

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa

Report of the General Secretary to Conference 2015

The year started with a new Lay General Treasurer and a new General Secretary for the Methodist Church, in an MCO in which a fair number of new staff learning the ropes of some of the unique systems and challenges we face in the Methodist Connexional Office. But thanks to our Connexional Leader and his patience as well as his deep insight into the life of the whole church, and his many years' worth of a broad scope of Connexional experience, the new staff at the MCO have been finding ourselves gaining direction and being able to fall into the patterns of work required of us. Beyond that, we have been able to begin a few new procedures that have hopefully been of assistance to the Connexion, such as electronic pay slips for Ministers and a monthly electronic newsletter for our clergy.

Communication

For a body as large as the MCSA, with more than 4000 Societies spread around 6 countries, communication is both difficult and vitally important. What makes our communication extra difficult is that we never manage to meet all together, and for many of us modern electronic communication is challenging. For some of us, Connexional communication is not a priority because we feel either too isolated, or we are too self-sufficient.

When you think that we have 12 times as many societies than Pep Stores have shops or more than 3 times as many societies than Standard Bank has branches in our countries, the size of the MCSA strikes one, and one becomes overwhelmingly conscious of the tremendous need for us to be in communication with one another. This is important, because we call ourselves the Body of Christ. A dis-embodied body is a dead pile of bones. A body can only be a functioning body, when the brain communicates with the limbs, and the limbs give feedback to the brain, or if the brainstem maintains vital control of the heart and lungs, and coordinates those important reflexes. If we as the Church do not communicate effectively, we will at best look and act like a paralysed body at worst, a corpse. Our mission will be haphazard, our relationships superficial and our efficacy, weak.

Our most obvious means of formal communication are our New Dimension, which has a very low readership, and our Year Book which is owned by many but read by few.

We have a website and Facebook page, which are frequented by a certain demographic of the church, and which we encourage.

We have instituted a brief newsletter e-mailed to Ministers monthly, which is received all on e-mail. Ministers also receive those statements the Presiding Bishop makes from time to time about burning matters in our nations, and we trust that these get into the hands of our Members, as well.

We are investigating the possibility of skype at the MCO and District offices, so that District officials can be in connection with one another and their Connexional counterparts, increasing communication, and hopefully reducing travel.

One other means of communication to highlight is that we appreciate at the MCO, receiving communication from the Connexion. Talk to us. Give opinions, share ideas, ask questions, interact. Our MCO staff are working at full capacity, but we only exist because of you and for you and we want to hear from you.

I ask us as a Church to make use of the communication means available. Subscribe to the New Dimension. Like our Facebook. Tweet out twitter. Read our e-newsletter. Pass on the news. As St

Paul says: “How can the eye say to the hand, I have no need of you, or again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.... As it is there are many parts, yet one body. “ (1 Corinthians 12)

Connexionality

Paul in 1 Corinthians goes on to speak about there should not be a division in the body but that the members may have the same care for one another. The structure and the belief of the Methodist Church is based on the principle of the Body. Our Connexionality is our strength. It binds us together, holds people from diverse places and diverse backgrounds in one body. At its best, Connexionality means the strength of one also becomes the strength of the other. In the recent response to Xenophobia in South Africa, Connexionality came to the fore as one society was closer to the burning point, the next Circuit pitched in and assisted with human care, and yet another Circuit was able to contribute provisions, while others marched and prayed. And the Methodist Church of Southern Africa was world news because together we were able to provide care and make a difference to those who were and still are, very vulnerable.

In our current series of themes for Conference, the word: “Together” is key.

As a Connexional Church, the first challenge for us is to believe in our Connexionality.

Some of the obvious out-workings of our Connexionality are among others:

- When we look different from one another, have different nationalities or speak different languages- that does not diminish our one-ness. It does mean that we become deliberately hospitable to one another, and those who feel outnumbered are to be specifically embraced. That might mean a Mozambique citizen at this Conference, or a White member of a certain Synod or a black worshipper in a suburban church.
- Connexionality means that the Methodist Church name and its logo is displayed proudly outside our church buildings.
- It means that as clergy, we are accountable to one another and we hold high our Rule of Life because the way we speak and act as individuals has an impact on the reputation of the Church and the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord.
- Connexionality means we stand with the decisions of the church, and with its Laws and Discipline even when we might not have voted for that decision.
- It means we attend Connexional events wherever possible, even when an induction of the Bishop is 200 km away, and could have my Sunday afternoon lie-down, or I attend the funeral of a colleague in my District out of respect.
- It means if we have a problem with a person, a church, a Bishop, the MCO, we do not take it to the newspapers or Facebook. We deal with it among ourselves.
- Connexionality is clearly seen in the role of our Superintendent Ministers when they are good, relational leaders of Circuits, knowledgeable of our practices, in touch with their people, accountable and available to their Bishop. To a great extent, the well-being of our Connexion is in the hands of our Superintendents. They are the visible representation of our Connexionality, which places a great responsibility on them.
- We need to understand that our Bishops are not only District officials, but also Connexional officials. They, together with the Presiding Bishop, are our Spiritual leaders, the custodians of our doctrines, our Mission leaders, they represent the Church ecumenically. Bishop Matsolo is not only the Bishop of Mozambique, He is a Bishop of the Methodist Church of

Southern Africa. This understanding should influence how we see the role of our Bishops, and it should influence how we elect and appoint our Bishops, and also help us understand when Bishops are at Connexional Meetings outside their Districts.

- Connexionality means that we recognise our leaders as our leaders. We put the leaders of our church in an impossible position when on one hand there are grumblings that our leaders are doing or saying nothing, and the next day, on the other hand, the same grumblers are grumbling that everything is top-down and they obstinately refuse to be led. If we are together in a transforming discipleship movement, there will be consultation, of course, but there will also be bold leadership.

Units

One division of our Connexionality which propels us forward, and is at the heart of our being together, are our Units. One of the important functions of all our Units is to hold together the work of the Church in a methodical, disciplined, carefully thought-through, and always progressive manner.

The Units work at full capacity, I assure you, and they are all under-staffed and over-worked, but at the same time passionate and committed to the Church and their role in the church. The component of the assessment that goes from Circuits to Units is carefully used to the last cent and with a deep understanding of the sacrifice those assessments are given with. The work of the Units include that:

- They train and empower,
- They vision and lead in the field of each of their operations,
- They enact the hundreds of Resolutions that come out of this Conference and Synods, They co-operate with similar bodies in other denominations and Methodist bodies nationally and globally.
- They support the Connexion and create Connexionality.

Mission Resource Fund

Finance is often on the agenda of our conversations. How do we enable mission in all the parts of our Countries? If we are a Connexional church, somehow the resources of the many need to benefit the few. Last year, in 2014, R 1 million was set aside from Church Property Protection Fund by the Connexional Executive, and stationed 11 ministers in places where agency could not be afforded. The report of Bishops is that almost all of those eleven stations have been brought to their feet to the extent that they will continue agency without assistance in 2016.

Conference 2014 asked the MCO to find ways to perpetuate this one-off grant. The MCO has made money available from the Church Reserve Fund to station 21 Ministers and Evangelists for 2016. This is again for one year only, and in stations where new work is established or existing work re-vitalised. These 21 stations include all the countries of the Connexion. We acknowledge that offering financial support to this extent requires thorough accountability, and quarterly reports will be required by the Bishop of the District and the Presiding Bishop to ensure that Circuits are strategic and missional with the resources they are given. The same fund will contribute to the logistics of the Mission Congress you will hear more about, from the Mission Unit.

Conference Centre

Conference is one of the crucial expressions of our Connexionality, and in recent years we have experimented with triennial Conference, but the overwhelming preference of the Church has been to move back to an Annual Conference. An Annual Conference does have many benefits, but the one prohibitive component is the financial expense. In the market place, the kind and size of venue we need, comes mostly in campsite or 5-star forms- neither of which is suitable for us. You know from Synod experience, that the days of people opening their homes to strangers, even if they are Methodists, are long gone.

For 2015 we were able to keep the Conference Fee at the same level as 2014, but this is not something we can continue. My predecessor, in his 2012 Conference Report proposed the idea of exploring a Connexional Conference venue to use every year. This proposal was well received and Conference 2013 approved finding a permanent Conference venue. Investigation shows that the cheapest destination from every corner of the Connexion is Johannesburg. At least six Districts could easily drive. For the further Districts, it is cheaper to fly to Johannesburg than to any other destination in Southern Africa.

We have begun negotiation with Emseni, owned by the MCSA almost right next to the OR Tambo International Airport. As we own the land, the only cost we would incur is the building of a Conferencing venue. Logistics are already in place, such as break-away venues, dining rooms, catering, cleaning and ground staff, and Emseni itself is busy adding bedrooms of a 3-star quality. There are other residential facilities in the neighbourhood which we can use until the venue can accommodate all members of Conference, but by 2017 they will be able to accommodate 120 people in double rooms.

Building can commence very soon, and we could in 2 years' time have Conference at our own venue.

Report on resolutions passed last 2 years

Sixty Conference Resolutions were passed by Conference in the last two years.

I report to you that there have been help before Bishop and Unit leaders repeatedly, encouraging them in the execution of resolutions.

Some of the resolutions are very difficult to implement and are dependent on multiple agencies, including Districts, Circuits, Units and individuals. Some resolutions are ongoing in nature.

I see that my predecessor often spoke about Resolutions in his reports, and I can, after less than a year in office, see why:

- We need to remember that Conference is not a Resolution machine. It exists for a number of other good purposes, as well.
- We should remember that a resolution has no magical properties. It is only of value if implemented and adhered to.
- Repeating resolutions does no good. Implement those that have been made.
- If you can, "just do it", it doesn't need a resolution.
- If you haven't spoken to the office your resolution is aimed at, don't bring the resolution until you have engaged the relevant office. Resolution regarding TopMed, as one example, would have been much more helpful, had the Circuit or District first interacted with the Lay General Treasurer, and understood the complications and dynamics of the law, the Medical Aid Board and the Medical Aids we have entered negotiations with during the year and

made use of the plea from the Lay General Treasurer to invite her and TopMed staff to visit Districts for interaction and information.

- Lastly, we have requested the Methodist Publishing House to again provide a booklet as they did five years ago, of all Conference Resolutions of the past 15 years. This can serve as an educational tool, a reference in pursuing the mission of the Church in Circuits and Districts, and as a directory of decisions to implement rather than to devise a new resolution.

Connexional Focus for 2016, 2017 and 2018

Bishop Siwa has introduced us to the Connexional Focus for the next three years, as specific components of our life together, not forgetting our overall church Vision and Mission, our Mission Pillars and our Conference theme.

Starting now, we celebrate the Year of celebrating Women Clergy. 40 years after the Ordination of the first woman as a minister, 17% of our clergy are women, 4% of our Superintendents are women, and no women are Bishops. We will celebrate our victories in the coming year in various ways, but we still have a far way to go before we can say we have achieved our goals.

Next year, starting at Conference we will celebrate a Year of Heritage, 200 years since Leliefontein on the Cape West Coast, paying our respects to our heroes of the faith in our tradition and in our part of the world, we will pay special attention to the places where history were made, as well as to our buildings that have, and will one day have, historic value. We will remember our collective story, and seek our untold stories, and we will celebrate who we are and what we believe, and our unique contribution we are able to make to the wider society.

I hope that this Conference will give us permission to establish a Standing Committee on Heritage, not only to plan for a year of celebrations, but to keep our Heritage before us into the future.

The following year, 2018, we wish to focus on Unity, celebrating 60 years since our watershed statement that we are One and Undivided. Let us now, without a moment's hesitation begin to take very seriously our unity in diversity, and pick up again our commitment to rainbow-ness, to anti-bias training at all levels, stationing ministers across the Connexion putting aside our old racially divided past. Let us not wait for 2018 to re-focus ourselves on unity again.

Connexional Meetings and events

2015 saw the third year of District Trust Secretaries coming together to work on a Connexional Properties strategy. We have a team of extremely competent people in this field, and the results of their work will soon become more evident in the development of our Property Unit.

We also this year called together all the District Discipline Conveners for consultation and training. Our time together was short, and the need to get together, very obvious. The one inhibiting factor in continuing this gathering and training, is as always, budgetary constraints.

The Connexional Discipline Committee, with its new Secretary and long-standing Convener, have just met for the first time, and apart from the regular work are committed to training on a District level. One of the greatest issues that the CDC have found in recent years, is the procedures are not followed in the District, to satisfactory standards. In issues of discipline and church law, processes have to be followed to their smallest detail, or a case is either dismissed or has to be re-tried. To this end, the CDC commit themselves to training District Disciplinary Committees around the Connexion in 2016.

There is also great need for the work of Mediation work in our church. Many issues that come to discipline are really issues of relationship that get out of hand, and are not addressed. As a church we should always be committed to the well-being of the church. We should always want all our members to find their rightful place in ministry or leadership. We are to be a model to the world of how we can disagree and yet not destroy one another. To this end, mediation is almost always the first port of call when there is an issue in a Circuit or Society. A Discipline Registrar should only consider charges if all avenues of pastoral reconciliation have been exhausted. It is the intention that District Mediation Panels, which must be operational in every District, be further trained during the coming year.

Statistics

Lastly, I present to the Conference a brief snapshot of our Connexional Statistics as they were received from Districts. In 2014, this was the status of our Church in this Connexion:

We have 551 585 member including adherents compared to 801 565 in 1995

This is a decline of 38%

We have more than 5000

Societies and 790

Preaching Places – that is around 6000

spaces around the Connexion where the Gospel is preached every Sunday

The Central District has the most members, and the Mozambique District, the fewest

The Queenstown District has the fewest members per minister- 431

The Natal West District has the most members per minister – 986

MEMBERSHIP	
12 Mozambique	6896
6 Northern Free State and Lesotho	18979
7 Natal Coastal	36217
2 Grahamstown	40198
3 Queenstown	42040
5 Kimberley, Bloemfontein and Namibia	45916
8 Natal West	48334
11 Limpopo	57030
10 Highveld and Swaziland	59502
1 Cape of Good Hope	68537
13 Clarkebury	76312
9 Central	77440

Members per Minister	
12 Mozambique	431
6 Northern Free State and Lesotho	449
3 Queenstown	488
11Limpopo	553
7 Natal Coastal	632
10 Highveld and Swaziland	700
1 Cape of Good Hope	704
9 Central	707
2 Grahamstown	780
13 Clarkebury	942
8 Natal West	986
5 Kimberley, Namibia and Bloemfontein	1093
Average	700

Members per society	
8 Natal West	42
13 Clarkebury	59
12 Mozambique	74
3 Queenstown	77
2 Grahamstown	121
7 Natal Coastal	126
5 Kimberley, Namibia and Bloemfontein	143
10 Highveld and Swaziland	168
9 Central	324
1 Cape of Good Hope	331
6 Northern Free State and Lesotho	
11Limpopo	
Average	146

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Societies per Minister	
1 Cape of Good Hope	2,4
9 Central	2.3
10 Highveld and Swaziland	4.1
7 Natal Coastal	5,1
3 Queenstown	6,2
2 Grahamstown	6.5
5 Kimberley, Namibia and Bloemfontein	7.5
12 Mozambique	5.8
13 Clarkebury	15,9
8 Natal West	22.9
6 Northern Free State and Lesotho	
11 Limpopo	
Average	7.8

	Dist 1	Dist 2	Dist 3	Dist 5	Dist 6	Dist 7	Dist 8	Dist 9	Dist 10	Dist 11	Dist 12	Dist 13	Totals	1995
Ordained Ministers	71	42	74			56	40	89	72	92		77	613	
Probationers	11	9	12				7	14	13	11		4	81	
Full Preachers	893	1760	1548			753		1249	917	1361		730	9211	
Preachers on Trial	243	237	156			208		380	235	312		48	1819	
Number of Societies	207	331	539			287		239				1289	2892	
New Societies this year	0	1						0				0	1	

Societies that have closed this year	0	0					1				0	1	
Number of Preaching places	27		49			76		64			17	233	
Full Members On Trial	5133	3456	3337	1686	3023	3424	6130	4926	4572	5094	4078	5163	
Members and classes	4	0	8	6	2	9	0	5	1	2	47	74	
Junior Members	984	708	1286	0	937	0	1869	1627	2024	5362	1479	5977	
Total of Members, on trial and Junior	5436	4543	2969	2113	3906	6	9646	6416	7431	1300	6661	1779	
Wider constituency/a adherents	5775	3981	3710	1897	3543	4539	7281	5730	5517	6693	1089	7540	
Total of members and adherents	4	1	5	9	3	5	5	8	7	12	089	82	
Total number of baptisms	1078										3234	4748	
growth by confirmation	3	387	4358	0	1142	0	4625	2194	1854	7000	3	3	
Growth by conversion	6853	4019	4160	1897	3600	4539	7744	5950	5703	6763	1121	8015	
Growth by transfers in	7	8	9	9	5	5	0	2	1	12	008	65	
Loss by transfers out		699			1093		2198			341	4331		
Loss by death	1173	781	1767		569		3961			242	8493		
Loss by ceased to meet	620	523	916		394		4068			62	6583		
	568	281	748		230		2203			21	4051		
	406	233	163		106		892			11	1811		
	514	417	510		504		1999			5663	9607		
											6447		

Looking at our statistics and the decline of membership in the last 20 years, our Mission Congress comes not a moment too soon.

Looking at our countries with their challenges and our local communities, families, children we need the igniting fire of the Gospel to take a hold of us.

In Conclusion

Our task is colossal, and the church needs to be at its unified, missional best to do what we were created to be. Let us keep our focus on what is most important, and put aside those things that are not of the Kingdom, and that don't build the Church. Let us honour one another, hold hands, and be the best we can be.

To the glory of the Lord of the Church and for the Healing of the Nations.

With thanks for a good year's work to the staff in the Presiding Bishop's office, the whole of the MCO, the Bishops, the Unit Leaders who are a superb team, and the Lay President and Presiding Bishop for true Servant Leadership and their deep devotion to the Lord and His Church.
