

REPORT OF THE COMMUNICATIONS STUDY COMMITTEE

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Strategic Planning study, conducted throughout the Canadian church in January of 1996, identified Communication as one of the six key issues of concern among Free Methodists in Canada.

The National Leadership Team, by which is meant the bishop, and the directors of Church Services, Administrative Services, and Ministry Advancement, desire to hear and be heard by the local church. Pastors and people in the churches, in turn, need to hear and be heard by their leadership. The first and best means of transferring information has always been face to face, but geographical distance and conflicting schedules often make that impossible. The old standbys, phone and mail, still serve us well, but new technological advances constantly broaden the scope of potential for information travel.

Channels of communication have been established within the Free Methodist Church of Canada, some of long standing and some new. The objective of Study Team on Communication has been to evaluate the present systems of communication and make recommendations for changes which will bring about a stronger sense of connectedness within the Church in Canada.

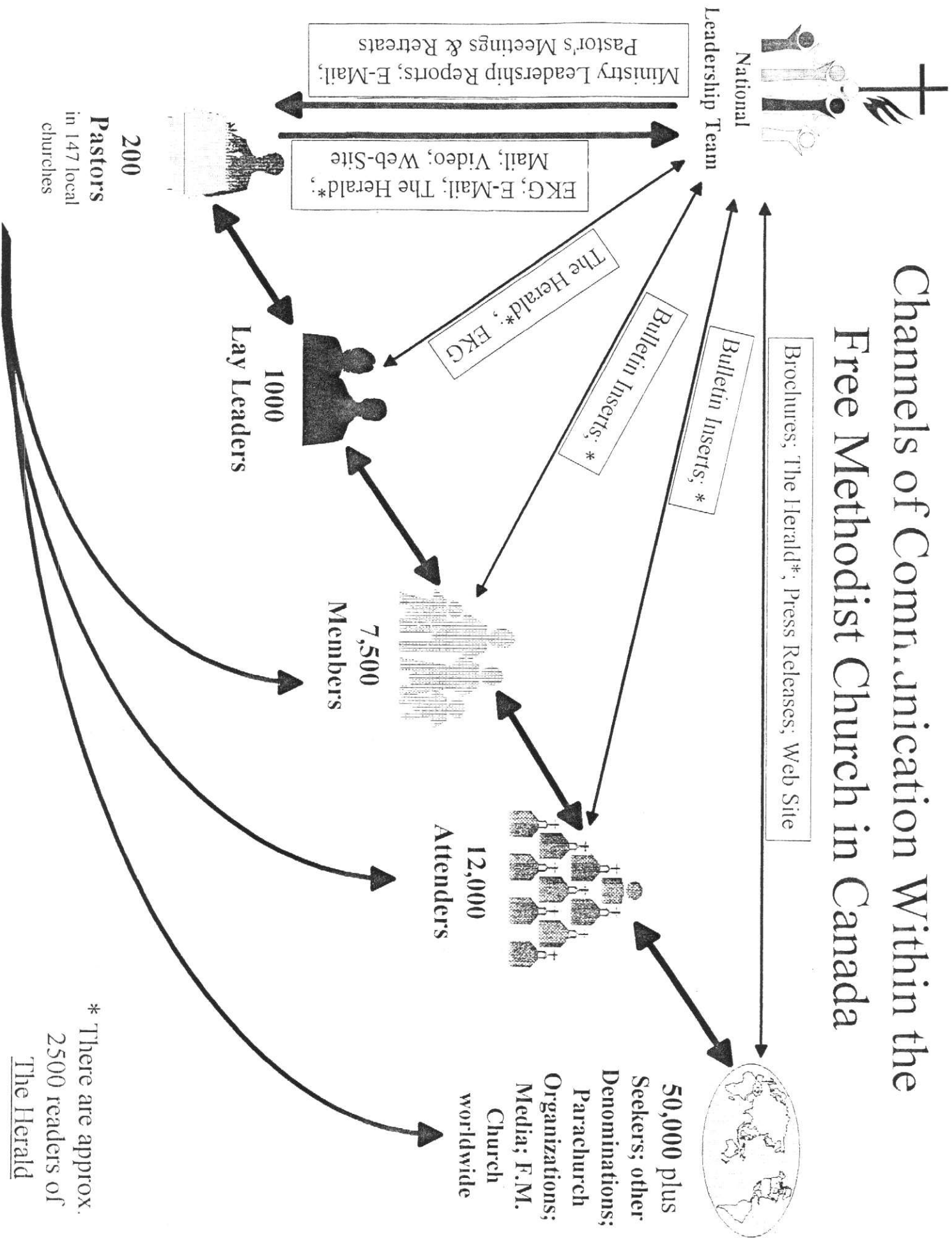
2. CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

The chart on the next page outlines the channels of communication within the Free Methodist Church in Canada which exist at the present time.

The path between the National Leadership Team and the Pastors is the heart of the system. Since the new structuring of the Canadian Church, particular recognition has been given to the essentialness of supporting and encouraging strong leadership in the local church, so administratively it makes sense that the greatest share of energy from the National Leadership Team be invested in keeping these lines of communication active in both directions. The pastor's role then is vital to completing the picture by becoming the channel of information to the church and community.

Pastors meeting monthly in regional groups view a video from Bishop Walsh and the rest of the National Leadership Team, communicating information and inspiration in a warmer, more personal way than can the written page. The EKG, its name being an acronym from our vision statement, "Empowering Kingdom Growth", comes from the

Channels of Communication Within the Free Methodist Church in Canada



* There are approx.
2500 readers of
The Herald

Department of Ministry Advancement under Mary-Elsie Fletcher, communicating timely facts and instructions. Copies are sent to churches bi-monthly for distribution to the pastors, lay leaders, and as far as there is interest, to the members and attendees. Occasional Bulletin Inserts, sent to the local church by the Department of Ministry Advancement, are intended to inform the people in the pew about the workings of the Free Methodist Church. In recent months a set of four was distributed on the Giving Streams.

3. A CLOSER LOOK AT THE HERALD

The Herald is remembered fondly by many long time Free Methodists as a valuable definer of the Free Methodist identity in Canada. Present circumstances, though, point to the need for careful reconsideration of The Herald's form, function and viability. In the past two years the number of subscriptions has dropped from 3,150 to a low of 2, 244 in July of this year. The subsidy from the national church budget has been increasing in recent years, (from \$3,947 in 1990 to \$8,349 in 1995), though, due to the reduction since January 1996 of publication from monthly to bimonthly, the subsidy is now negligible.

The church must ask, "At whom is the present Herald aimed? Is it reaching its mark? Is this the appropriate audience? What part of the church is being missed? What is The Herald's objective? Is this objective valuable enough to justify the expenditure? Could changes bring about a turnaround in support of The Herald across Canada?"

Approximately 2500 people are now reading The Herald. Informal surveys suggest that the majority of these are long time Free Methodist, a high proportion being in the more senior age group. It is probably fair to say that this is the audience at which The Herald is most directly aimed. This may well be seen as appropriate, as this is the group with the keenest interest, and strongest commitment to the support of the ministries of the church, yet, as we look to growth in the future, the lack of support for The Herald by younger Free Methodists and newcomers is a matter of concern.

After consideration of the options, the conclusion of the Communication Study Team is that the Canadian church needs a national paper and that without The Herald communication within the Free Methodist Church in Canada would be significantly weakened. Notwithstanding, The Herald needs to take courageous steps to broaden its appeal so that it can more readily be embraced by the Free Methodists across the country.

Following is a quote which was excerpted from Leadership, Spring, 1995 in the June EKG Report:

Realize that when you ask people to do something different, they focus on what they have to give up, not on what they are going to gain.

With this in mind we ask, "What would the Canadian church lose without The Herald?"

- a. **Without The Herald** we would lose a vital source of information about our people and our churches. Its function as a disseminator of news among us may be more essential now than ever before since regional conference newsletters no longer exist. Some readers of The Herald have said that the first sections they turn to on receiving their copy are the obituaries and the listings of weddings and births. Seeing the names of people we know, love, and respect being remembered is very special. Of course this is one of the aspects of The Herald that has little appeal for newcomers to the church as they are less likely to know names from across Canada.
- b. **Without The Herald** the Bishop and the National Leadership Team would lose an important vehicle for addressing the church. Without the Herald the creative and progressive among us would lose a forum for the discussion of important ideas.
- c. **Without The Herald** we would lose a natural opportunity for the communication of information about our missionaries and the work that they are doing for the expansion of the Kingdom of God overseas.
- d. **Without The Herald** we would lose a window into knowledge of our church by outside groups, namely the media, other denominations, parachurch organizations, educational institutions, and the American Free Methodist Church. Faith Today and Christian Week occasionally pick up news items that have been printed in the Herald, and this past year The Light and Life has reprinted an article from The Herald almost every month.

4. **THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE FOR THE HERALD**

If we agree The Herald could and should play an important role in facilitating connectionalism within our church, we need to ask what can be done to increase its appeal and effectiveness.

4.1 **Distribution**

Not all Free Methodists who care about news and ideas from across the country are presently subscribing to The Herald. Creative, courageous promotion will be necessary in order to increase the distribution and the impact of our paper. (Some ideas that have been put forward include: a one Sunday blitz across the country with subscription cards

and payment being put in the offering plates; a phone campaign to all members within promoted time frame.)

4.2 Content

Most readers of The Herald that were queried by the Study Team have little complaint about its content. Under the editorship of Donna Elford, The Herald has been rich with interest and variety.

One of the greatest challenges continues to be getting submissions of material. The committee heard complaints from both ends of the country that they are under-represented, but reality is that what is submitted is generally printed. The responsibility for getting news and articles into The Herald must be taken seriously by the churches.

4.3 Format

Some readers say that they find the shape and size of The Herald awkward and old fashioned. Others say that the shape makes storage difficult, and that while the EKG gets three hole punched and filed, the Herald is more likely to get discarded in time.

Considerations has been given to the idea of reformatting The Herald into monthly bulletin inserts to be distributed to all attendees, but such a style would not serve some of the present functions of The Herald, namely that of a voice to the outside, and a forum for the discussion of theological and lifestyle concerns.

4.4 Name

A herald originally was the name given an officer who carried messages and made announcements during the Middle Ages. In the past, within the church, the Christian life was popularly compared to the journey of a pilgrim in Medieval times and Crusader talk was common in hymnody and testimony. In recent days this metaphor is seldom used in the church, and understood even less by those who come to Christ unchurched. Recognition of this change in cultural language was acknowledged when the American Free Methodist Church, while updating its mid-week children's program changed it's name from Christian Youth Crusaders (CYC) to Christian Life Club (CLC) The word "Herald" was itself one of the age group terms used within the program which was dropped.

The name, The Herald, holds little power to attract the minds of newcomers, and it may well be that it would be a deterrent. A name that is more closely identified with the paper's purpose would be easier to sell.

4.5 Recommendation

Whereas the Herald is serving a valuable function in the Free Methodist Church in Canada, but whereas distribution pattern indicate that in its present form it is not being read by the full range of people in the church, the Study Team on Communication recommends to the General Conference of 1996 that alterations be made to its format and that its name be changed.

COMMUNICATIONS BALLOT 4.5

I vote to approve this recommendation.

☐ YES ☐ NO

4.6 Recommendation

Whereas The Herald is mandated to speak to and for all Free Methodist Churches in Canada, and whereas the effectiveness of a "magazine" is dependent on the regularity and quality of its submissions, the Study Team on Communication recommends to the General Conference of 1996 that forms be composed and a system established which will require a representative from each church to make monthly submissions of such congregational news as weddings, births, death, graduations, anniversaries, special honours, etc. and encourage the submission of reports and articles.

COMMUNICATIONS BALLOT 4.6

I vote to approve this recommendation.

☐ YES ☐ NO

5. NEW WAYS OF CONNECTING

The field of communication has been revolutionized by the introduction of new technologies. As we move into the twenty-first century, the church must keep pace or lose wondrous opportunities and be seen as archaic. Communications consultant Steven Sheils was quoted in the December issue of The Herald, as saying,

Christians at large must accept their responsibility to use the Internet and similar technologies to create a positive impact on Christians and non-Christians alike through the dissemination of information and knowledge with the overall goal to facilitate the pursuit of Christ-centered wisdom.

Recent reports have estimated that thirty to forty percent of Canadians now have access to internet and the numbers are growing rapidly. Steps have already been taken toward the establishment this year of a Web site for the Free Methodist Church of Canada. Our World Mission Centre, as well as several Canadian churches and camps, have done so already. Most of our missionaries are presently on line, as is the Missions Hot-line.

The "new" technologies are reducing the costs and increasing the efficiency of communication. Faxing is becoming routine. The computer, and more specifically the use of the internet, has the potential to open up exciting and practical doors of communication. Electronic mail (E-Mail) makes possible the inexpensive transfer of pages of information and allows for response in dialogue between two or more parties at once. With just a click of a button, a message could be sent to all our churches in a moment.

5.1 Recommendation

Whereas computers are rapidly becoming essential tools of communication in all levels of business and commerce, and whereas E-mail will open the door to inexpensive, immediate connections between the Canadian Ministry Centre and the local church; the Study Team on Communication recommends to the General Conference of 1996 that the Board of Administration encourage and, as much as is possible, assist all Free Methodist Churches in Canada to achieve E-Mail capability by General Conference 1998.

COMMUNICATIONS BALLOT 5.1

I vote to approve this recommendation.

☐ YES

☐ NO