

**The Methodist Church of Southern Africa
Conference 2012**

MESSAGE TO THE METHODIST PEOPLE

Conference met at a time of great pain in our world. The wounds of natural disaster, national uprisings, deadly protests like Marikana, calamities such as educational crises continue to batter our nations at the time of the meeting of the 123rd Conference of the MCSA. As Methodists on the southern subcontinent of Africa meeting for the very first time in Swaziland, we heard the call that together, we are to be a Healing Community.

In a pervasive climate of despair and woundedness, Presiding Bishop Ziphozihle Siwa echoed the words of Jeremiah: "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?"

Wounds exist not only in the world, but also in the church. Issues such as conflict and jockeying for power poison us. We wound one another, as clergy and laity in many ways, and that has a devastating effect on the church. In many of the reports received by Conference, the pain of the church and its individuals and leaders were evident, in terms of personal wounds as well as pain over a hurting church.

We Methodists, who acknowledge our own woundedness, are called to offer a healing balm to the church and the world through our very togetherness as a church. We are Wounded Healers. Bishop Siwa urged us, saying "The emerging future will be shaped by our collective resolve to be healing communities".

Our opening service in St Pauls Church, Manzini was a joyous celebration which concluded with the new Siswati hymn book being received and authorised.

Rev Dr Mvume Dandala had a profound impact on the hearts of the members of Conference as he reminded us of our woundedness. The church is a wounded community, but at the same time we are under divine commission to offer healing. As a church community we need to open our life for the healing of others. As we follow Jesus, we are called to act together for healing. Healing is never meant to be self-centred, but drives the healed ones to invite others, and to be unremitting intercessors, trusting in the prevenient grace of God. This we believe: In Christ there is healing.

Dr Dandala brought us to the graveyard and introduced us to the Demoniac in Mark 5 –a man who had surrendered his life to brokenness, like so many today. As Jesus recognised him as a person, looking beyond the labels he had been given that denigrated his humanity, we need to look beyond the labels people are given in our society and offer them healing. Jesus comes to those who live in the graveyards of our community, and who have taken upon themselves the abusive names they are given, and he gives them a new understanding of who they are. As broken people find a new identity in Christ, healing can take place from the inside out. And we as Methodists reaffirm the God-given possibility of sanctification of all and rejoice that grace is free.

The General Secretary reminded us of challenges facing the church ranging from human resource planning and the challenge to properly register church properties, to managing transition planning and the vital and urgent issue of the wellbeing of clergy.

The representation of youth at Conference was significantly higher than in the past, and their contribution to debates and commissions was very valuable. The report of the Youth Unit blessed the Conference, as they are clearly moving in a direction of looking beyond themselves and their own issues, to participating very significantly in mission activities of the church. The Youth and the Mission Unit called us to look after the children in our communities and especially child headed households, in terms of Christian Education, poverty alleviation and the security of children in our care.

In listening to the report on HIV/AIDS we found a sense of hope in hearing statistics like the mother to child infection rate having declined from 8% a few years ago to 2.7% and the care given to orphaned and vulnerable children.

The Mission Unit and Rev Ivan Abrahams from the World Methodist Council helped us to take a global view on Methodism. We were also invited to join in partnerships with Methodists in Tanzania and Malawi, and encouraged to strengthen our work in the far north of Mozambique and in Rundu. The Ecumenical Affairs Secretary pleaded with the Conference to strengthen our ecumenical relations locally and abroad, and especially on the continent of Africa. Greetings were brought from the United Methodist Church in Germany. Rev Frank Aichele was very enthusiastic over the cooperation of their Connexion with ours. He suggested ways in which our relationship can be strengthened, for example, by exchanging volunteers.

The mission work of the Men's and Women's organisations have been very impressive over the past year. Homes and schools have been built, school uniforms provided, bursaries offered to children, and school equipment provided, and much more.

A working document was presented on Human Resources for the church, which will receive further attention from the appointed committee before Conference 2013.

When sensitive issues were dealt with in the Conference, we believe we were able to deal with them with a sense of unity, and the desire to truly be a healing community in Christ.

In the quest of this Conference to contribute to the healing of nations, Conference adopted resolutions voicing concerns relating to e-tolling, the Bill on Traditional Affairs, job creation projects for youth and environmental matters. We decided that the Desk for Justice, Advocacy and Service in the Mission Unit previously approved, be established from January 2013 with initial funding from the Church Reserve Fund. Conference issued a statement relating to the Marikana strike. We lament the loss of life, recognised the gains made to date, but warned that much more needs to be done. A further statement was made recognising the worth of all children, condemning the abuse of children, and calling for all children to receive a good education. We deplore the use of school children in the North West as pawns in service delivery protests. This is never acceptable, and neither is vandalism of schools. We call on a speedy return to normality for these children both in North West province of South Africa. We applaud the return of teachers to school in Swaziland after a 40 day strike.

Relating to the life and work of our church, we affirmed the decision that the church will not receive Candidates for the Ordained Ministry above the age of 50. The moratorium on accepting non-itinerant Candidates has been extended by 12 months. Our long-standing structures conversation led to decisions that strengthen the missional nature of Societies and Circuits. A Connexional Boundaries Committee will investigate the composition of Districts. We will develop competency assessment processes for ministers and other staff, and continue to develop leadership training. We requested a report on the planning for bringing the Presiding Bishop's Office, Unit offices and Methodist Connexional Office together on one site, by Conference 2013. Other structures- related discussions are ongoing.

Conference accepted the document on the theology of the use of stoles and other liturgical symbols, and asks Bishops to ensure teaching on their appropriate use, and that unauthorised use of stoles cease by 2015.

Relating to the ongoing discussion on same-sex relationships, and recognising our diversion of convictions, Conference notes that Districts have done very little work on the issue, and is therefore not in a position to move forward yet. We are urged to continue in respectful dialogue in Societies, Circuits and Districts and continue the conversation at Conference 2014.

16 Ministers, including two former Presidents of Conference, 419 Local Preachers and our previous Lay President were remembered in our Memorial service as we lit candles giving thanks for their lives and ministry. The service brought comfort and healing, and sounded a call for those who hear the voice of God to offer themselves for servanthood and ministry. Those who had responded to this call and have been thoroughly trained were brought before Conference. One Ordinand Deacon, one Minister on transfer and the Ordinand ministers were introduced to the Conference and Ministers ready for Ordination were received into Full Connexion. Bishops Dan Nzimande, Abel Mnaba and Gavin Taylor all retire at the end of 2012, and we paid tribute to them and the three district lay leaders Ms Judy Simons of the Cape of Good Hope, Ms Lindiwe Hadebe, Highveld and Swaziland and Mr Gideon Nyokana, Natal West District. and the president of the YMG, Rev Linda Mandindi who are stepping down.

Conference congratulates the Presiding Bishop on his excellent and inspiring conduct of his first Conference, and we pledge to continue praying for him and his colleagues in leadership.

Our prayer is that the church may once again mesmerize the world, drawing darkness to the light of Christ, offering the balm of Gilead to a world crying out for healing, harmony and wholeness. As we hear the cry "Is there no physician there?" we respond as the Methodist Church of Southern Africa: "Here we are. Send us!"