

Free Methodist Historical Society

# Newsletter

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## FREE METHODIST ARTISTS

The MMHC staff have been hard at work, planning and installing a new exhibit called “Free Methodist Artists.” One of the pieces on display was donated by the family of Chloe Anna Sanford Brodhead, who, along with her husband Rev. J. P. Brodhead, was a missionary to South Africa from 1898 to 1923. Anna was gifted with a strong artistic temperament and was the first art teacher on faculty at Greenville College. In the fall of 1897, the couple were appointed as missionaries to Africa. Anna’s use of her artistic abilities on the mission field is made apparent in the book *Our Free Methodist Missions in Africa*, which she edited. It is an early “Picture Book” of her missionary endeavors, filled with artistically arranged photographs, which she said was “laid upon my heart by the Lord of the Harvest” in order to “show the Mission Work to its supporters at Home.”



Undated painting of the South African veldt by  
Chloe Anna Sanford Brodhead.

This is just one of the displayed items in the exhibit, which is composed of three components – Winners of the Free Methodist World Missions art contest for missionaries and children, FM poets and FM song writers. Shortly after the display was complete, the MMHC received items from a minister who, 70 years ago, purchased sheet music while he attended God’s Bible School in Cincinnati. In this donation were musical pieces written by the Shelhamer family not previously stored in the FM Archive, including: “Kiss Me Goodnight” by Julia A. Shelhamer; “Sacred Songs” by Everett Shelhamer; “Just Sixteen,” “Back to the Bible,” and “Baptize Us Today” by brother and sister Everett and Esther Shelhamer; and “Make Room For The King of Kings” by Mary A. Beeson and Helen Arnold (sisters of Julia Shelhamer).

We are thankful to donors who contribute these treasures. They increase the value of the collection in the FM Archive and help to tell the beautiful story of who we are as Free Methodists.

If you have material that you think may be suitable for donation, please contact Cathy Robling by email at [history@fmcusa.org](mailto:history@fmcusa.org) or by calling: 317-244-3660 (ext. 281).

In addition to the “Free Methodist Artists” exhibit is another exhibit titled “Medical Missions in Africa Past and Present.” The Marston Historical Center is open to visitors Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

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# Free Methodist Ministry in the Northeast

by Dwight Gregory

An important growing edge of the Free Methodist Church - USA in recent decades is an expanding tapestry of Spanish-speaking congregations in the Northeast. I was closely connected with many of these groups during the middle of their 75-year history while serving in the New York City area from 1971-98, and I have been working to uncover the origins and understand recent developments, specifically in New York, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania.

The history of these congregations began with a camp meeting in northeast Pennsylvania in 1949. A visiting missionary speaker from the Dominican Republic, Pearl James, looked up Dominican Free Methodist Pastor Anselmo Estrella, who was in New York City at the time on a tourist visa, and invited him. That brief encounter with James was pivotal.

Despite a limited English proficiency, Estrella proclaimed that he understood every word of the message at the service, almost like the Jerusalem visitors at Pentecost in the book of Acts and found himself deeply touched. Also present at this camp meeting was Superintendent Herbert Olver, who heard Estrella praying in Spanish and introduced himself. Estrella told him that New York City had many Dominicans who needed shepherd-evangelists to reach them. Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship over the Dominican Republic from 1930 until his assassination in 1961 fueled an influx of Dominican immigrants to the U.S., as many people faced threats to their extended families over perceived disloyalty to the government. Olver, a tireless advocate for expanding Hispanic efforts through his ministerial career, was eager to engage with Estrella's vision.

He began following up on contacts initiated by Pastor Estrella, introducing them to other Free Methodists in the area, and within a few months several home groups had been gathered. A small German-speaking Free Methodist congregation on Hooper Street in Brooklyn made its building available, and

a Spanish-speaking society was organized in 1951. After returning to the Dominican Republic at the conclusion of his tourist visa, Pastor Estrella served a church in Santiago; but his missional vision for New York remained, and he was later released for ministry in Brooklyn, transferring to the New York Conference in 1954.

After the Hooper Street property was taken by eminent domain for a new freeway, a converted residence on Taylor Street was purchased with help from the General Missionary Board and served the congregation for nearly a decade. Pastor Estrella served alongside this group until his death in 1960, and his widow, Luz Estrella, was a dedicated and saintly member of the congregation when I first visited in 1970. In the 1960s the congregation acquired and renovated the four-story "Washington Palace" social hall that had been an apartment building, a Depression-era speakeasy, a synagogue, and an abandoned gang hangout over the years. The First Spanish Free Methodist Church, now Iglesia Evangelica Renacer (above left), still meets in this building in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, made famous through the novels of Chaim Potok.

Soon after the church's launch in the early 1950s, two women of the church, evangelizing on the streets, met a lonely new immigrant from Puerto Rico, Juan Pizarro (pictured top), and gave him a tract. Though he had devout parents and grandparents, Pizarro had never opened his life to Christ. The next week Pastor Estrella visited his home to get acquainted and pray. The next day Pizarro came to church and responded to the invitation to salvation. He became active in the life of the congregation and a leader in Sunday school. After moving his growing family to rural Pennsylvania in 1956, he began outreach ministries with migrant farm workers in cooperation with the English-speaking churches of the Wilkes-Barre District.

Converts from Pizarro's outreach went on to



serve the Lord in other states and in Puerto Rico. In 1965, others moved to Allentown for permanent employment, and he decided to follow them, seeing that they needed a shepherd. To support his missional endeavor, Pizarro was able to secure employment as a sewing machine mechanic in a garment factory. Pastor Milton Faulkner and the local Free Methodist Church welcomed them and added a Spanish service. Soon, the new Spanish-speaking congregation was able to purchase and renovate their own building, before moving later to a larger facility purchased from an Orthodox church. Because of this missional intrepidity, Allentown, adjacent Bethlehem, and other nearby Pennsylvania cities currently have at least eight Spanish-speaking Free Methodist congregations. Pressing on in an evangelistic spirit, Pizarro moved to Texas where he planted two other Free Methodist churches and discipled leaders who served in El Salvador and elsewhere.

Families from the New York City churches had begun moving to Massachusetts for employment opportunities, and Pastor Isaac Brito, who came from a family of Dominican Free Methodist leaders, later moved from Brooklyn to Lawrence, MA, to serve them. That congregation remained part of the New York Conference until a second Spanish church was formed in Salem and both groups transferred to the Centenary (New England) Conference.

Matias Gonzalez (lower left page), part of the "second wave" of Massachusetts church planters, served many years in Lynn, giving leadership in the region and the nation. He was instrumental in the founding of the Latin American Theological Seminary, which has greatly enriched the pastoral team. His daughter, Pastor Raisa Fabre, has planted a multi-cultural, English-speaking congregation, GracePoint, in Northern Massachusetts. It is already stronger than any previous English-speaking Free

Methodist church in the state and has added Spanish-speaking ministries.

The current network of Hispanic Free Methodist churches in central New England numbers about a dozen and is united with the New York City area and Eastern Pennsylvania area churches in the Acts 12:24 Conference. They recently added ministries in Spanish in Maryland under the leadership of Pastor Fernando Gonzalez, who was challenged to move to Baltimore in 2009 after planting churches in the Dominican Republic, Pennsylvania and elsewhere. Superintendent JR Rushik reports that the first Spanish-speaking Free Methodist congregation has also been launched in Delaware.

So much more could be told! The Acts 12:24 Churches alone now include 40 organized Hispanic societies, with 15 church plants in operation and 19 in the planning stage. Many can trace their history to that 1949 camp meeting in Pennsylvania. In almost every Northeastern state churches have multiplied, from intentional church plants, adoption of independent groups, members moving to new regions and opening their homes, and unplanned divisions through differences over philosophy and personalities! There have been false

starts and heartbreaking setbacks and more heroes than a short article can credit. It has been a great 75 years, with seeds planted to grow into more great stories in the next 75 years and beyond. May the Lord of the Harvest give the same increase elsewhere!



**Group of early Spanish-speaking Free Methodists in the Northeast United States circa 1950s. Reverend Anselmo Estrella is in the front row on the right (wearing hat).**

**Author's Note:** To read an expanded version of this article, contact the Historical Center ([history@fmcusa.org](mailto:history@fmcusa.org)) for a digital copy. Early history was gathered for this story from *The Vision Glorious*, the centennial history of the New York Conference edited by Miriam Olver and others. Memories from 55 years and countless conversations and interviews also contributed. Additional research was facilitated by Cathy Robling at the Marston Memorial Historical Center. Some errors may remain through conflicting memories and inadequate documentation.

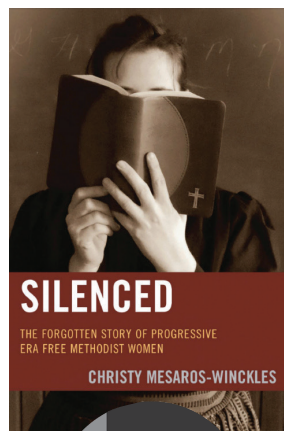
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## LATEST BOOK PRIZE

The fourth Marston Book Prize, an award given annually by the Marston Memorial Historical Center and the Committee on Free Methodist History and Archives in honor of Free Methodist Historian Bishop Leslie R. Marston, was awarded in October 2024. This year's selection, *Silenced: The Forgotten Story of Progressive Era Free Methodist Women*, by Christy Mesaros-Winkles, merits the prize for its important and timely contribution to the history of Free Methodist women in ministry.

In *Silenced*, Mesaros-Winkles explores the church's response to women's aspirations of equality in ministry as opportunities afforded, or advocated for, by B.T. Roberts and his supporters in the first generation of the church evaporated with the ascension of powerful leaders opposed to the ministry of women. The reader quickly learns that history as lived by many women in the Free Methodist Church (FMC) has not been a happy story. However, the volume is also a narrative of hope: Intrepid women persisted in following the calling of God on their lives. As a young person in the FMC, student and as a budding scholar, I was heavily impacted by Free Methodist women evangelists, scholars and social activists. I was puzzled that their voices were not more readily heard. Later, I came to understand that these women had fought against limi-



tations written, whispered and silently imposed. They were tenaciously loyal to the church that ignored them.

This stunning, terrible, powerful narrative traces the struggles of numerous women to participate equally in the FMC, arguing convincingly that the result has been and still is far less than equality. Mesaros-Winkles gives significant attention to the development of the deaconess orders, an alternative structure of non-pastoral ministry for women. She uses core denominational documents, especially *The Free Methodist* and the *General Conference Daily*, to tell the stories of these women and those who sought to limit their roles. She assembles data from archival sources preserved by the families of the women studied, government documents, newspapers and material preserved in the Marston Memorial Historical Center and Spring Arbor University's White Library, to illuminate the values and actions of the actors of the drama, both men and women.

The evolution of gender roles in U.S. churches and society remains a contested story. Mesaros-Winkles' book brings fresh information to that discussion. The focus on data from the "Progressive Era" of American history brings information from the FMC to this still controversial period. It will be an enduring standard work for the study of the Free Methodist Church.

- David Bundy, Manchester Wesley Research Centre