the Roberts and others. In the face of glaring injustices, early Methodist and early Free Methodist leaders saw God's Word being just as scandalized as were the poor. To ignore issues of social justice where they were clearly declared and previously judged in the Word of God was tantamount to rebellion against God.

THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF 'DOING JUSTICE'

Some theological historians have pointed out that our Wesleyan/holiness forebears may be considered less as reputable theologians and more as motivated ethical activists. While some theologians and historians laud the theological brilliance of Wesley and the 19th-century holiness

proclaimers, Donald Dayton (in "The Holiness Churches: A Significant Ethical Tradition") and Timothy Smith (in *Revivalism and Social Reform*) shine revealing light on the social and ethical impacts of these movements. As Wesleyans connected basically sound theology with pressing issues of social justice, new patterns of spiritual formation were developed and social renewal resulted.

One of my mentors, Wesley D. Tracy, taught me that the initial formation and application of core holiness theology must be understood within the context of social injustice that existed in England in the mid-18th century. Imagine the connection the Arminian teaching that *all may be saved* had on people in the slums and mining communities who had received the message by the dominant church that they were—as evidenced by their self-destructive behavior—predestined to hell. Imagine the connection John Wesley's preaching on *assurance* had on people made to fear daily for their very lives and livelihoods. Imagine the impact the focus on *adoption* had on those whose social standing was nonexistent. Imagine the impact of an ecclesiology that actualized the *priesthood of all believers*, regardless of formal training or official credentialing.

First among teachings that fed the "habits of the heart" of the early Methodists was the doctrine of Christian perfection. Imagine the hope for England's poor that was conveyed in Wesley's teaching that God's grace is sufficient to empower a person to live the fullness and integrity of life that God intends for him or her to live. That God is able to impart sin-defeating, heart-changing love and lead one by the Holy Spirit in a life-long relationship of being transformed into the likeness of Jesus was Good News, indeed, to Wesley's hearers. And when the possibility of being *personally* whole is raised and realized, then the possibility of a community or society being *corporately* whole—just, fair, equitable, what it is intended to be—is also raised. If it is possible at a personal level to love God completely and one's neighbor as oneself, this raises the possibility of glorifying God and loving neighbors together in a community and systems in which justice, mercy, and truth prevail over injustice, insensitivity, and corruption born of deception, relativism, cynicism and raw self-interest. Such is the optimism borne of grace.

Imagine the combination of these teachings woven together into the fabric of the early Methodist societies as living communities in witness to a world rife with sanctioned injustice and routine social oppression. Theologically speaking, injustice may well be the very irritant around which the pearl of holiness theology is formed. Given this formation, it would seem that through attempting to embody and bring about justice today the holiness churches may most brightly shine.

It is no mistake that the Wesley and the early Methodists saw so many people personally transformed and affected significant social reform within a generation. Reforms in England at the time are striking. Under the slogan "join hands with God to help a poor man live," Wesley and his spiritual descendants pushed through such laws as the Factory Acts, Miners Acts, and the Child Labor Laws. Methodists led in labor organizing. The Methodist emphases on education and economic opportunity were socially developmental: literacy, health education, family counsel, financial guidance, revolving loan funds, and small business incubators, along with an insistence on temperance, chastity, and personal integrity. In light of this, we begin to understand at least part of what Wesley meant when he said "there is no holiness but social holiness."

FREE METHODIST EXPRESSIONS OF JUSTICE

Likewise, a century later in America, it was no stretch of Biblical or theological application for B. T. Roberts and the Free Methodists to directly address human slavery and poverty. These injustices and others—such as the rights of women, the plight of farmers and unjust economic policies of the state—were not beyond the scope of core Christian experience, the church's concerns and the activities of its leaders. In his soon-to-be-released book, Howard Snyder demonstrates how clearly Roberts grasped the connection between heart holiness and social justice. He reflected it in the mainstream of his writing, speaking and organizing. Like other holiness groups, Free Methodists rallied around the often quoted statement of Phoebe Palmer: "Pentecost laid the axe at the root of social injustice." Dayton points out that holiness group involvement with the oppressed were "much more than just 'relief' efforts." Their contact with the poor led them "toward new social and political positions that favored the oppressed. Some," Dayton notes, "adopted various forms of social radicalism."

That Free Methodist Churches were "free" and particularly welcoming to the poor was a social justice expression in and of itself. This intentional and focused hospitality, following Biblical precedent and mandate, ran counter to the prevailing trend in urban mainline denominations at the time. What began as outreach became a matter of solidarity; what started as evangelistic fervor developed into distinctive patterns of discipleship, polity, advocacy, leadership style, and organizational ethos. Identity with the poor set the tenor and course for the denomination in profound ways for several generations.

The first generation of Free Methodism is particularly rich in examples of living the holy life through 'doing justice.' It is seen in their direct efforts to rectify injustices, establish institutions that

would counter or heal social evils, and writings and speeches to convince both Christians and a non-Christian public of the rationality and practicality of Biblically-defined justice. Beyond working to abolish slavery and opting for the poor, Roberts personally involved himself in the Farmers' Alliance, calling for farmers to organize together, influence legislators to repeal high tariffs on items farmers needed and to work to break up the monopolies that controlled prices at farmers' and workers' expense. Free Methodists, though deploring secret societies, made special provision for members to participate in labor unions. They also voted as a General Conference to stand against militarism and bore a witness for peace.

Free Methodists established schools, colleges, and seminaries that were envisioned to be models of Christian education that would develop leadership to guide the church and society to reflect more and more God's justice, mercy, and truth. Such institutions would always be accessible to the poor. Most of these primary, secondary, undergraduate, and graduate schools have not survived in the 146 years since, but some have, such as Greenville College, Spring Arbor University, Roberts Wesleyan University, and Seattle Pacific University.

The Free Methodist commitment to the poor was also expressed in a wide range of mercy- and relief-oriented activities and organizations. While Free Methodist works of mercy will be covered as another aspect of this symposium, it is important to note that the vigorous establishment of rescue missions, clinics and hospitals, orphanages, homes for unwed mothers, outreach to immigrants and other human services—both in North America and through world missions efforts—were an outworking of a faith orientation that took the Bible and Wesley's early Methodist principles regarding the believers' and churches' commitment to love and care for the poor quite seriously.

Roberts tried to influence his own church and the public at large through his writings in *The Earnest Christian* and a series of books written later in life. Of particular note are his efforts to persuade regarding the justice of ordaining women and reforming monetary policy. His little book *First Lessons on Money* (1886) offers insights into the founder's leadership on issues of markets, debt, and economic justice. For instance, Roberts disparages mergers and acquisitions for their negative impacts on workers and the market. "Monopolies," he says, "whatever may be their form, operate against the welfare of the community at large." He cautions against undue indebtedness at personal, corporate, and governmental levels. Regarding inherited money, Roberts declares that "our laws should make it difficult for one man to amass a vast fortune and keep it in his family from generation to generation." Regarding influence peddling, he says, "the people should see to it that

their representatives in Congress pass laws in *their* interest, and not in favor of the moneyed class and rich corporations to the injury of the community generally." He promotes "systematic benevolence" and quotes the enduring dictum of John Wesley: "Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can."

While my limited research cannot adequately answer the question of the extent to which 'doing justice' was incorporated into the weekly concerns of Free Methodist members, the practices and preaching of its pastors, and the priorities of its local congregations, it is difficult to read early Conference minutes, books by leaders, or peruse early editions of the *Book of Discipline* without being aware of a *milieu* in which 'doing justice' was in the center of heart-felt faith and at forefront of holiness-motivated activities. In numerous instances there is a blending of 'doing justice' and 'showing mercy,' as they often go hand in hand. Even so, there is no indication that 'showing mercy' was somehow separated from 'doing justice,' as if one were more or less important than the other or theologically or practically divisible.

HOW WE GOT FROM THERE TO HERE

So, how did we get from there to here? Most church historians link the demise of robust holiness church focus on 'doing justice' with the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy. This ecclesiastical conflict has defined ministry at global and local levels for nearly a century. Fundamentalism emerged in the early 1900's in reaction to a growing acceptance among American mainstream church leaders of some of the tenets of German higher criticism. Accumulatively, these assertions came to be called Modernism. Over against Modernism, Fundamentalism defended such Christian "fundamentals" as the inerrancy of the Scriptures, virgin birth and deity of Jesus, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection, and authenticity of Jesus' miracles. But Fundamentalism not only countered liberal theological perspectives, it successfully redefined the sole mission of "Bible-believing" groups to be individual soul salvation. Fundamentalism reduced 'doing justice' and social action to a secondary—even unnecessary—place in the theological and ecclesiastical equation. With the rise of Fundamentalism came an environment of polarization and "guilty by association" regarding social justice efforts. As so-called Modernist churches and organizations believed in and championed social justice efforts (usually out of a different orientation than Fundamentalist-aligned churches), a Fundamentalist-aligned church or church-based organization's involvement in social justice advocacy was tantamount to "liberalism." Because of the labeling reaction to "the social gospel," most holiness church-based efforts at 'doing justice' and

writings of leaders advocating for the rights of the poor and oppressed were gone within a generation.

The extent of the impact of the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy is a subject beyond this presentation. Paul M. Bassett charts the impact of Fundamentalism specifically on holiness churches in articles such as "The Fundamentalist Leavening of the Holiness Movement." Fundamentalism, for the good it accomplished, brought with it a suspicion of any church or Christian organization not explicitly focused on individual soul salvation, a proclivity for social and political disengagement, and a reduction of social action and outreach to soul-saving charity. Even today, the measure of a so-called "successful" ministry of outreach to the poor or effort for social justice is evaluated primarily by how many conversions it counts. Do church growth experts or holiness leaders evaluate in the terms Jesus used when asked about the legitimacy of his ministry: "the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor" (Matthew 11:5)?

I am convinced that a continuing obstacle to whole-hearted Free Methodist involvement in 'doing justice' is a passive acquiescence to Fundamentalist-based descriptions of salvation. Reticence about the extent to which we should be 'doing justice' is rooted in a deformed soteriology. We inadvertently buy in to a form of metaphysical dualism: souls are for saving; bodies are dispensable. The soul is perfectible; creation is irreparably corrupted. The soul is eternal; substance must pass away. Exclusive focus on singular soul salvation eclipses the real physical, material, social, and structural surroundings in which the soul temporarily lingers. Do we really believe this? Where is our understanding of the Kingdom of God? Does not Biblical integrity call upon us address and correct this dichotomy? Would it not be more historically faithful to our Wesleyan and holiness heritage to embody ministry expressions and proclamation that refuse to truncate people, divide the Gospel message, devalue God's creation and redemptive intention, or sideline the Kingdom of God?

All focus on 'doing justice' was not completely lost in the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy. Fundamentalism did not leaven the *whole* lump. There is ample indication that Free Methodists did not abandon social justice issues entirely. *The Book of Discipline* is a living document in witness to enduring emphases and new social realities. It indicates that while North American Free Methodists modified some statements as they moved toward a predominantly mainstream, middle class orientation, they never retracted their historic stands on most social justice issues. It reveals a special care for the spirit and approach to how issues of social injustice are addressed, staying close

to early Methodist and holiness roots. Of particular interest to me is the firm stand against racial bias that Free Methodists took at the hour of the nation's greatest social crisis of the 20th century. Robert Wall points out that "when conservative Christianity had distanced itself from the civil rights movement...as being politically liberal, Free Methodists took the remarkable action of affirming the equal worth of all persons and pledged 'a determined effort to eliminate the unchristian practice of racial discrimination and injustice.'" This 1964 *Book of Discipline* statement against racial bias during the heat of the American civil rights movement is a tribute to faithfulness to its theology and history as well a mark of leadership in its ecclesiastical fellowship. Perhaps this was a turning point or a moment of awakening to reclaim a heritage. Since then, Free Methodists have voted to ordain women and caringly address a widening range of justice concerns. While Free Methodists may not have been as directly engaged in 'doing justice' or in a cutting-edge role as the first generation, there are more than residual vestiges to point to and build on for the future.

IF WE ARE DOING JUSTICE, WHAT KIND OF JUSTICE ARE WE DOING?

Some will argue that today we, in fact, 'do justice' quite routinely. It is true that much could be made of preventive (dare I say 'pre-emptive?') work against injustice which vigorous inreach and outreach ministries of a local congregation offer. Who can adequately measure the redemptive care and positive spiritual formation impacts that Sunday School, Christian Life Clubs, addictions recovery, Bible study groups, cell groups, counseling, solid Biblical preaching, and compassionate outreach achieve in individual, family, congregational, and community lives? Daily and weekly Free Methodists are calling people to live as salt and light in the world, equipping them to stand against temptation and evil, and forming them to be people who are not conformed to the world but who may well transform it. But all our positive, formative, preventive action does not reduce in the least the question of our action or inaction in the face of outright injustice in our community, society, and world.

Perhaps part of our conversation should focus on the kind of justice we Free Methodists are currently prone to do. It seems rather obvious that over the past 25 years, Free Methodist members and pastors have been and are involved in the struggle against abortion, the provision of positive alternatives for pregnant women, and other "culture war" issues related to public education, sexuality, bioethics, and court decision-making. On the one hand it appears that "culture war" issues have been framed and promoted completely outside Free Methodism, wed to partisan politics, and accepted by our members, pastors, and congregations. On the other hand it appears that historic concerns of Free Methodists and others have been co-opted and distorted by political influence

groups. As far as I am concerned, the wedding of partisan-motivated issue advocacy to denominational identity should be resisted at all levels in Free Methodist ecclesiology and practice, both now and in the future. As we consider involvement in justice issues, we should be asking: who is initially and ultimately being served by these priorities and passions? Is the manner in which this issue is being approached and addressed reflective of the Spirit of holiness or the heritage in which we serve? And, are we thinking globally, or even beyond our own socio-economic group or consumer desires, when we vote or act?

One step further, let us ask: who is setting the social justice agenda? How are some issues deemed more important than others? It appears that current evangelical issues overlook and/or bypass core concerns that originally motivated Methodism and defined early Free Methodism: poverty, human slavery, and feminism. Let us ask ourselves: why has poverty and slavery, though these are the two gravest global issues, not even registered on the agenda of either major American political party in years? Why are we not alarmed at this? And what might we do in concert with other branches of the Body of Christ to focus on these global crises, even if national or Western political will regarding them is currently all but nonexistent?

WHY SHOULD FREE METHODISTS GIVE MORE ATTENTION TO 'DOING JUSTICE?'

I must summarize and move toward applications. Why should we give more attention to 'doing justice?' Consider these four reasons why Free Methodist believers, pastors, and local congregations should move 'doing justice' toward the center of our lives and practice:

1. The Scriptural bearing, reason, tradition, and experience of our early Methodist and early Free Methodist heritage make an unmistakable appeal to us to 'do justice' as core to Free Methodist spiritual formation.

2. The de-formations of Protestant evangelical spirituality under the influence of Fundamentalism and the co-optation of evangelical social justice concern by partisan politics call for a course correction and a reclaiming of Biblical and holiness-heritage expressions of 'doing justice.' The question might be put this way: can we, with integrity to our history, continue to claim to be Free Methodist or Wesleyan/holiness if we do not move 'doing justice' toward the center of our lives, pastoral leadership, and congregational priorities?

3. The injustice issues at play in a rapidly globalizing economic and international reality call for a Biblically-based, heart-clarifying and discerningly-sophisticated assessment, advocacy, and action. Poverty today is not simply a matter of a lack of local resources or drought or flood, it is increasingly a matter of global market forces at work demanding ever-cheaper labor and multi-national corporate control (in the name of “democracy” and “free market economy”) over local food supplies, resources, and production. Human trafficking for labor exploitation and the sex trade is as related to market irresponsibilities as any other issue. The impact of Western consumerism as the highest good is driving the exploitation of children, women, and laborers in ways that begin to mirror 18th-century England. And there is perhaps no theological and ecclesiastical entity that connects so closely with addressing poverty and human slavery as Free Methodism.

4. The clarity of Jesus in his announcement of the kingdom of God calls for ‘doing justice’ as a central part of every disciple’s and congregation’s life—including a Free Methodist disciple’s life and congregation’s life together. Jesus called his followers and the church to enact the Kingdom’s values, practices, and priorities—even in the face of derision, “impracticality,” and death—as if the future depended on it.

THE FUTURE SHAPE OF ‘DOING JUSTICE’ IN FREE METHODISM

So, for the sake of possibility, let us imagine placing the doing of justice more centrally in our lives as Free Methodist believers, pastors, and congregations. What does one’s weekly devotional life include? As a pastor, what teaching priorities or investments of time do I make? As a congregation, what does our “ministry menu” or thrust of service include? Where do we begin? What are we like? In the spirit of the optimism of grace, consider the shape and indications of a Free Methodism that embraces ‘doing justice’ more centrally:

We stop convincing ourselves that justice issues are too messy and complicated to get involved in. We seek to fully understand the nature of particular injustices. We begin to trace their sources in irresponsible or sinful values, actions, approaches, alliances, or habits at personal, corporate, social, and/or national levels.

We no longer just hope somebody else is doing something about poverty or human trafficking. We identify how Free Methodists and others are engaging in both relief and redemptive counter to these injustices. We support this work financially and prayerfully. We identify corrupting

activities and also commend best practices to our representative church, government, corporate, and community leaders at all levels.

We incorporate 'doing justice' into the center of our descriptions and proclamations of salvation and discipleship. We reclaim Biblical guidance regarding 'doing justice' and forge a fresh Free Methodist spiritual formation with this mandate and heritage at heart. We both preach grace and do justice in our evangelism and discipleship. We incorporate "justice, mercy, and truth" into our Christian education, discipleship, leadership development, worship, and group life curriculum. Justice is not something talked about one Sunday of the year; it is woven into the texture of our life together.

We do not accept at face-value any politically-motivated or fear-based description or solution to social problems or injustices. We exercise a deeper sense of spiritual discernment and broader sense of social responsibility than can be reduced to sound-bytes, slogans, campaigns, and election-cycle political interest action.

We are educated and engaged regarding what is being accomplished within the Body of Christ regarding historically-core Free Methodist concerns--poverty, human slavery, and women's issues (for starters). We encourage involvement in local and international initiatives like the Christian Community Development Association, the Blueprint to End Homelessness, and the International Justice Mission.

We take a global outlook and approach to 'doing justice.' We move beyond Americanism for the sake of authentic Christianity and our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. While we address specifically American justice challenges like homelessness, affordable housing, livable wages, affordable health care, and access to quality public education at all levels, we do so within a global perspective. North American and Western lifestyles and choices are linked with the prevention or propagation of global poverty, human trafficking, fair labor, women's rights, and economic domination.

We openly commit to solidarity with the poor and the plight of the poorest of the poor in our society and around the world. As best we can, we look at the world through the eyes and experiences of marginalized people and groups. We no longer insulate ourselves from contact with the poor; instead we look for ways to engage the poor with meaning, linking our own

lives inseparably with theirs. We visit, develop relationships, and become increasingly aware of the immediate struggles of neighbors. We give more weight to their testimonies and experiences than to politicians and news media sources. We work with neighbors to understand and address poverty.

As we act for relief of the poor and vulnerable, we link relief with reform and establish just structures, policies, and opportunities whenever possible. As we give ourselves to salvage lives that have been swept over the proverbial waterfall, just as readily we move expediently to address what has caused people and groups to be swept downstream in the first place. We treat symptoms and we address sources of harm. To modify a well-worn adage: give people fish, teach them how to fish, guarantee their right to fish, and do all in your power to insure that the water upstream is not being polluted so that they can actually eat and sell the fish they catch.

We are as redemptively involved in our communities for social reform as we are in our congregations for spiritual formation and revival. Free Methodist spiritual formation encourages active neighborly as well as service to support congregational life. Volunteers serve local justice concerns in balance with congregational outreach ministries. We see the two as complementary, not competitive or exclusionary.

We act as responsible investors in global market dynamics. If we invest in the stock market or benefit from stock market investments (such as through tax-sheltered retirement accounts), we do so, as much as possible, without blindly contributing to or benefiting from unjust labor or unethical business practices. We refrain from investments that promote violence, war-making, addictions, or unfair trade and labor practices. We examine local labor and market practices of companies in which we invest and call for social responsibility. When stock-market and multi-national corporate activity is identified as rapacious, it is called to accountability and change.

We act as responsible consumers of global products, resources, and services. We see a higher value than the lowest possible retail price tag. We challenge our habits of purchasing and consuming whenever it is known to directly or indirectly feed injustices for laborers and the poor around the world.

We refute violence against human beings in all its forms. We speak prophetically to militarism and the violence of unjust war, to be sure. We also reject of the language and norms of violence in our society and world. Alternatively, we engage in, pursue, and encourage methods of

conflict resolution and shalom-bearing that are a positive testimony to the power of a holy God whose way is love.

We address justice issues in the Spirit and manner of perfect love. Even as we identify injustice, seek to relieve the oppressed, call perpetrators of injustice to accountability, and work for reform, we do so with the redemption of the perpetrating individual or organization in focus. Our very approach and spirit is the key to transformative outcomes. As one early Free Methodist put it: "to find the remedy is easy; successfully to apply it involves the principle of holiness."

We show by example and precedent what is possible when people of heart-felt faith and vision creatively engage the call to 'do justice.' We demonstrate the promise of restorative justice initiatives. We model best practices in socially redemptive ministries and volunteer services. We are proactive instead of reactive. We exemplify to the best of our ability, acting with all the light that we currently, collectively have, the principles of the kingdom of God. We live earnestly the petition we constantly make: "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

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