

CONFERENCE ADDRESS 2012

By : Rev Ziphozihle Siwa, Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa

Readings: Jeremiah 8: 8-22

Colossians 3: 12-17.

Greetings and Welcome!

The Former Presiding Bishops, General Secretary, Bishops, Lay President, Lay Leaders, Conference delegates, visitors, guests and all my fellow pilgrims, I greet you warmly this evening in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is my pleasure and great joy, to extend a warm word of welcome to this 123rd Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. Whilst the Conference purpose and procedures are the same since we last met, the context has defined itself for us. I pray therefore that we be obedient to the promptings of the Holy Spirit as we confer. Some of the leaders who were directly involved particularly with the affairs of this conference have since moved to join the church triumphant. Among them is our beloved Mrs Bakhombisile Mkhwanazi who led the invitation that we come to Swaziland and was the Convenor of Conference Planning Committee until her death. Following soon after was the departure of that selfless servant, the former Secretary of this Conference who became the first President of the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary, Rev Dr Ross Olivier. We pay tribute to two Former Presidents of this Conference, Fathers Fremont Louw and Dr Khoza Mgojo who were called to higher service during the course of this year. May these dear servants together with many others not mentioned, find rest as they join the many pioneers of our faith.

We meet in the Kingdom of Swaziland where you will be spoilt by her breathtaking beauty and the hospitality. We salute Ingwenyama, King Mswati 111; we salute INdlovukazi and all the beautiful people of Swaziland. Our prayer is that our visit may add value towards a journey of peace, economic stability and meaningful life for all the people of Swaziland. As we gather here, the philosophy of King Sobhuza 11 comes to mind, “asikwami kwebantfu.” (It’s not mine, but belongs to the people). May these words of African wisdom find place in our hearts especially those who have the privilege and cross of leadership in church, government and all spheres of society. May they continue to be the seed that germinates continuously, so that we all may know that leadership is not for personal gain. The true spirit of leadership is others first.

So it is said that Christianity was brought to Swaziland by the Missionaries in 1844 on invitation by King Sobhuza 1 and Shiselweni Region was one of the first areas to embrace Christianity. This year marks the Centenary anniversary of the Mahamba Methodist Church building, that beautiful church built in 1912, and where the Mission Station was established in 1845. You will hear that story told during the course of this conference. It is also fitting that on the occasion of the first MCSA Conference to be held in this land, the SiSwati Hymnal will be launched.

The context:

Conference meets during spring, a season when all creation around us seems to be clapping its hands, welcoming new life and new beginnings. We also meet at a time when there is so much woundedness in people and creation. Hurricane Isaac has rendered countless homes/families and many lives in Louisiana tragically changed forever. We weep with the people of Syria as we witness a nation caught up in violent upheaval. The pain of Somalia and Sudan continues to disturb the whole world. Protests and responses thereto are becoming deadly exercises. We mourn the deaths of many workers in the North West Province of South Africa. Shocking images! That must never be repeated! There are wounds and more wounds- no healing. More hurtful were some of the responses and inciting statements. We are wounded. The refrain has been; "let us not point fingers." Whilst I understand that this refrain is meant to calm the dangerously high emotions and to stop the opportunism and point scoring by some, the time will have to come when we name the evil and together seek healing. We cannot afford to just put band-aids on the wounds and not open them for genuine healing to take place. The perpetrators of evil thrive behind carefulness and sensitivity – especially when we find ourselves trapped in a mode of proclaiming 'peace, peace' when there is no peace Wounds do not heal by being concealed. It is encouraging to learn that dialogue has been given a chance and that workers will return to work on Thursday 20th - it was not necessary for people to die in the first place.

The economic crisis which has hit the world has had a more severe negative impact on the people of Swaziland. It calls for serious consideration to do things differently. The collapse of public education especially in South Africa, where in Provinces like Limpopo, learners are without books and some of the books are found dumped. Communities around Kuruman in the Northern Cape have closed down schools since June in protest for service delivery. Something has gone wrong. The Southern African region which is our mission field is wounded: poverty is rife, effective health care and quality education is inaccessible to the

high numbers of disadvantaged people. There is need for life giving dialogue as we search for solutions.

The Theme “TOGETHER a healing community”:

The theme is informed by the verbalised and sometimes non-verbalised question in the minds of many: “Can life in Southern Africa be different? Shall we ever escape the cycle of violence, brutality of murderous actions against each other of grinding poverty, under-development, alienation from God and one another? Whilst evidence may point otherwise, as people of faith, we have to say “Yes together, we are a healing community! It is a theme that is a continuation of the conversations of previous conferences and seeks to encourage us on the journey of our Vision and Mission which is “A Christ Healed Africa for Healing of Nations.” This follows the call of the last two conferences, of ‘an invitation to a round table’. Introducing the theme at last year’s conference, Rev Ivan Abrahams said: “Our healing challenge remains to work for the elimination of structures still based on racial, cultural and economic exclusions as we seek to work to emulate Jesus’ principles aimed at including everyone within the family of God.” The emphasis is on the aspect of our *togetherness* as a healing community. It speaks to who we are and who we are striving to be. The Biblical origins of a healing community are not difficult to find. Acts 2:42-47 is an often quoted example. That community is characterised by teaching, fellowship, sharing of bread and prayers. The theme of togetherness is very clear and is followed by an observation of signs and wonders and God adding to the number as a stamp of approval. The signs and wonders that come from the approving heart of God, mitigate the pain of challenges.

"Woundedness:"

I do not need to dwell too much in explaining the wounded state in which we are in at this time, as this is evident and gives itself expression at different times and contexts of our existence. The signs of our 'woundedness,' jump out in social networks and media, road rage, conversations, lifestyles, violent ways of relating to each other, shattered hopes everywhere, excluding behaviours, the list is endless. As someone suggested; our wounds run deep and result from our wounded consciousness. The wounded psyche poisons every thought, poisons our ears, our tongues and our hands. In many instances, what we think, what we hear what we say and what we do inflict wounds all around us. Alan Boesak made the observation that “the weeds of alienation and fragmentation will return and choke the hope of reconciliation.” I want to add that, those weeds are with us now and those weeds are not only choking the seeds of

reconciliation but the very hope of well-being. The 'woundedness' holds us back from doing what God is calling us to do together. It is the 'woundedness' that prompted Alfred Henry Vine to pen down the hymn:

“Phefumlela Thixo wethu xa sithandazayo kuWe, sidalele ubomi obutsha, masikhanyiselwe nguWe. Zusinyamezele Thixo, sakuxakwa yintliziyo ethi noko indlela iyazi, ibe ithanda ukunxaxha. (O Breath of God, breathe on us now, and move within us while we pray; the spring of our new life art Thou, the very light of our new day. But ah this faithless heart of mine! The way I know; I know my guide; forgive me O Friend divine, that I so often turn aside.”

Local Churches as centres of healing:

It is of course easier to describe what is needed than to create it. A call was made during the Millennium Mission campaign and strongly emphasised by the Mission Congress which met at Mthatha in 2004, that every local church should be a centre of healing. This is very urgent now! As we prepare to return to Mthatha in 2013, what does the score card show? What signs of healing do our local churches and communities show? A number of conferences have made a call for the building and strengthening of healing communities – communities that heal both the person and the societies in which we live- our wounds are keeping us apart. There are some good examples of healing communities in our connexion, but there are also some bad ones. Together, we can build and nurture these, not because it is a nice thing to do, but because this is who God is calling us to become – *Together* a healing community. Our God is spoken of in Psalm 133 as a God who rejoices at togetherness:

“How good and pleasant it is when brothers (*and sisters*) live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.”

As people of hope, called by God into community, we are called to look back and enter or re-enter the covenant with God and make the commitment that we cannot be part of instruments of destruction, but are partners towards the well-being of creation. Our calling requires that we imagine the future together. Karin Chubb asserts '*that which has not come about, has not come about due to our collective failure.*' I want to add the emerging future will be shaped to a great extent by our collective resolve to be part of healing communities all over the Connexion.

From commodity to communion:

Walter Brueggemann in his recent book titled; ‘Subversive Obedience,’ writes:

“What should interest us, I imagine, is how to get from commodity to communion, for it is a travail that we and our children and our grandchildren face.” Brueggemann 2011:91.

Nations and communities are becoming markets in which “everything and everyone is reduced to a tradable commodity.” Brueggemann further argues that the church is tempted to transpose its practice of good news in order to compete for a share in the market. The turning point is hearing afresh the cry of God as coming from the Prophet Jeremiah; “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?” (Jeremiah 8:22). God knows that there is a way for healing, but God’s people are held back by destructive loyalties to people and things in ways that reduce the powerless to commodities. Yes, it is correct to protect economic growth, investments, and to ensure that nations are governable and orderly, but that has to be done with a human heart and in a way that seeks to protect the vulnerable. The bruises of alienation and fragmentation are choking the transforming power of the Gospel. Is there no balm? Rorisang Tshabalala posed a similar question in the Sunday Independent of 9 September 2012; “How do we break the hypnotic spell of division...?” By:

- **Dividing profit making from health and the well-being of all**
- **Genuine coming together of Gods people versus the protection of self interest**
- **Faith and real life situations**
- **To bridge the divide between the rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless**
- **Division between sister and sister, brother and brother**

The surrender to Gods will compels us to live out the words of the song: “Christ enough to break all barriers...” The balm of our togetherness have to be evident in the communities from which we come, otherwise the slogan ‘mission is local’ rings hollow. The balm is to be found in real situations that people find themselves in. I like the context of prophet Ezekiel who in Ezekiel 3:14-15, had set among the exiles:

“The spirit then lifted me up and took me away and I went in bitterness and in anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the Lord upon me. I came to the exiles that lived at Tel Aviv near Kebar River. I sat among them overwhelmed.

It is a call that takes us and makes us sit among those driven to exile by circumstances of life- emotional, social family, economic, political and religious exile.

Brueggemann continues to remind us that liberation is not an event, but a journey and it is not into a vacuum but into a different way of life. The event recorded in Exodus was not simply a moment of liberating, but an on-going life *together*. When God led the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, God led them not into “unbridled, unqualified, unfocussed freedom that had no projection into the future. It was an exchange of bondage for bonding.” The new bonding relationship with one another is characterised by life-giving conversations, healing, changing attitudes, views, and lifestyles and expanding life-giving relationships. This is our calling! We are called to model a life of togetherness in our local communities. Dr Simon Gqubule writing about the then FEDSEM, says it was an attempt towards a non-racial, ecumenical movement that says to the world; ‘we can be different.’

The healing balm:

Much has been said and much has been done, but the wounds remain. Do we hear the ‘sobs ’of God through the Prophet Jeremiah?: “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?” (Jeremiah 8:22.) The healing balm the life of Gods people is to be seen in the healing of the wounds:

- of division and strife in all local communities. It is possible when we allow:
- seen in local churches being centres of healing where every member especially every leader and member becomes the agent of healing
- Allowing personal wounds to be healed in each and every person. I recommend the work of Dr Leon Klein who has provided some models that are worth looking at. (www.centresofhealing.com)
- In robust and respectful dialogue when dealing with challenges that we face. This has to be characterised by compassionate listening to each other in a way that allows forgiveness to heal us and draw us to each other. It has to be characterised by an all-embracing love that makes us better people.
- Confession, forgiveness, compassion, love, commitment need to be at the centre of our life together.
- The Wesleyan spirit of mission- venturing into new areas of need, seeing dying churches opening doors to those around them.
- Fresh ways of doing church in emerging new contexts

- Robust but respectful dialogue that help to shape that common vision which is able to pull us together as the desired healing community of God, characterised by emphatic listening to each other, forgiveness and embracing love that makes us better persons.
- Our energy and resources must be channelled in that direction. We cannot, and should not be running away from those who need us most. Things cannot remain the same whilst we claim to have a vision of healing and transformation. This we have to do *together*.
- Processes that rigorously focus on wellness of the pastoral teams/persons and their families to emerge. Healthy leaders and workers produce healthy outcomes.
- Relationships to be challenged and healed.
- Reclaim our role in Education: There are some key proposals being worked on by our Education Task Team on what our contribution can and should be. Every church is invited to lend a hand- be it a reading room or walking alongside learners, parents and teachers.
- Those in search of access to quality education to find a shoulder to lean on in our local societies. Upward Bound movement has suggested some simple actions that communicate that there is hope for Education even in South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland. (www.upwardbound.co.za). Every child must have access to quality education.

Hope for us all to be a true healing community *together*

This all possible! God wills it! God has us to do it together! Brother Timothy of the Holy Cross Monastery in Grahamstown said; “When waters are stirred, there is hope for healing.” As the circumstances of life stir the waters in the various areas of our lives together, there is hope for healing .As it is often said, ‘darkness is the absence of light.’ It is when the people of light dim, or choose to be absent, that space is given for the darkness to operate and the world becomes covered by all sorts of darkness, be it the moral darkness, religious, economic or political darkness. Let us therefore allow ourselves to be agents and reflectors of light in every area of our existence. Let us not settle for anything less.

Let us endeavour always to lower the barriers to collaboration, seek common ground, engage honest dialogue, and be prepared to acknowledge discomfort – sit with it, learn from it and allow true community to grow from it. “If we hope for meaningful relationships, we must practise being relational. Hope that is true hope is lived hope, and is the opposite to living with a culture of denial, because it does not shrink from reality” (Denise Ackermann 1993:6 in Ragbags

Theologies p 19). It is that call for true relationships with the full hope that the world can be different and will be different, that I am making here. “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.” (G.K. Chesterton in Ragbag Theologies page 4). This is the time to seriously make every endeavour to live out the Christian ideal of being a healing community TOGETHER!

Conclusion:

In the words of that prayer with which one of the former Presidents of this Conference, Alex Boraine, concludes his biography titled ‘Life in Transition’ – a prayer attributed to Sir Francis Drake in 1577, I end:

“Disturb us Lord, when we are too pleased with ourselves, when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little, when we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore... We ask You to push back the horizons of our hopes; and to push into the future in strength, courage, hope and love.”

Borrowing again from Mary Gast, (from ‘No Longer Strangers’), I say to you all:

“Let us now depart and hold fast to the Covenant,
Knowing that in Christ we are no longer strangers and sojourners,
But, are dearly loved children of the living God.”

Together a healing community!

Amen.

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7. **The Yearbooks of the** Methodist Church of Southern Africa.