



Executive Summary for a New Annual Conference in Michigan

Our History: A Multiplication Movement

- At inception (1860) the Free Methodist Church was positioned for multiplication.
- Within four years our growing Michigan Annual Conference was formed.
- By 1884 we were three Michigan Conferences rapidly multiplying churches.

Our Reality: Plateau and Decline

- Many of our churches are struggling to regain lost missional progress in advancing the gospel and making new disciples.
- All three Michigan conferences have experienced significant decline in churches, membership, and overall attendance.
- Fewer counties, cities and towns have a Free Methodist presence.
- To address these realities we urgently need strategic intervention.

Our Vision: Collaborate to Saturate

- A network building Spirit-fueled leaders who collaborate to saturate Michigan with the transforming love of Jesus.

Our Opportunity: United Missional Strategy

- Strengthening pastoral formation and leadership development.
- Releasing new leaders into the mission.
- Multiplying new congregations.
- Combining resources for greater Kingdom impact.



Envisioning a New Conference in Michigan

Welcome. You're invited to explore the formation of a *new*, state-wide conference in Michigan for the Free Methodist Church. The following document presented by the superintendents of the East Michigan, Southern Michigan, and North Michigan conferences, in conjunction with Bishop Kaye Kolde, provides some history of how we arrived at where we are today, the need for change, the rationale for change, and the benefits of change.

The Purpose of the Free Methodist Church Annual Conference Structure

"...the annual conference is the organization at the regional level that joins societies into a network. The annual conference ensures that pastors and congregations are counseled and encouraged, identifies those who are being called into the ordained ministry, and promotes and oversees church planting and evangelism." *Book of Discipline* paragraph 5000

Early formation of the Free Methodist Church in Michigan

In 1864, just four years after the formation of the Free Methodist denomination, the Illinois mission district sent E.P. Hart to Ida, Michigan, which led to the establishment of the *Michigan Conference* on June 22, 1866.

"On a wintry day in the middle of the Civil War, the Reverend E.P. Hart, sent by Free Methodism's founding father B.T. Roberts to begin a work in Michigan, stepped off a train in southeastern Michigan, his wife by his side. And on that 24th day of January in 1864, as Rev. and Mrs. Hart looked down on the bustling city of Ida - in those days a hub of commerce and industry because of the river, the railroad and the good drinking water...he led Free Methodism's sweep across Southern Michigan, passionately building the Kingdom, winning people to Christ and planting churches, like Johnny Appleseed planted trees, from Milan to Jackson, from Spring Arbor to Hillsdale, from Coldwater to Sherwood and to points beyond." (Written by Thomas Ramundo as an introduction to the book *Passionately Building the Kingdom*, by author Richard Roth, p. 9)

Envisioning a New Conference in Michigan



In those early years of rapid growth, ministers were stationed in the towns of Raisinville, Lambertville, Huron, Forrest, Ramson, Coldwater, VanBuren, Berry, and the States of Ohio and Indiana. The first FM church was built in Sherwood, Michigan, at this time.

- As more churches were multiplied, a new work in Coopersville, Michigan, was opened, which led to the establishment of the **North Michigan Conference** in 1876.
- In the 1870's, there were 535 members who regarded themselves as Free Methodist Christ-followers living in the State of Ohio. New houses of worship had been constructed, and preachers appointed. So, at the 14th Annual session of the Michigan Conference held in Holland, Ohio, the decision was made to create the **Ohio Conference**, which was organized in 1879.
- Because of the continued rapid growth of churches, the Michigan Conference launched a new annual conference called the **East Michigan Conference** in 1884.
- Subsequently, the Michigan Conference was renamed the **Southern Michigan Conference** in 1960.

In 18 short years, the Michigan Conference multiplied into three new annual conferences, which still exist today as the North Michigan, East Michigan, and Ohio conferences.

The Conditions Which Caused These Newly Formed Conferences

Organizing new conferences was necessary due to the rapid multiplication of new leaders and congregations. In fact, the Book of Discipline summarizes the historic logic of annual conference size as follows:

“Annual conferences are the normative Free Methodist organization at the regional level that provides for reasonable spans of care for ministers and congregations, as well as the structure for effective kingdom expansion.” *Book of Discipline* paragraph 200.A.

Historically, the cost associated with travel and the limitations of communication created significant challenges concerning the “span of care” a network could provide. The solution was to multiply new annual conferences to meet the need for oversight.

Envisioning a New Conference in Michigan



However, the limitations regarding 19th-century travel and communication are no longer true. The 21st century has afforded us new tools to engage in the work as defined by our *Book of Discipline*. Interstate highways, GPS, cell phones, email, virtual meetings, and the Internet have shrunk our world rapidly, making it possible to give missional oversight to larger regions and greater numbers of leaders and churches, thus reducing the redundancy of too many annual conferences which were historically needed and subsequently developed.

Since the factors that drove the formation of smaller geographic conferences in Michigan are no longer relevant, the Superintendents of the three Michigan conferences feel that it is time to reimagine a new, larger, more robust network to better serve our pastors and local churches.

Central to any change initiative of this magnitude involves answering the “why” before sharing the “what.”

Missional Advantages of a *New Conference*

Here are the missional reasons why we believe the formation of a new conference makes sense:

The formation of a new conference will grant us the ability to fulfill our mandate to strengthen pastoral formation and leadership development, release new leaders into the mission, multiply new congregations, and combine resources for greater Kingdom impact.

Strengthening pastoral formation and leadership development

- A new conference strengthens our ability to better resource pastoral leaders and local churches.
- A new conference will ensure that every pastoral leader under appointment is connected to Jesus and accountable to His mission through regional superintendents.
- A new conference gives us a more balanced and aligned superintendent team to bless our pastors and strengthen our churches.
- A new conference increases overall morale and encouragement among our leaders – the rising tide raises all the ships.

Envisioning a New Conference in Michigan



Releasing new leaders into the mission

- A new conference strengthens and enlarges our leadership pipeline.
- A new conference offers more options and greater flexibility in appointing the right pastors to the right churches throughout a larger network.
- A new conference creates a larger, stronger network, attracting more pastoral candidates for future recruitment.
- A new conference increases our ability to attract, appoint, and empower a rich diversity of new leaders, allowing us to reach new diverse populations of people, including next-generation leaders.

Multiplying new congregations

- A new conference will lead to a much-needed statewide multiplication vision. Currently, there are six million unreached people in Michigan. There are numerous counties in our state with no Free Methodist presence. Our vision would include geographic saturation of churches in our cities and counties.
- A new conference allows us the ability to form a new, stronger, and more adaptive missional strategy and church planting network to reach more people who are far from Jesus.
- A new conference would better steward our financial resources to fund a more comprehensive, focused, and robust multiplication plan.

Combining resources for a greater Kingdom impact

- A new conference strengthens overall financial stewardship associated with the redundant operations each conference currently performs.
- A new conference taps into the inherent genius within each conference. Each conference has specific strengths and weaknesses. We believe in the value of collective genius found within all three conferences being formed into one team.
- A new conference increases collaboration whereby we can accomplish more together. This would remove barriers to sharing best practices, systems, and structures, which would, in turn, strengthen the whole.
- A new conference allows us to “fill holes” that currently exist across the three conferences regarding leadership, resourcing, and multiplication. No single conference is “doing it all” or “running on all cylinders” due to limitations of size, resources, etc., and no single superintendent will possess the gifting or capacity to minister as effectively as a well-resourced conference team.

Envisioning a New Conference in Michigan



- A new conference with a critical mass of human and financial resources to create and empower teams will more fully align with the New Testament picture of leaders for the church. An apostolic superintendent working with a team (prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers) can take new ground as a well-resourced team is deployed. Together, they would work toward directing mission, providing order, identifying and developing leaders, resourcing, training and caring for pastors. All of this will benefit the local church.
- A new conference releases us from the past, often ineffective practices into a new Kingdom trajectory with an increased focus on the health and multiplication of all leaders and churches. Spiritually alive churches that possess an intentional focus on being disciples who make disciples will multiply leaders, ministries, and churches. A newly formed conference structure can support forward movement.
- We believe that a new conference grants us the opportunity to create a strategic “intervention point” that will address and remediate the ongoing decline taking place across all three conferences in our state.

When a conference provides invaluable coaching to a leader or produces an outstanding resource, or offers a significant training that really helps leaders or churches move forward, or when a crisis in a church occurs and the conference has someone to step into that situation with wisdom and skill, everyone will say, *It's good to belong!* We envision becoming a new conference where all our people recognize the blessing of belonging together because we believe that a stronger conference is a blessing to all leaders and congregations.

*Join Us in Prayerfully
Envisioning a New Conference in Michigan*