

## Conference Address 2016

**Theme:** **TOGETHER** a transforming discipleship movement

**Sub-theme:** Igniting Mission – breaking barriers

**Readings:** John 17: 13-26.

### Greetings

The leadership of the Church and the members of the 127<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, distinguished guests, my dear mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers in the faith, I greet you warmly in the name of our Triune God – Amen. I extend a word of welcome to all of us who have set this time aside for holy conferencing. We look forward to robust debates, inspiring imagination of the future and a conference soaked in prayer.

### Acknowledgements and Introduction:

We meet in the City of Tshwane, the seat of the South African Government. Many of us will remember the songs of old during the dark days of Apartheid: “*Siyaya ePitoli*” – a yearning for an inclusive, free and peaceful society with justice and dignity for all. The hope was that the excluded majority would, in future, be included in decision-making thereby shaping a better future for all. Twenty- two years ago, that vision became a reality. “*Sifikile ePitoli.*”

This year, we meet in Tshwane – the destination of over 20 000 women from all racial and ethnic groups who marched here in 1956, 60 years ago now, demanding the fall of oppressive and discriminatory barricades – chanting: “*wathint’ abafazi, wathint’ imbokodo.*” Enough was enough! Twenty two years ago, these barriers of legislated separation crumbled. These achievements give us the hope that all barriers will fall in the end. John, on the island of Patmos, was given a glimpse of that final harvest – “*a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language before throne.*” (Revelation 7:9). John looked and the barriers had fallen.

For now, however, the church of God is called upon to join God in the dismantling and overcoming of barriers, because there are many that still stand. They too will fall, in the final analysis. In all the member countries of the Connexion and the world at large, the people of God must be reconciled to God, to one another and to the God-given resources of our beautiful lands. God is calling us to deliberate on ‘igniting mission and breaking all barriers!’

Botswana, which is part of this hosting District, is celebrating its Golden Jubilee. It was 50 years ago when Botswana ceased to be a British Protectorate on 30 September 1966, the same month and year in which Hendrik Verwoed died. You will recall that the seat of the Botswana government had just moved from Mahikeng in South Africa to Gaborone in 1965. That is the same year that the Botswana Christian Council was founded. Winds of change

were blowing across the African continent at the time. I had the privilege of joining the Botswana Council of Churches in their Golden Jubilee celebrations and listened to moving stories of their journey. I was asked to request Conference to join the people of Botswana in prayer for their land. They face challenges which include high HIV/AIDS prevalence, desertification, inequality and poverty especially in the rural areas including the looming specter of some emerging political tensions. As they celebrate their Golden Jubilee, we pray that Botswana continues to grow in justice, peace and dignity for all her people. We wish them well in their celebrations. I ask this Conference to send the Botswana Government and Botswana Council of Churches a message of congratulations assuring them of our prayers.

The drought affecting most of southern Africa has had a devastating impact on many forms of livelihood in the region and far reaching effects on food security, economic growth and unemployment levels. We continue to call on all of us to preserve the sanctity of all creation even as we pray that the forthcoming rainy season will be a good one.

In the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, we celebrate 40 years of the decision made by this Conference to ordain women to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments in the same way as the ordination of men. Let me be quick to say that it is a celebration that marks the awakened consciousness of the church that we are all equal in the eyes of God. Space should be opened for all to exercise their call irrespective of gender. Some have asked that we call this year 'a year of lamentation' because of the injustices and prejudices suffered by women over the years. Whilst I acknowledge the need for such lamentation and repentance, we must not miss the opportunity to express our joy in what God has done. The doors were opened, some barriers fell. We must therefore use this opportunity to call for ongoing reflection and action that will remove any remaining barriers.

The barriers of Hebrew slavery fell down on the Passover night and Hebrew slaves left Egypt for the Promised Land. However, on the way they encountered numerous challenges, and even doubted the leadership of Moses, but they never missed any opportunity to remember the night in which God performed the liberation miracle and passed over the houses of the slaves as He shook and broke down the shackles of oppression. We paused this year to remember what God did for us forty years ago. I extend Conference's appreciation and thanks to all who have heeded the call to celebrate and gone beyond what we asked for in remembering this precious moment in the life of the church to celebrate with our women colleagues. We are not celebrating our successes but what God has done. To God belongs all the Glory!

This is the year that marks 200 years of the arrival of Barnabas Shaw in the Cape and the beginning of Methodist witness in this country which later spread to the member countries of the Connexion. Therefore this Conference marks the beginning of the celebration of this milestone. Let us acknowledge our past, reflect on the present and imagine the future. The General Secretary's report will unpack some of the thoughts of the Heritage Committee as we declare the time from now until Conference 2017 – the year of Heritage. Let us further

remember that 2017 also marks 500 years of Reformation. The Ecumenical Affairs Unit will guide us on how we join the Lutheran Communion and the ecumenical movement in marking that occasion and its impact on the life of the church and society.

We meet during the World Week for Peace in Palestine and Israel, which is being observed from 18 – 24 September 2016. It is a week of advocacy and action in support of a just peace for all in Israel and Palestine. In 2017, it will be 50 years since the Israeli occupation of Palestine in 1967. The conflict in the Holy Land has been long and continues to this day. The Kairos Palestine movement calls on the world church to intensify its prayers for a just peace. In their invitation they write; “It’s time for Palestinians and Israelis to share a just peace and for the healing of wounded souls.” One has to visit the Palestinian Christians in order to fully grasp the depth of the tragedy. In 2013 we made the call that whoever visits the Holy Land should make an effort to add a day or two to visit the other side. The Kairos Palestine movement has for some years now been extending the invitation to “come and see.” Barriers continue to rise separating people from one another and from life-serving spaces. There are walls, check-points, fences, army barricades and violence from both sides that continue to tear people apart. All this has to come to an end. Only just peace can dismantle those barriers.

**Gratitude and call for prayers:**

I am grateful to the Methodist people who have offered me the space to serve in the highest office and in Wesley’s chair for a further term of office. I do not take that for granted, because I know my weaknesses. The space granted to me by this church to exercise my calling is a special gift that I cannot claim to deserve. To have been asked to serve as Superintendent, Bishop and now Presiding Bishop is indeed the work of God’s grace. I am conscious of the seriousness of that call to serve. It is indeed holy ground that calls me to be on my knees often. I know that the Methodist people have never stopped praying for me, my family and the church. I accept the call with deep humility, trusting in the equipping of God as I acknowledge that I am work-in-progress and therefore will need lots of prayers, coaching and to be held accountable as I take on the yoke of leadership for my last stretch in active ministry. To borrow Nelson Mandela’s words, with modification, I offer the remaining years of my active service into your hands. I love and have a high regard for this church. This church has through God’s grace made me who and what I am today.

**The sub-theme of this Conference: “Igniting mission – breaking barriers.”**

Speaking at the morning Worship Service at the World Methodist Conference in Houston, Texas, on 1 September 2016, Rudy Rasmus told the story of the Good Samaritan and asked the question; “What happens when love crosses the street?” I want to suggest that that mission is love crossing the street. So together with Rasmus, I beg to ask the question; “How do you imagine love crossing the street in your context and locality?” I concluded the 2015 Conference Address by making a call for mission to be informed and shaped by

compassionate and unifying justice. We need to reflect deeply and strive to become a society that embraces difference and demonstrates a better reality. Whilst the context is ever changing, there are realities that have remained the same. Perceptions of racial superiority and the pain of the marginalized, continue to haunt us. The church must be at the forefront of the mission drive to transform this reality. Yes, the church has the potential to lead in the mission of transforming realities. Above all God is calling us now to journey together with the God of life throughout the length and breadth of the Connexion as a true transforming discipleship movement. God cares and God has done it and continues to do it. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14). Jesus became the "incarnation" of the love of God and mission is being the presence of God in word, deed and signs; becoming the "incarnation" of God's love. Barriers must fall and love must cross the street, igniting the life-changing mission of God.

### **What mission?**

The 2013 World Council of Churches Assembly meeting in Busan, South Korea adopted the Statement on Mission and Evangelism, entitled; "Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes." That statement begins by affirming faith in the Triune God who is acknowledged as "the creator, redeemer and sustainer of all life." It further reminds us that mission begins in the heart of God and is therefore God's mission. It is that missionary God who calls and empowers the people into a community of hope. "The church is commissioned to celebrate life and to resist and transform all life destroying forces." Any denial of life is the rejection of the God of life. The mission of God must reflect the transforming love of God. It must be true to the message of the Gospel. Paul Verghese from India once wrote, "The mission of the church is the greatest enemy of the Gospel." (Unisa Study Guide: Church and Mission, page 83.) Any congregation that seeks to serve itself is an enemy of the Gospel call "to go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them all that Jesus has commanded". The Gospel message is to transform realities, change lives, and strive for justice, peace and dignity and to move beyond self.

Mission must translate into the building of genuine relationships in a way that does not dehumanize. Salvation is not only saving from sin, but also being saved **for life** that God intends us to live. Jean Vanier writes that ***the most important thing is not to do things to the poor and those in distress, but to enter into relationship***, learn from one another and allow the transforming energy to create a true transforming movement where we discover and unearth each other's gifts to build a new world. Genuine relationships can only develop and thrive when both sides give and receive. As G.A. Hood put it, "some parts of the church are clearly being impoverished by feeling unable to give and others by their inability to receive." (Hood G.A, 1972:277). We must ignite a true mission spirit that grows fellow followers of Jesus TOGETHER. We belong together. We are baptized together into one body.

Jesus, the incarnation of God's love, made residence in the margins. Note that Jesus did not tour the margins but dwelt in the margins of society. A WCC statement notes that mission has been seen as a movement from the center to the periphery and from the privileged to the marginalized. It calls for the recognition of the people at the margins of society as authentic agents of mission. It is there that mission is affirmed as transformation. God chose the poor, the foolish and the powerless to ignite God's mission of justice, peace and dignity, "so that life may flourish." This calls for the negation of the propaganda spread by "market ideology that the global market will save the world." It is time to seriously engage the paralyzing threat that a serious transformation agenda will drive investments away and make people poor. Who benefits from this ideology anyway? What could be described as God's mission in the midst of economic and ecological injustice? What barriers need to fall and what is the nature of mission that dismantles those barriers? The church has to be resident among the poor instead of being tourists who sometimes bring some "goodies" as 'gifts' for the poor. The poor must not be seen as a burden that waits for the crumbs of our blessings, but as partners and mission agents that can help the world to recover its humanity. The call is meant to awaken us to this reality. The cries of the poor and the marginalized which are sometimes met with resentment, suspicion and even brutal force are actually God's whispers to wake us up. In most cities and big towns there is what is called "inverse densification" where the peripheries are densifying much faster than the inner suburbs. The scale of our resources or rather the distribution of God-given resources is skewed against this reality. In the church, more clergy are concentrated in single societies and where there is densification, we are reducing agency. We have a smart excuse that says we must not station ministers in unviable circuits. What kind of mission is this? The global market is defining our mission strategy. Is it possible to demonstrate something different? *Yes it is.*

### **The complex mission field**

The political, socio-economic and demographic landscape is changing rapidly. Migration and displacements are bringing countries all over the world onto each other's door-steps. Yes, there are different reasons for this – some are the harsh conditions created by conflicts and economic realities, but also there are factors of shrinking world space and exploding populations. Instead of a commitment to God's mission that seeks to transform realities and create conditions that allow God-given life to flourish, some among us dream of running away from what has been mismanaged politically and economically to some distant horizons where prospects seem better. But reality is proving that challenges will continue to exist and space will continue to shrink. We need each other in order to dig deep into the rich well of diversity. Together, we can be a transforming discipleship movement with a diversity of approaches and gifts which God can use to transform the world. In a conversation with our General Secretary, Rev Charmaine Morgan, a bishop from another conference said that in the context of the changing landscape and changing demographics at our door steps, the key is "**not assimilation, not separation but true integration**"

allowing each other's stories to enrich us in the context of God's Story. Authentic Christian witness is not only what we do in mission but how we live out our mission. It is not what we go out and do for others, good as that may seem, but is joining together and allowing God to enable us to see the gift of what God is doing in our diversity. I pray for the planting of new churches that reflect the changing dynamics. # True obedient churches must grow.

### **God igniting mission – “Mission Dei**

If we believe that mission is the mission of God and not of the church, then we need to spend more time seeking to understand what God is doing in the world and what God's vision for the world is. I like the analogy of the matches/lighter – the potential is already there, it is a given. Igniting is not creating, but awakening what lies dormant. We are not asked to start or create but to ignite. The flame is already there – given by God. What do we ignite then? I want to further suggest the following:

#### **(1) Revitalisation of Wesley's small groups:**

For John Wesley, class meetings were at the heart of the Methodist revival movement. He writes; “Never omit meeting your class or band... These are the very sinews of our society; and whatever weakens, or tends to weaken, our regard for these, or our exactness in attending them, strikes at the very root of our community.” (Watson KM, 2014). Kevin Watson makes a distinction between different types of small groups that exist in the church for different reasons. He argues that in the main there are three approaches to small groups: (a) Affinity Groups which are formed around common passions, interests and even hobbies, (b) Information driven groups which focus on conveying information and learning more about the faith, discussion and mastery of content. (c) He then advocates for transformation driven groups which focus on changed lives. This group is focused more on living than learning. This group focusses on transformation and not information. The guiding question becomes ‘How have you lived your life during this past week, in loving God and neighbour? How is it with your soul?’ Edward Wimberly in a book titled; ‘No Shame in Wesley's Gospel’, speaks of the loss of relational connections and close-knit communities. Wimberley then suggests that the small groups are to “to recover the village/close knit community which was disappearing on account of global realities and dynamics.” He further explores the practical theology of Wesley's small groups and how it can contribute to the twenty-first century ministry to people who could be classified as “relational refugees.”

Wimberly speaks of shame as a feeling of being unloved and unlovable and argues that this is the experience of many twenty-first century people because of the loss of relational connections. Painting the dangers of emerging reactions which he calls: “cultural narcissism or self-love, the cult of self-admiration which is replacing self-actualization, and equating wealth and social status with being loved.” He suggests that Wesley's class meetings/ small groups can serve as a means of saving grace and spaces for therapeutic interactions. The praxis of the supportive nature of class meetings is needed at a time where “brokenness,

isolation and feelings of being unloved, commodification of human life and narcissistic or self-identity yield to shame.” #class meetings are the sinews of revival and transformation.

## **(2) Sunday Schools as key focus areas:**

Statistics show us that in Africa, there is no shortage of children and young people. In fact a UNFPA report states that in 15 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, half the population is under the age of 18 and overall 62 percent of the population in Africa—more than 600 million young people—is below the age of 25.

We have to be the church that is resident in the space of children and young people instead of opening little spaces for children **in our space**. It is the children and young people who are able to take us into their space. It has been said that Sunday school is the door to evangelism. We have to imagine how to allow the children to take us where the rest of God’s people are. Reflecting on the statistics that we have, which are far from impressive, I hereby make a call that we revisit our Sunday school ministry/children’s ministry and prioritize it as our focus area as we seek to join God in igniting mission. Let each society do an in-depth audit of their children ministries and also scan the community in which it finds itself praying that scales fall off our physical and spiritual eyes in order to see where God wants us to be. I have heard many testimonies of people whose formation began at an early age. I am sure there are so many such testimonies that you have heard. As we reflect on these testimonies let us ask ourselves: how many children are left unconnected in each community and are missing this opportunity of the means of grace? # prioritize children’s ministry everywhere

On the back of the 21<sup>st</sup> World AIDS Conference held in Durban in July, statistics released have shown that sub-Saharan Africa continues to carry the heaviest burden of HIV infections with 2000 girls between the ages of 15-24 infected every week in South Africa. This calls for an urgent re-evaluation of our programmes for young people with sexual and reproductive health and rights education mainstreamed into all youth activities. The church is not immune to the impact of HIV.

Re-focused attention on children will begin in each local church and no local church can do it alone as if it is the only agent in that community. In order for us to do this we need to take statistics seriously. They will help us see how we are doing in the mission field that God has given us. There are agencies out there with the information and expertise to assist us. Let us count the number of children in our Sunday Schools/ Children’s ministries against those outside in our communities. This can also apply to the reflection of membership planning for the future. I propose that we do a membership and children’s ministries census in each society, between now and synods in 2017. #Statistics must speak.

### **(3) Missional imagination:**

Desmond Tutu urges us not to lose imagination. He cites C.S Lewis in believing that “We were made for another world.” A church united in purpose and prayer is able to imagine a reality which is beyond the logic of the world. When poverty affects millions whilst tons of food is being thrown away; when violence and threats of conflicts abound all around the world; when fear and prejudice tear communities apart – another world is possible. That is the imagination of the people of faith. When divisions abound, an alternative society is should be envisaged. The movement of the early followers of Jesus set off in barrier-dismantling ways, forming unthinkable relationships and fellowship. The disciples themselves were drawn from across impossible barriers. The composition of the first disciples of Jesus showed the intention to transcend the tensions of the old community. John Meier points to the startling juxtaposition of “Simon, the Zealot and hater of Roman occupation with Matthew, the tax collector, a lackey (foot soldier) of Rome.” (Meier JP, Matthew, 1980:105). This is the team for whom Jesus prayed for unity. He prayed to God to sanctify them with truth and he prayed also for those who would believe through the message of this team that outwardly looked ill-conceived, that all of them would be one.

In order for the above to be realized, this movement must be soaked in prayer. Prayer is not an obligation but an opportunity to rest in God in order to stay awake to what is true. God’s mission is looking for a church that is a maternity ward for the birthing of a new reality that is beyond the logic of the world. The church at the local level must be in the forefront of leading each and every member to be in active anticipation of that new world being born. We are all created in the image of God. The appreciation of that reality must be evident in the lives of our members and communities.

What a great vision **God has given to this church! “A Christ Healed Africa for the Healing of the Nations.”** Attempts have been made before in the form of Obedience 81, Journey to the New Land and the Mission Congress – both past and forthcoming. They all speak to the birth of a new obedient church that follows the transforming spirit of God.

### **(4) The vision of Jesus in John 17**

Reflecting on John 17, Michael Cassidy wrote a book entitled, “The Church Jesus prayed for” which planted a seed of missional imagination in me. In John: 17, Jesus makes two requests: first He prays that He may be used by the Father for the full and final display of divine love. For that, He offers His own life in sacrifice. He then prays for a new society standing out in marked contrast to the world – a society of believers who belong to God and embrace the fullness of the divine truth. It is a society that reflects the unity of will and purpose that exists in the Trinity. He makes it clear that the disciples are neither to escape from the world nor be immune to the hatred of the world, but they are to reflect the divine love of God in their conduct in the world. It is this reflection of the divine love that must be ONE. That unity of purpose will make the world recognize the divine mission of God. It is possible when



the Church has “moments of divine gaze” as Jesus did, focusing on God, communicating with God and allowing God to lend the shining presence of divine love on the church, so that the divine spark of mission may be ignited ; so that the mission of God and not of the church may be ignited. AMEN.