

Conference Address 2013

Reading: Matthew 4:12 - 5: 14

Theme: TOGETHER a transforming discipleship movement

Introduction

The General Secretary of the Conference, Lay President, Bishops, District Lay Leaders, my colleagues in the ministry, conference delegates and honourable visitors and guests, I greet you warmly in the name of our crucified Messiah, Risen Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is with great joy and anticipation that I welcome you to this 124th Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. Please feel welcome in the Name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Amen.

We are meeting in Mthatha, in the Clarkebury District; I can assure you of the warm hospitality of the Methodist people in this District. This is the home of many great, transformational leaders in the history of Southern Africa, both in church and society. Leaders like Gideon Baqwa, Charles Phamla, EJ Mqoboli and JC Mvusi and many others hail from this district. Others who influenced the history of not only South Africa, but the world as well are, to mention just a few, the world icon Tata Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela who also hails from this District. The revered Oliver Reginald Tambo, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, and many others also come from this region. Just outside the borders of the District, but in the same region are the homes of Govern and Epainette Mbeki, Thabo Mbeki, Chris Hani, Clarence Makwetu et cetera. The Kings who invited the missionaries to bring the Gospel of peace, healing, hope and salvation; King Ngubengcuka of AbaThembu, Inkosi Ncaphayi of AmaBhaca and King Faku of AmaMpondo are revered ancestors from this area. Their action led to the establishment of prestigious mission stations with schools of excellence that offered quality education. Today, we weep when we witness the ruins that remain of those places of hope and pray that the phoenix would rise again and something new may be born. The recent troubles at the Walter Sisulu University were a cause of much concern. We applaud the stakeholders for coming to a resolution and pray that in future such disputes should be dealt with speedily to and with due sensitivity so that they do not lead to unnecessary disruptions and derailment of the futures of the already disadvantaged students from poor communities. We cannot afford to allow a system that sacrifices the futures of the young generation to continue any longer. All of us must be counted in the efforts that turn things around throughout the connexion.

The Conference last met here in 1994 in the very chamber where the Methodist Church of Southern Africa was banned in 1978 and where the doors were re-opened in 1988. The God of Grace was with His people all the time, patiently calling them and now us to be a faithful movement of transforming discipleship. It was here that the historic celebration of that un-banning took place in a stadium here in Mthatha in 1988 when the then President of Conference, Rev Dr Khoza Mgojo took us down memory lane to the origins of Methodism in this District as well as the powerful exposition of Proverbs 22:28; 'Do not remove the ancient landmark that your fathers have set.'

Welcome to the Clarkebury District.

It was here in Mthatha 2004 that the Mission Congress met and made a firm commitment that every local Methodist society would be a centre of healing and transformation. Last year at Conference, I asked that each local church do some self-examination and now ask how far they have gone towards this goal. Next year will be the 10th Anniversary of the Mission Congress, so it is appropriate that each local church does some self-examination in terms of the Mission Charter which was adopted and endorsed by Conference in 1995. I have asked that the Mission Charter be displayed at this Conference and trust that the same will be done in each District, Circuit and Society as a visible reminder of the commitments we made. As we do the self-examination, let me be the first to acknowledge the hard work done in some of our local churches under very trying circumstances. Your efforts do not go unnoticed especially by the One who called you. Keep on keeping on.

The Theme: TOGETHER a transforming discipleship movement.

There is no intention to move away from previous Conference themes. For those who may be asking what the message of the Methodist Church is at this time, I invite you to visit the themes of the Conferences in the last ten years. Those themes are also on display at this conference. The message has been consistent with our vision statement of 'A Christ Healed Africa for the Healing of Nations.' If you are not sure where to go and find guidance for your action plans, I urge you to visit these themes, addresses and the Conference Messages to the Methodist people in the last 10 years.

This year's theme is informed by this journey of the Methodist people as well as the context in which we find ourselves at this time. In the late 1990's, Phineas Dube who was then working for Africa Enterprise posed a challenge in the form of a question; *Are we as the Christian Church to build more buildings that look like churches or more people who are Christ-like?* The General Secretary of this Conference followed in later years with a comment in the 2008 report; "We are over-churched and under-disciplined." I know that the local churches have been trying their best to respond to these challenges over the years. My call today is a deep desire, which I know is shared by most, if not by all of us, to be bolder and more courageous and determined about being true Methodist disciples in today's challenging contexts. Our calling is to follow Jesus at this time; acknowledging Jesus as leader of our actions helps our witness to be characterised by grace, humility, justice and obedience.

Discipleship is not a special programme of the church. It is the very life of being church. Whilst acknowledging that the task may be daunting, the good news is that God is doing it, and we must not lose heart; God is not finished with us yet. It is always worth remembering that it is He who transforms the world He loves so dearly and calls upon us to live in a way that signals God's presence in the world. It is a journey of lifelong learning from the One who made us. We are called to be faithful. I have heard the following words often and sometimes out of my own lips: "This is our church," until I came across a warning from Brian McLaren, who said that this *is misleading in two ways. First, the church isn't ours; it's God's church. Second, it isn't ours; it's us.* Discipleship is therefore not something that stands outside of us, it is our DNA – our being and should be defined by what God is calling us to be – "a transforming discipleship movement." The very nature of this call is revolutionary. We are not asked to *be standing in the flow of the status quo* (to use Brian McLaren's words). We are called to be revolutionaries against the status quo which robs God's people and creation of the state of well-being. We have to be a movement that is constantly on the journey of being Christ-like. We must strive for a faith that overturns the world and sets the agenda towards the will of God.

The theme is intended to be an invitation for us to listen together, to think together and to act together towards being a movement that changes lives of individuals and communities beginning with me.

Martyn Atkins, the General Secretary of the Methodist Church in Britain, writes in the booklet entitled: **Discipleship and the people called Methodist**; *we are a story-rich Church and want to encourage each other to be ready storytellers. Not just the many good stories but also the stories of struggle and hurt, in order that the unfolding story of God's faithfulness and leading, and the cost of discipleship is known among us more deeply.* In order to deepen the impact of that story-telling, it should happen across all known boundaries. Our God is faithful and our God is in action and our God acts across all boundaries. We are simply called to follow. The purpose is far more significant than our own survival. The commitment to discipleship, to being learners and followers of Jesus Christ – learning to be better followers ourselves and in the process contributing to the making of more followers, *who desire to pray and work to transform the world led by the Holy Spirit – is a key theme of our Church. Methodism is at its roots a discipleship movement and a disciple-making movement. It is the yearning and active seeking to become better disciples of Jesus Christ, and offering Him to others, that lies at the heart of being Methodist Christians.* (Atkins).

The call to Discipleship

Let us visit one of the beautiful passages where Jesus sounds the call to discipleship. It is in Matthew 4:12-5:14. According to Thomas Long, everything that is to follow in the ministry of Jesus is in embryonic form in this passage. I find this passage very compelling. Here is the glimpse of the future of ministry and mission – the making of disciples. John Hiigel in his recent book: **'Partnering with the King'** introduces the passage in a very interesting way. He says: *The preliminaries are completed. Jesus has been baptised in the Jordan and tested in the wilderness. The mission of John the forerunner has ended with imprisonment. It is time for the main event.* Jesus is introduced as coming from the desert solitude and temptations. His arrival is described as light coming into darkness. Hear the words in Matthew 4:15&16:

The land of Zebulon and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.

The link to the land of Zebulon and Naphtali points to Matthew's conviction that what is about to happen is not a game of chance, but the unfolding of God's plan. The reference to the Galilee of the Gentiles points to the emphasis that the message of good news is transcending borders, boundaries and barriers. Jesus is calling for disciples to take it there with Him. Thirdly verse 17 says that Jesus made the call for repentance. Discipleship is linked to repentance. It is not something to just know about, but has a transforming effect – the metanoia. Things cannot remain the same. New sets of relationships are formed and new direction is followed.

The call is made to four fishermen by the Sea of Galilee. With authority Jesus calls **them to follow Him** and they get up immediately **and do just that – they follow Him**. They follow him in the business of bringing light into darkness. I don't know if they are aware that this is for the rest of their lives, but they knew who they were following for John had introduced Him as recorded in John 1: 29 – 42. The two disciples Andrew and Simon heard John announcing; 'Behold, the Lamb of God' *who*

takes away the sin of the world and gives the world a new chance of being. Luke adds another dimension and says that they had seen Him perform a miracle as recorded in Luke 5:1-11 - the great miraculous catch of fish after toiling in vain for the whole night. Matthew who himself had left the tax collection booth to follow Jesus emphasises the impact of the presence of Jesus. The call to discipleship stirs people to act differently and changes the course of one's way of life. They are called to learn from Him and imitate His way of life. Before they encountered Jesus, their lives were already set in a particular direction. They were fishermen, not only recreationally, but for a living. It was their career. They were fishers of fish for profit and now they are to follow the One, who said that He would make them fishers of men and there is no guarantee of what was in it for them.

At that stage they were not yet disciples but Jesus said *I will make you....* It is Jesus who will do the making. They were not yet equipped for this new role, but the equipping would happen on the journey as they learnt from the One who calls and leads the way. Apart from reading about discipleship, important as it is, the transformation takes place as they encounter Jesus and walk with Him. Archbishop Elias Chacour of Galilee gives an Aramaic translation of the Beatitudes recorded in Matthew 5. He says the Aramaic word in the place of the word "blessed" which has a passive quality is *ashray* from the verb *yashar*. He says that word means "to set you on the right way for the right goal." The Aramaic word has a sense of getting up, going ahead, doing something and moving. In the Aramaic language, Chacour says Jesus would have been saying:

Get up, go ahead, do something, move; you who are hungry and thirsty for justice, for you shall be satisfied. Get up, go ahead, do something, move; you peacemakers, for you shall be called children of God... Get your hands dirty to build a human society for human beings otherwise, others will torture and murder the poor, the voiceless and the powerless (Elias Chacour, *We belong to the Land*).

Something happens on the journey with Jesus. It is not in the recitation, but in the following, that the world is turned around. From then on their personal agendas take a back seat and their lives become something God is doing. The orientation of their minds shifts from self to God. They were used to living for themselves and now they are to live for God. They were used to making plans according to their ambitions and common sense, now they were to follow God's command and fit into God's plans.

It is no longer about me and mine. The discipleship movement gets power when the mind-set changes from me and mine to God's will. Even when the old mind-set wants to throw some doubts and confusion, the experience of following Jesus takes them back on course. When the old ways wanted to pull them (the disciples) back and they grumbled when Jesus laid down the law; "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him." (John 6.56). Many said that this was a hard saying and began to turn away. Jesus said to the twelve which included these four; *do you want to go as well?* It was through the experience of the journey that Peter could say: *Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.*

The journey forms and transforms and has the power of setting the agenda for the world. When we've only heard about Jesus, we lose the power to set the agenda and we ourselves begin to look elsewhere for the answers. This was one of John Wesley's fears: *I am not afraid that the Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as*

the dead sect, having the form of religion without power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast the doctrine, spirit and discipline with which they first set out. Jesus is central to the discipleship movement. 'Follow me,' He calls to them. Not your own ideas, or philosophy or skills but follow Jesus, the living person; learn from Him, imitate Him, be with Him, so that people are drawn to Him and not to a certain nice group of like-minded people, but to Jesus. The life of the disciples will revolve around Jesus and they are life-long learners who will not graduate but will continue to learn from Him as life continues to throw challenges their way.

Jesus is about bringing together the people of God through renewing them; the fishermen were called to partner with God in the business of gathering people who are learners of Jesus. The people are gathered for a relationship with Jesus. **NB: not as individuals or small sects BUT church TOGETHER!!!**

How are we to do this?

This is a genuine question. How do we get to know what God wants? We can only hold on to the promise that He will be with us, and that we are therefore called to journey with Him, asking Him when in doubt; keeping constant communication with Him. Hiigel writes; *the most helpful activity for learning His way is to converse with Him.* Prayer becomes constant in the life of the follower. Guidance is taken from prayer and the scriptures. Scripture helps our praying to be a two-way conversation, so that we listen and hear Jesus as well instead of simply talking to Him. Earlier in the year, I invited a small group of intercessors from around the connexion and we spent time prayerfully discerning how to enhance the prayer life of this movement. I humbly request this conference to take this call very seriously. We have to be a praying church.

Secondly we reflect on our journey constantly. That is why we need companionship, so that together we may reflect on how it is with our souls. We walk with Jesus accompanied by others who walk with Him. Key to the Methodist Discipleship movement is openness to the in-filling of the Holy Spirit. Atkins writes that Methodism is one of the tributaries contributing to the emergence of the Pentecostal tradition and later renewal movements, but Methodists have never regarded the Holy Spirit as being *captive* to the church, and therefore having the only role of blessing those in the church. God's Holy Spirit is the One who hovered over the whole created order and continues to do so in order to renew the whole of creation. The Holy Spirit is the One who reveals the things of God, and the One who convicts and converts. Whatever we do, whoever we meet and wherever we are, God the Spirit is already there. The challenge is to join him.

Discipleship is central to Jesus's mission and method. Making disciples is the core of the ministry and mission of Jesus. The mission of Jesus is about forming a community of partners whose hearts are adjusted to the will of God and it is the continuous calling of the church to draw more and more into the life of discipleship and the final great harvest will be at the end, as we finally join the Leader of the movement, Jesus Christ. This will be an all-inclusive community, not two categories of specialists; committed disciples and majority who are ordinary Christians. No, the joyous celebration at the end will be that of followers of Jesus TOGETHER.

Together:

I have chosen the word TOGETHER deliberately. Discipleship requires mutual encouragement and help. You can't do it on your own. We belong TOGETHER. Each church is the Church catholic, and not simply a part of it. The Porto Alegre statement of the World Council of Churches; 'Called to be One Church (Geneva: The World Council of Churches 2006) asserts; *each church is the Church catholic, but not the whole of it. Each church fulfils its catholicity when it is in communion with other churches* The Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the birth of the church and offers a Biblical picture of a church that is inherently mission shaped, called and sent to bear costly witness to the Risen and Ascended Lord. It is through that witness, that the Holy Spirit was pleased to create a community characterised by holiness. John Wesley said: *By Methodist I mean a people who profess to pursue holiness... of heart and life, inward and outward conformity in all things to the revealed will of God; who place religion in a uniform resemblance of the great object of it; in a steady imitation of Him they worship... particularly in justice, mercy and truth, or universal love filling the heart, and governing the heart.* This is what we do together because we are interconnected. That interconnectedness is expressed by the New Testament word – *koinonia* – which basically means *called together*. Atkins says that word, indicates a *common life in Christ for believers*. We are in connexion with the eternal family of God.

The call to follow implies movement somewhere:

Jesus proclaimed the Gospel by words, deeds and signs. His teaching in words is supported by actions. Jesus is continuously on the move. In our world today where would Jesus go? I imagine Jesus going to your work place and my work place and inviting me to join Him there instead of the other way round; showing me and you how to live in that context. As they say, there is something called the 9-5 window – which is the best opportunity to witness to Jesus' presence in your life – announcing not only in words but by actions and signs, the hope that is there in Christ Jesus. I imagine Jesus in every school and clinic and hospital or even in every legislature or political meeting or labour union, and in every relationship showing us how to do things there. I imagine him present in every congregation and circuit and even at this conference and every Synod; being part of the worship and every activity and meeting; leading the way and not us inviting Him to bless what we do, but us discerning what He wants to do with these structures and gatherings. I hear His call *follow me and I will make you* instruments of calling all people to join this transforming discipleship movement. As the Mission Congress did here in Mthatha in 2004, I echo the call for:

- Every congregation to strive to be a centre of healing and transformation. Of course each congregation is placed where it is to take notice of the reality in their locality. There are children who are being sacrificed by the education system in every town, city or whatever you call your mission area. We have the resources to do something about the access to quality education by all as already shown by many endeavours around the connexion. We have parents, grand-parents, learners in our midst; committed educators as well as those who may be frustrated in one way or another including those who are broken by one thing or another. We have people with all kinds of expertise to assist and we have buildings. What are we waiting for? There are so many good models around the Connexion which must find their way into every area of need. Even the Governments and other stake-holders should be held accountable.
- I urge each and every member, severally and collectively to take following of Jesus very seriously, so that the transformation of society may be a reality. I long for the growth of true

learners in the school of following Jesus – that all of us may be transformed in the likeness of Him who loves us so dearly that He laid down His life that we may have life in all abundance

- We must follow Jesus who challenged unjust systems, acted in ways that are aimed at improving the quality of life of all God's people. Immanuel Kant, the German Philosopher warned against loyalty to powers that exist at the expense of principle and justice. Many nations get into destructive mode when their focus becomes loyalty to power in order to get something, more than focus on justice and the will of God. Paraphrasing the General Secretary: *we must be a movement of givers more than being takers as we follow Jesus who gave His life for the world.*
- I call upon all of us to declare 2014 a Year of Lament and Weeping: Weeping for corruption that is eating the souls of persons and nations. Corruption is spiritual and moral impurity and deviation from what is ideal. We cannot go on as if nothing is happening. We are being deconstructed to something less of being human. Whilst celebrating many good things that we have; like 20th anniversary of democracy in South Africa and achievements in other countries of the connexion, we must weep, put on sack cloth for those things that degrade human life and creation and plead with 'God of Life to lead us to Peace, Justice and Dignity.'

This call is made at a time when abuse and violence against women, children and vulnerable persons continue to hurt the heart of God. Paul Brand says it is like the case of leprosy patients, who lose the ability to feel the pain; they become numb and insensitive to pain. An injury to one is an injury to all, writes Paul. May God of the abused vulnerable people, God of the victims of brutality and violence disturb us and move us to action with Him as He walks wounded among His wounded people. I put it to all of us that the time is now for us to:

- Stand up and be counted in condemning violence and abuse on the spot, where it happens
- Begin a serious education campaign in all our spheres of influence against this brokenness
- To lobby support of all stake- holders for clear action by all of us against this monster
- Push, persuade and disturb our governments to pull all stops in dealing with this evil and harmful behaviour
- Whilst the conversation on how we go forward with regard to same-sex relationships is still on-going, we must be very strong in condemning homophobic violence. No one has the right to kill or ill-treat anyone irrespective of our beliefs or positions on the matter.

The balance has always been between the works of piety and works of mercy. The emphasis is on being, before doing. Follow me and I will make you. That is a healthy balance. *From the beginning Methodist discipleship was not about being so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly use.* (Atkins). Acts of devotion, compassion and social transformation have always belonged together in Methodist discipleship. Human beings are not only bodiless souls to be made ready for heaven nor are they soulless bodies only to be materially looked after. The two belong together.

It is fitting to conclude with the words of Charles Wesley's hymn:

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire, to work, and speak, and think for Thee; Still let me guard the holy fire, and stir up thy gift in me – Ready for all thy perfect will, my acts of faith and love repeat, till death thy endless mercies seal, and make the sacrifice complete. AMEN