

The Free Methodist Church – USA

# 2019 Book of Discipline

“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock  
of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.  
Be shepherds of the church of God, which  
he bought with his own blood”  
(Acts 20:28).

# 2019 BOOK OF DISCIPLINE



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to or addicted by pornography. Therefore as Christians we abstain from pornography and oppose its use and work toward removing its legitimacy and availability.

¶3215

### **Sexual Intimacy**

Sexual intimacy is a gift from God for marital union. As such it creates a bond that scripture describes as one flesh (Genesis 2:24; 1 Corinthians 6:16). When expressed within marriage, sexual intimacy is a great blessing and source of fulfillment. The sanctity of marriage between one man and one woman is to be protected against all manner of immoral conduct (Exodus 22:16-17; Deuteronomy 22:23-28; Leviticus 20:10-16).

Pre-marital intimacy robs the marital union of the exclusive bond that sexual intimacy is given to create. Fornication is listed along with other forms of immorality. (Galatians 5:19-21). Extra-marital intimacy, which Scripture describes as adultery, transgresses the moral law and betrays the marriage bond. Adultery is a degrading and destructive force. It undermines trust and contaminates the exclusive bond of marriage (Exodus 20:14).

Post-marital intimacy which occurs after divorce or the loss of a spouse debases the biblical design of sexual intimacy (1 Corinthians 7:8-9).

Homosexual intimacy is regarded by the Scriptures as immoral because it is a distortion of God's created order. The Scriptures speak explicitly against homosexual intimacy (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26, 27; 1 Timothy 1:8-10).

All persons are accountable to God for their thoughts, words and deeds (Romans 14:12; 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10). For those who have fallen, the grace of God is available and completely adequate to forgive and deliver (1 John 1:9; Hebrews 7:25; Luke 4:18; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Because the sexual desire is so powerful, counseling is recommended as a part of the church's pastoral care.

The church has a corporate responsibility to be God's agent of transformation to persons as they learn to live a Christian life that is wholesome and pure. We oppose cultural mores and laws that legitimize adultery, pre-marital, post-marital and homosexual intimacy.

¶3220

**"We commit ourselves to respect the worth of all persons as created in the image of God." (¶158)**

¶3221

### **Dignity and Worth of Persons**

We are committed to the dignity and worth of all humans, including the unborn, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, color,

## **¶3311 The Christian and Marriage**

### **A. Principles Regarding Marriage**

**Nature of Marriage:** At creation God instituted marriage for the well-being of humanity (Genesis 2:20-24; Mark 10:6-9). Marriage is the joining of one man and one woman into a lifelong relationship of mutual love and service which the Scriptures call "one flesh." Such a marriage should be based on mutuality and partnership, patterned not according to prescribed hierarchies but according to the creation of the male and female both in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and the call to mutual submission as illustrated by Christ in His relationship with the Church (Ephesians 5:21-31).

We look not to the state but to the Scriptures for our understanding of human personhood and well-being, including human sexuality and marriage. We order our life of faith and our ministries according to the Scriptures, not according to the shifting values of society and the state.

Sexual intercourse is God's gift to humanity, for the intimate union of a man and woman within marriage. In this relationship, it is to be celebrative (Hebrews 13:4). Marriage, between one man and one woman, is therefore the only proper setting for sexual intimacy. Scripture requires purity before and faithfulness within and following marriage.

With deep compassion for persons who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, and especially those who have been mistreated and marginalized in various settings, the Free Methodist Church encourages its congregations to practice welcoming hospitality and embracing lovingkindness toward all who desire to worship among us. We will be a people who offer ourselves as agents of Jesus' grace and love to others – all others. We will trust the Holy Spirit to convict people of their sin, to enliven hope of transforming possibilities, and then to lead people to God's best for their lives.

Nevertheless, we hold that marriage can only be the union of one man and one woman who have made a public covenant and vow before God and the state (Genesis 2:20-24; Mark 10:6-9). Therefore, it would be a breach of the doctrine of our Church to for ministers or members of the Free Methodist Church to conduct, officiate, or assist in officiating, the marriage or union between a same-sex or same-gender couple. In light of our beliefs, ministers and members of the Free Methodist Church shall not officiate or assist in officiating marriages or unions of same-sex or same-gender couples.

We hold that our congregations are stewards of the church property. Officiating or assisting in officiating or hosting a

marriage between a same-sex or same-gender couple in any Free Methodist Church building or on any Free Methodist property would be a violation of consecrated Free Methodist property. Therefore, such marriages may not be performed or hosted at Free Methodist churches or on Free Methodist properties.

Marriage that the Free Methodist Church deems doctrinally acceptable, legal and appropriate, should be safeguarded and supported by both the Church and society and should be formalized with public vows. It is not enough for a couple to live together in private commitment; we believe that they are to covenant before God and the state.

Further, we hold that all these provisions are applicable to and fully binding on all activities and ministries of or affiliated with the Free Methodist Church.

#### B. **Nurturing Healthy Marriages**

The Free Methodist Church urges its people to enter the covenant of marriage prayerfully. In accordance with the apostle's command (2 Corinthians 6:14), we expect believers to marry only believers. Ministers are required to use diligent care when being requested to solemnize a marriage. It is contrary to the explicit teachings of the Scriptures to unite a believer with an unbeliever.

Couples considering marriage should seek the wisdom of mature Christian leaders for instruction that promotes full equality in communication, finances, family dynamics, sex and spiritual formation. Young couples contemplating marriage should seek parental consent.

#### C. **Healing Troubled Marriages**

Human sin and rebellion against God always threaten marriages. Sin in the Garden brought a change to the way marriage partners related to each other, with profound consequences for a couple's experience of God's plan for marital oneness (Genesis 3:16b). Early in the biblical story the practice of polygamy and spousal abuse became common. Sadly, a constant feature of the story has been the hardening of heart that may lead to broken vows, marriages, and homes.

The prophets describe God's relationship with Israel against the backdrop of common marital brokenness. God pursues his unfaithful people as a husband who refuses to abandon his adulterous wife. Indeed, the steadfast love of Israel's God claims and wins at last a remnant of his rebellious people (Hosea 1-3; Ezekiel 16). In the fullness of time, Jesus the Messiah brings to full expression this steadfast love of the Lord. That love made flesh in Jesus and his followers becomes the prototype of marital love in the teachings of the Apostle Paul (Ephesians 5:22-33).

Therefore, the church as the Body and Bride of Christ has spiritual resources for marriages in trouble. Through the renewing power of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Scriptures, the Sacraments, and the mutual support of God's people, God brings healing, reconciliation, and oneness to willing marriage partners. We encourage our members to avail themselves of these rich and powerful resources whenever a marriage relationship is strained. In some cases, pastoral and professional Christ-centered counsel should be sought.

As in the biblical story, domestic violence, emotional assault, and physical abuse sometimes occur in the homes of our people. Such sin jeopardizes safety of spouse and children and may threaten their very lives. These family members need the special care of the church family for spiritual and emotional protection and healing.

The Church recognizes all abusive behavior as sin and destructive to the home and its members. Often in these cases separation is necessary to halt abuse and allow space for the healing of persons and their relationships. Even when the marriage and home have experienced the most grievous violation, however, we insist that God's grace can bring healing. Therefore, we counsel our members to seek the fullest measure of healing and reconciliation possible in every situation.

#### D. **Divorce**

Although God intends and wills that marriage vows be honored for life, some marriages fail even within the fellowship of God's people. When marriages fail and partners divorce, they have violated God's intention for marriage and often one or both have violated their vows to love and cherish the other. Such violations, whatever their reason, constitute rebellion against God's plan for their lives and result in personal brokenness. After a divorce each partner needs healing from God, with counsel towards repentance where needed and renewed faith in God for all involved. The church must stand ready to be agents of this healing work in their lives.

A divorce may result from a variety of sinful acts, attitudes, and responses. Sexual infidelity, abandonment, and patterns of abusive behavior that threaten spouse and children are the most commonly identified sins destructive of marriages. Other sins, however, also sometimes lead to divorce, such as selfishness, anger, fear, obsessive preoccupation, and careless neglect. The hardness of heart that drives partners to divorce may trace back to many different manifestations of sin.

When questioned about marriage and divorce, Jesus stressed three principles. First, He cites the intent from the beginning that no marriage would fail. Second, He identifies "hardness

of heart” as the ultimate marriage killer – because either it causes destructive behavior or refuses the grace that can heal and reconcile. And, third, He refuses to support the common assumption that in some cases one partner has a right (i.e., enjoys freedom) simply to walk away. Whatever the particulars, Jesus offered grace that heals and empowers people to live according to God’s plan – to move from their sin to a life that pleases God.

E. **Care after Divorce, Singleness and Remarriage**

When a marriage fails, the church seeks to restore people from the trauma of their divorce by inviting its members into a process of restoration (see paragraphs 7110-7130). Godly counsel that promotes full equality will help people understand what happened in their marriage; specifically, where they may have contributed to the failure and how they have been wounded by it. Sinful relational patterns will be exposed, forsaken, and replaced with Spirit-directed and Christ-centered patterns. The damage to children, the larger families, and their witness to Christ will also be acknowledged and where possible restitution will be made.

Persons who have suffered the trauma of divorce must exercise extreme caution when considering remarriage. Unless they have experienced healing and restoration from their failure in marriage, they will likely fail again. In some cases, wisdom will insist upon remaining single and free to live in devotion only to Christ.

One who has been divorced shall not by that fact alone be denied the privileges and responsibilities of a future marriage in the Lord. The grace that brings correction, conviction, repentance, faith, healing, and restoration can make all things new, even for a Christian whose sin may have broken a marriage. When grace restores the brother or sister who has failed, the plan God has for human well-being reopens, even the possibility of remarriage.

F. **Refusal of Counsel**

When a member divorces a spouse or remarries without seeking the counsel or following the guidance of the pastor or the Membership Care Committee, the committee shall review the case and recommend appropriate action to the local Board of Administration. Corrective action shall include removal from leadership, and may include suspension, or expulsion from membership.

Exceptional cases may arise for which the pastor or the Membership Care Committee can find no explicit direction in this *Book of Discipline*. In such cases, the pastor, after consultation with the Membership Care Committee, shall confer with a superintendent.

E. Pastors are encouraged to preach on the subject of practical charity, receiving offerings and providing opportunities for financial support. These offerings are to be used for the relief of the poor in that society or sent to an accredited human service ministry.

## Educational Institutions

¶4800+ Educational institutions are responsible for promoting and helping to maintain adequate opportunity for college and graduate training of the people of the Free Methodist Church.

### Denominational Institutions

¶4810+ The Free Methodist Church – USA recognizes as Denominational Institutions those colleges and universities whose commitments are consistent with the history, theology, mission and character of the Free Methodist Church.

#### A. Leadership Commitments

1. The president shall be a member of the Free Methodist Church who actively seeks to create a Free Methodist presence in the life and leadership of the institution.
2. The chief academic officer shall be a member of the Free Methodist Church, or one who is in both conviction and spirit committed to Wesleyan theology and perspectives.

#### B. Mission Commitments

1. The Free Methodist educational institutions shall have articles of incorporation, bylaws or other appropriate governance documents which:
  - a. identify the college or university as a private institution of evangelical higher education affiliated with the Free Methodist Church - USA;
  - b. define the relationship of the institution to the churches and conferences of the Free Methodist Church – USA; and,
  - c. specify Free Methodist Church - USA representation in the governing board.
2. The Free Methodist educational institutions shall have a Wesleyan statement of faith consistent with Free Methodist Church - USA doctrine which boards of trustees and executive leaders agree shall guide the policies of the institution.
3. The Free Methodist educational institutions shall have a mission statement which includes an institutional priority to serve as an educational resource for the advancement of