



Affiliation with the Free Methodist Church - USA

Welcome



Thank you for your interest in affiliation with the Free Methodist Church - USA.

This information is intended for interested congregations or groups to prayerfully consider the steps required for affiliation.

The Free Methodist Church is open to pastors and churches who are interested in affiliation. Like all covenant relationships, they should not be entered into lightly. In the pages that follow, you will find information about our Affiliation Process: a four-phase journey to a solid and healthy transition blessed by God and affirmed through steps of the process.

For each pastor, church planter, or congregation desiring to affiliate, variations in each affiliate's realities will shape each scenario. It is our desire to help you initially identify the standard waypoints that guide the Affiliation journey.

Our view of church growth is to see lives and communities transformed, and to seek God's coming Kingdom. Though we welcome affiliates, our focus is as it should be – rooted in evangelism and discipleship. We seek to see Christians disciplined to become holy servants of God.

Is affiliation with the Free Methodist Church a good fit for your congregation or group? We invite you to begin and engage the entire process prayerfully, inviting the Holy Spirit to speak, lead, and guide you.

We look forward to joining you in prayer and investigating affiliation with you.

Sincerely,

Linda Adams, Keith Cowart, Matt Whitehead

The Board of Bishops of the Free Methodist Church - USA



Our Mission:

Love God - Love People - Make Disciples

Drawn from Jesus' Great Commandment and Great Commission, we seek to fulfill the commands of Christ through earnest and sincere love for God, holy love freely given to all people, and discipling the nations for His glory.

Our Vision:

To bring wholeness to the world through healthy biblical communities of holy people multiplying disciples, leaders, groups and churches



Perspective:

How the Church Grows

We know that the church grows by conversion, biology, and transfer. Every healthy church experiences some of each. Transfer is generally not sought as the primary form of growth as it is a shifting of the body of Christ rather than expansion of it. Nevertheless, embracing others is something we are willing and prepared to investigate.

More and more congregations and entire groups find themselves with a desire to affiliate with the Free Methodist Church. The reasons are many. They include:

- Independent group(s) or church(es) seeking covering and accountability.
- Small group(s) or church(es) seeking to be part of something larger and/or global.
- Dissatisfaction (theological or praxis incongruence) with their own governing body/denomination.
- Rapidly expanding group(s) or church(es) often in the developing world with limited infrastructure or leadership to maintain healthy growth.
- Group(s) or church(es) seeking affiliation for the sake of joining ministries (church planting, human trafficking ministry, missions programs, etc.).
- Attractiveness of Wesleyan theology and practice.
- Need (often financial).
- Validation and/or protection.

Growing world Christianity, increasing denominational theological and praxis divides, and a decades-long emergence of unaffiliated, independent churches have caused many groups and churches to seek affiliation with likeminded movements with whom they share compatible commitments and cultural DNA. Yet some want to affiliate for less noble purposes – prestige, material growth, leaders seeking support and protection from membership or personal failure, etc.

Regarding affiliation, we seek to know and understand the reasons. In so doing we want first to ensure that transfer is essential and to confirm that through a witness of the Holy Spirit in prayer. Secondly, we want to learn of the health and life of the group or congregation, and finally, to sense an excellent fit for ministry and accomplishing the mission of Jesus in our world today.



Posture:

Who We Are – The Free Methodist Church

A People Guided by Passion

This passion is clearly expressed in our mission, vision, core values, and strategic initiatives as expressed in the booklet “Whole on Mission.” These documents help keep our church united and focused on the essentials of the FMC within the framework of the universal church.

A People Devoted to the Authority of God’s Word

Because we believe the Bible is the trustworthy record of God’s revelation, and completely truthful in all it affirms, it holds authority over us in all matters. On a practical level, this means that we must orient our lives and the life of the church around God’s Word — not the other way around. If a doctrine is clear in Scripture, we do not debate its legitimacy, but prayerfully consider how we must respond in faithful obedience.

A Holy People with a Transformational Mission

The Free Methodist Church is comprised of people deeply committed to scriptural holiness. However, you may be surprised to know that we do not align with a legalistic, “bunker mentality” that insulates the church from the world. In 1995, our leadership courageously called our people to a renewed passion for our mission in the world *and* for personal holiness that grows out of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Our membership covenant reflects this passion by calling our people to commit to a life of transformational discipleship. The people of the Free Methodist Church are therefore deeply committed both to scripturally holy lives and equally devoted to progressive strategies for taking that gospel to a lost and broken world.

A Leadership-Friendly Environment

In addition to calling the church to a renewed sense of mission and a more biblical view of discipleship, we are committed to removing unnecessary impediments, identifying desired outcomes and strategic priorities, and clearing the way for Spirit-led and missiological ministries, systems, and structures. To put it simply, we say this: “Placing **mission** ahead of method, our pastors and churches are **free** to strategize and minister in ways which fulfill our **expected outcomes**.”

A People with A Heart for the Kingdom

While we greatly value our denominational connection, Free Methodists recognize that our ultimate loyalty and devotion is to the Kingdom of God. This conviction permeates everything we do as Free Methodists and opens the door for opportunities to partner with and learn from denominations and ministries outside the FMC.



A Small Denomination Compared to Many

The Free Methodist Church – USA is smaller in size than many other denominations – particularly in the Southeast and Midwest. We have 856 worshipping congregations in the United States organized into 25 Annual Conferences. There are some notable advantages with a smaller denomination, including greater flexibility, a more personal connection with leadership, more openness to partnerships outside the FMC, and the ability to more readily adjust course when the Spirit leads.

Diverse Congregational Ministries, Sizes, and Experiences

The richness of our congregations is found in their diversity of location, ministry context, size, and experiences in worship. The average FM church in the U.S. has a worship attendance of 116 with both significantly larger and smaller congregations. Free Methodists minister to specific audiences such as one congregation that targets inner-city poverty and substance abuse, another to suburban families, others to rural farmers, and yet others to urban professionals and everywhere in between. That is not to say we do not have our challenges, but the plus side of them is that our leadership is confronting those issues and is highly motivated to cultivate church health in every context.

A Denomination That Appoints our Clergy

Pastors of Free Methodist churches who are ordained are called elders, and our denomination appoints its pastors. However, our system is collaborative with a preference for longer appointments. Generally, moves are only initiated with the agreement of the pastor, church, or both. Our leadership structure is a modified episcopal system with bishops as our lead elders, then superintendents who oversee elders appointed to local churches. It is important to know that the FMC does not guarantee appointments, nor does it have minimum salaries guarantees. We would not make these kinds of clergy-guarantees even if we had the resources to do so. We are not convinced such guarantees lead to more fruitful ministries. Our most recent *Book of Discipline*, our denomination's website, and superintendents can provide more information about leadership in Free Methodist churches.

A Denomination with Lean Organizational Structures

The FMC is a very lean organization. We only have three U.S. bishops, 24 superintendents, and very few boards and agencies. Without question, a lack of abundant resources is a factor contributing to this reality. However, the bent of the FMC is toward a relatively lean organization, regardless of the available resources. The FMC believes the denomination should serve the local church, not the other way around. It is not our aim to become a top-heavy, multilayered, boards/agency-driven denomination, but one that is committed to the local church as the primary means through which our mission is accomplished.



Polity:

The 2019 Book of Discipline and Affiliation

The *Book of Discipline* (BOD) is authoritative in the FMC. The BOD is “a contemporary expression of how this part of the Body of Christ both inspires and organizes itself for effective ministry under the direction of the Holy Spirit, as together with other Christian traditions we live and serve our Lord in the neighborhoods of our world.” (*Book of Discipline* Foreword)

The FMC *Book of Discipline* outlines the affiliation process as a means for independent congregations or congregations from existing denominations to become part of the FMC.

Affiliate Congregations

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- A. Congregations established outside of Free Methodist sponsorship and wishing to become part of the denomination may enter as Affiliate Congregations.
- B. Authority to Recognize. A conference superintendent, with the concurrence of the conference Administrative Committee, may receive a congregation in an affiliate relationship when:
 - 1. the members of the congregation have received adequate orientation to the doctrine, organization, and mission of the Free Methodist Church;
 - 2. a document of affiliation has been signed by the governing board of the congregation, the superintendent, and representatives of the conference, affirming the Articles of Religion and the mission statement of the Free Methodist Church and describing mutual responsibilities; and
 - 3. the group is incorporated or organized under state law and it is duly authorized to transact business in the state where it is located;
 - 4. the members have given public joint assent to the document of affiliation and questions for church membership. The requirement to incorporate or organize under state law is applicable to churches in the United States. For new churches of mission origin, we seek to relate to governmental authorities in ways consistent with the church’s ultimate allegiance to the mission of Jesus Christ and its respect for governmental authorities.
- C. Accountability and Responsibility. The pastor and board of the affiliate church shall meet periodically (at least twice a year) with the conference superintendent or designated liaison to review and strengthen the connectional relationship and shall participate in conference fellowship, mentoring, and reporting procedures. The pastor and board shall consult with the Ministerial



Appointments Committee of the conference regarding any proposed changes in pastoral leadership during affiliate status.

- D. Membership. An affiliate congregation may receive members in all relationships and report them in the same manner as societies.
- E. Financial Matters.
 - 1. An affiliate congregation is encouraged to contribute generously to conference and denominational ministries as the first step towards full participation in these responsibilities.
 - 2. Staff members are eligible but not required to participate in the denominational pension program during affiliate status if an alternate retirement plan is already in effect.
 - 3. Those churches who hold property at the time they join the Free Methodist Church may be given the option by the Board of Bishops, with legal counsel, whether or not to adopt the trust clause for their existing property. Denominational assistance for capital improvement shall be in the form of loans repayable if the church chooses not to become a Free Methodist society.
- F. Local Organization. The governing board of an affiliate congregation shall be guided by the Book of Discipline and the mission of the Free Methodist Church in its decisions and the development of new ministries but may retain its existing bylaws until recognition as a society occurs.
- G. Duration. The normal duration of this relationship shall not exceed three years from the adoption of the document of affiliation. At the end of this period the congregation would become a society, terminate the affiliate relationship or request the conference to grant an extension of time for clarification and development of denominational relationships.
- H. Conference Relationship. An affiliated congregation shall be represented in the annual conference by an honorary delegate who shall have a voice but no vote.

Applying this polity, the following pages outline key points during the affiliation process.



Affiliation: *An Overview*

PHASE ONE: Exploratory Phase

The first step for those seeking affiliation with the Free Methodist Church is that of exploration. This includes:

- Communication: Establish a connection with the World Ministries Center of the Free Methodist Church and the Board of Bishops Office.
- Investigation: Look into available information about the Free Methodist Church at our website – <https://fmcusa.org>
- Introduction: A meeting of Free Methodist leaders and leaders from the affiliating congregation or group will take place. At this meeting the discussion will include specific topics such as:
 - Doctrine of the FMC
 - Organizational Structure of the FMC (*Book of Discipline*)
 - The Mission, Vision, and Strategies of the Free Methodist Church
 - Annual Conferences of the FMC and Meeting with the Overseeing Superintendent(s)
 - The FMC Ordination and Appointment Processes
 - Pastoral Pension Program
 - Question and Answer Time

PHASE TWO: Decision Phase

In the decision phase, the congregation or group desiring to affiliate with the Free Methodist Church processes all the information gathered during the exploratory phase to reach a point of decision to affiliate or not to affiliate. Churches will vary in their procedures for arriving at the decision. FMC leaders may be called upon to answer questions or provide input during this phase.

During the Decision Phase, here are other ongoing objectives:

- Continue in fervent prayer, listening for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in all matters.
- Allow time for relationship development.
- Both the FMC and the affiliating congregation or group attend one another's meetings.
- Allow time for ongoing, full disclosure from both parties.
- Seek to understand motives and compatibility fully and completely.
- Allow time for local church leadership to inform congregational leadership and denominational leadership fully and to be informed fully as to the realities of changing affiliation.



- Draft the transitional affiliation document(s) and allow thorough time for review.

Once a vote of the affiliating congregation or group has reached adequate consensus, mutual agreements have been reached, and all hearts are clear through prayer, the Affiliation Phase begins.

PHASE THREE: Affiliation Phase

The affiliation relationship officially begins when church leaders and the pastor join FMC Conference leaders and representatives to sign the **Affiliate Covenant (MOU)**. This is a public declaration that the church and the FMC are affiliated. The signing of the covenant agreement should be viewed much like an engagement ring. It declares intention while allowing both parties time to continue getting to know the other prior to making a lifelong commitment.

During the affiliation process, the following may take place:

- The pastor(s) can explore or potentially complete the ordination process with the FMC.
- Eligible pastor(s) may enroll in the FMC pension plan.
- Conference and church leaders will continue to meet every six months to review progress, discuss opportunities, and address concerns.
- The pastor and church leaders should attend FMC Annual Conference events such as clergy gatherings, training opportunities, and the Annual Conference gathering.
- The church will contribute financially to the support of the Annual Conference and denominational ministries as agreed upon in the MOU.

While there is no set time period for an affiliation, normally a decision is reached within three years of signing the Affiliate Covenant. When the decision for full membership has been reached by mutual decision of the FMC and the church or group, Phase Four completes the process.

PHASE FOUR: Full Membership

The Affiliation Process concludes when the church leaders and leaders of the FMC express mutual desire to welcome the church as a full member of the Free Methodist Church. The congregation would then be presented at the following Annual Conference gathering to be welcomed as a Free Methodist Society.



Prior to Changing Affiliation: *A Suggested Path*

Whether your church is unaffiliated (independent) or affiliated with a larger group or denomination, changing affiliation, or affiliating for the first time, is a decision that requires thoughtfulness, prayer, and strategic communication.

The following is a suggested path leading your church toward a decision to change your affiliation. While it is not intended to be an exhaustive list, we see these as significant markers along the path to a decision as important as affiliation.

1. Prayerfully discern and prioritize all reasons for changing affiliation. Engage with all leaders and key influencers in your congregation to focus in on the most crucial reasons. Evaluate these reasons and ask essential questions based on your situation. If you will be leaving one affiliation for another, then ask questions like, “Is this worth breaking fellowship with our current affiliation and changing?” “Can we do this in a way where we will ‘leave well’?” “How will our congregation respond to the change?”
2. Create a research team to gather and consider all legal requirements and considerations, denominational differences and requirements, pastoral appointment, employment and benefits. Consider at least two possible new denominations or organizations with which to affiliate.
3. Notify the leaders in your current denomination or group and engage conversations about your desire to affiliate with a different denomination. Listen carefully to all points offered from your leaders and ask to be heard on all viewpoints motivating your decision to change affiliation.
4. Invite representatives from those denominations or organizations with which you are considering affiliation to address the leadership team and governing church board, allowing for questions and answers.
5. Engage in fasting and prayer. Seek the Lord’s will regarding your calling and mission as a church to your community and ask for the Lord’s leading in regard to how any change in affiliation will help or hinder that mission.
6. Inform the congregation in a way that shares the process up to that point, engages conversation allowing for questions and answers, and prayerfully considers any resistance from the congregation. Present all legal, property, and pastoral implications that will take place should there be a change of affiliation.
7. If, after navigating through this process, reaffiliation is desired, then set a time for a congregational vote. In the time leading up to the vote, have copies of a complete plan for reaffiliation prepared for view by the congregation that addresses all legal, property, financial, and pastoral implications and changes.



For More Information about the Free Methodist Church

Our World Ministries Center

770 North High School Road, Indianapolis, IN 46214
317-244-3660 or 800-342-5531

Our Website

<https://fmcusa.org>

World Ministries Center Contact Directory: <https://fmcusa.org/about/contact-us>

Our Leaders: Bishops and Superintendents

<https://fmcusa.org/about/fmc-leaders>

Free Methodist Global Ministries

<https://fmcusa.org/go-global/fmg>

- Free Methodist World Missions
- SEED (Sustainable Empowerment through Economic Development)
- ICCM (International Child Care Ministries)
- Set Free Movement

Free Methodist Communications

- Light + Life Magazine: <https://lightandlifemagazine.com/>
- Light + Life Online Bookstore: <https://freemethodistbooks.com/>
- Amazon Bookstore for Light + Life: <https://www.amazon.com/lightandlife>
- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/fmcusa/>
 - Light + Life Conversations:
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/474947123124807/>

Free Methodist Foundation

<https://fmfoundation.org/>

Free Methodist 2015 Book of Discipline

Read online at: <https://fmcusa.org/resources/2015bodforeward>

Departments

- Ministerial Development and Credentialing: <https://leadership.fmcusa.org/>
- Association of Free Methodist Educational Institutions (AFMEI):
<https://fmcusa.org/ministries/educational-institutions>
- Marston Memorial Historical Center: <https://fmcusa.org/ministries/marston-memorial-historical-center>