

Mission Congress 2016: Background, Purpose and Significance.

Introduction

My task is to give a brief account of the background, purpose and significance of the Mission Congress 2016. I have also been asked to try and sketch an overview of some of the work that has happened since Mission Congress 2016. The responsibility of giving direction in of where we are going to be going in the next ten years is not what I have been asked to do. The way forward is something that needs to emerge out of our interactions, listening and discerning God's direction over the next few days.

To do an overview of work that covers a period of 12 years of a denomination like the Methodist Church of Southern Africa is almost an impossible one and will not do justice to the enamours good work that is being done across the Connexion. The real and comprehensive accounts of God's mission among us are engraved in the lives of local congregations and individuals who are touched by the love of God in many ways than we can ever imagine.

Background to the Mission Congress 2016

Before sketching the background, purpose and significance of this Mission Congress, we would do well to remind ourselves of at least two historic moments in the life of the MCSA that preceded the first Mission Congress held in 2004. These two historic milestones are **Obedience '81** and the **"Journey to the New Land (JNL)"**. Among some of the works that have been written about these two historic events are journal articles by Prof. Mokhele Madise, (*The Leadership of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa during the 1980s and 90s: Transition from Apartheid to the Democratic era in South Africa*) and Prof Simanga Khumalo (*Transforming South African Methodism: The "Journey to the New Land" Programme 1992-1997*). I recommend then to you for detailed accounts.

Obedience '81 took place within and was a response to the cruelties of the racially oppressive South African regime and how its political system and ideology not only *poisoned* the life of the church as community that sought to be "one and undivided." At Obedience '81 the MCSA reflected on the painful reality of dehumanized majority of South Africans and an Africa that was being undermined and destabilized, in particular, the member states on the MCSA.

Within this context, Obedience '81 was also a moment of confession by the church for failing to be truthful to its commitment to being One and Undivided. Therefore "The purpose of Obedience '81 Conference had been to address the social ills of South Africa at the time."(Madise 2014:118). At the end of the Obedience '81 a statement was formulated and in that statement Methodist people made a commitment: "... Therefore, we promise before Almighty God and each other that we will henceforth live and work to bring into reality the concept of an undivided Church and free and just Southern Africa". Those who were present at that Conference will remember the tense atmosphere that prevailed and the fear of intimidation that was likely to be unleashed on the leadership of the church by the apartheid regime after the Conference. Nevertheless, the church had to take a prophetic stand towards prophetic action.

In 1991 “**The Journey to the New Land**” took place. Prof. Kumalo says “The JNL was a renewal programme of the MCSA aimed at promoting and facilitating a process of ecclesial transformation in the church, so that it could be an agent of transforming mission in a rapidly changing South Africa.(Kumalo, p1)”. I affirm this view and would go further to say that the overriding focus of “The Journey to the New Land” was the doctrine of the Priesthood of all Believers (ministry of all the people of God) and the relevance of church structures in facilitating lay participation for effective mission.

While the JNL had its strengths and weaknesses like all other processes, it created an a necessary and needed atmosphere that enabled the MCSA to speak to the minds and hearts of all Methodist, inviting them to own the work to which God was calling is namely, “**To Proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ for Healing and Transformation**” bringing about a “**Christ Healed Africa for the Healing of the Nations**”.

Following the JNL several conversations began in the various structures of our church on the effectiveness of our witness in the new context of a “new” Southern Africa. In the light of these conversations the Mission and Vision Statements were crafted. As the thinking and assessment of our mission focus evolved, the need for an intentional conversation on mission arose. As a result the 2003 Conference “resolved that a Connexional Mission Congress be convened for 2004.

Conference directed that “The primary purpose of the Mission Congress shall be to explore ways for the MCSA at every level to faithfully and fruitfully implement the objectives of the Mission and Vision Statements of the church within the framework of the mission imperatives.” The 2003 Conference went further to direct the Mission Congress “to identify stumbling-blocks and obstacles to mission within the MCSA and formulate appropriate responses.”(MCSA, Yearbook 2004, p.37).

This directive of Conference was implemented and the Mission congress was held in the month of November 2004 in Mthata, Clarkeberry District. For more on the 2004 Mission Congress, I recommend that you read the article written by my predecessor, Rev Gcobani Vika - The article is in the book titled: *Methodism in Southern Africa: A Celebration of Wesleyan Mission*, edited by Wessel Bentley & Dion Forster..

Mission Congress 2004 marked another milestone in the mission history of the MCSA. Out of it came the Mission Charter. The Mission Pillars (which had been crafted earlier) provided the master plan for implementing the strategic goals as set out in the Mission Charter but not limited to them. These mission pillars have and still continue to do so. They enable local churches and missions groups to ask question about the state of their missional health, social context and to develop appropriate responses. Please allow me to call the Mission Pillars the “*Marks of a Missional Church*”.

Enormous work has been and continues to be done across the Connexion and the Acts of God are evident in the life of the Methodist Church but not limited to it. Addresses of Presiding Bishops, reports of the general secretaries and those of the various units and organizations and orders, as well as the stories reported by New Dimension since 2004, all attest to the fact that we can only be grateful to God for the work that God is doing through God’s church in the power of the Holy Spirit despite our weaknesses.

Mission Impact Assessment

The 2008 Conference felt strongly that we were at a point where we needed to assess the impact of the mission strategy on the mission of the church in the Connexion as a whole. Conference of

2008 therefore instructed the Mission Unit “to initiate a process of Connexional evaluation including Districts, Units, and Organizations on the implementation of the Mission Charter and our Connexional Vision and Mission statement for presentation at Conference 2009.” This assessment in 2009, a year that marked a 5 year journey since the Mission Charter was launched. The assessment was to incorporate the following (The full report was presented at the 2010 Conference and adopted):

1. Understanding of the MCSA Mission imperatives at every level;
2. Ascertaining the extend of the Implementation of the Mission Imperatives;
3. Measuring the Outcomes of the Implementation of the Imperatives.

The following feedback came out the Mission Impact Assessment process:

- People who attended the Mission Congress *did not give feedback* to their Districts.
- After the Congress there were *no people trained who would communicate* and train leaders for the implementation of the mission strategy.
- There was *no intentional strategy to raise awareness* through workshops, teaching in class meetings, cell groups and sermons, etc.
- *Church did not include discussions on how* to implement the mission strategy.

Challenges in Communicating the Mission Strategy:

- Some clergy have not fully embraced our Mission Strategy.
 - Limited financial resources and lack of effective means of communicating with circuit in the rural areas was identified as one of the major challenges.
 - Cynicism from ministers and laity who feel a disconnection from Connexional structures.
 - The geographic scope of circuits and Districts make it virtually impossible for Bishops and ministers to reach all our people for education, planning and implementation.
- The materials are produced only in English and therefore exclude a large sector of the membership of the MCSA. This weakness was strongly highlighted by those who were interviewed.
 - Materials are not made available to the non-English speaking membership of our church, especially for Mozambique.
 - There were no resources set aside for the communication of the mission strategy.
 - The materials are targeted at a selected audience that has a clear understanding of the terminology, context, and the understanding of what the MCSA would like to see happening in every society.
 - Available materials are not easy to read, understand and translate into relevant missional action.
 - The materials, while of a high standard, fail to assist children and youth to understand the vision and mission strategy of the church.

Strengths Indicated in the Assessment were:

- i. Despite the many weaknesses in our communication strategy, there is now more awareness of our mission ideals than there were in 2004.
- ii. Many churches in both the cities and rural areas are moving from maintenance to mission. For example, we have since been intentional about HIV & AIDS issues.

- iii. There is a quest for our mission strategy and the principles of our Missions Charter to be upheld and taught. They are still relevant.

The Mission Unit Team made efforts to read through Circuit Reports to Synods in the last five years. The common trends found in all of them are the following challenges:

- Lack of financial resources.
- Differing motivational level and skills within the clergy.
- The need for training.
- The lack of sustainability of district mission projects.

Purpose of the 2016 Mission Congress:

While the word Congress is mainly used in the political landscape, its significance for us as a church is that we must continue to have an inclusive, communal participation and ownership of our missional call and a commitment towards a common goal – A Christ Healed Africa for the Healing of Nations.”

Prof. Dana Robert cites an interesting story but one that helps capture why we are here for the next few days. In 1910 the World Missionary Council met in Edinberg, Scotland under the theme In attendance at this conference was the youngest delegate, Kheng Gingyi, a minister of a church in Beijing. At this conference he called on the conference and these are his “Let us go, with our divine master, on the top of the Mountain of Olives, and there will obtain a wider, broader, and larger view of the needs of the church and the world.”(see Dana Robert’s paper pg. 5) This in my view explains vividly the purpose for our coming together in this fashion – namely going on top of Mount Olive to obtain a wider, broader, larger view.

The focus of the Congress is to educate, inspire and ignite passion for mission. Further goal of Mission Congress 2016, among other expectations, is to evaluate how well we have implemented the areas of mission engagement outlined in the Mission Charter – it is hoped that this evaluation will form part of our conversations during the electives. . Mission Congress 2016 will also take time to analyse the present Southern Africa socio-economic and geo-political context and re-envision our response so that we are relevant and appropriate in our response to today’s contextual challenges. This process will happen through plenary and elective sessions. Our vision statement of “A Christ Healed Africa for the healing of nations” remains a deep and Christ-centred aspiration (of commitment) in light of the prevailing challenges of international migration, human trafficking, conflicts, economic down turn and recession and the drought affecting most of Africa, as well as the widening gap between the rich and the poor and the many health challenges facing us today.

The challenges of the Church in Africa are numerous and diverse. We must continue to cast eyes into the horizons of mission frontiers where the Spirit continues to lead moments. The MCSA is part of the Church in Africa and we are part of the global church as well. Sebastian Bakare reminds us that “Despite material deprivation and poverty, despite social and economic marginalization, Christianity is growing faster in Africa than anywhere else in the world”.

However, he equally warns us that:

While this dynamic numerical growth is indeed a source of joy for the entire ecumenical movement, it should not tempt African churches themselves to become complacent or to ignore the challenges facing them. This moment of grace signaled by this demographic

shift in the world church calls Christians in Africa to creative imagination and new vision (Bakare 1977:12).

The implication of this demographic shift has two immediate challenges for the Church in Africa. The first is that the Church in Africa is positioned to lead the world Christian Church with others. However, this proposition should in no way imply undermining the contribution of the ecumenical community.

What After the Mission Congress?

- District Group Discussions at the Congress – The process of what happens after this mission Congress begins at this Mission Congress! During the course of the programme, there will be an opportunity for District delegates meet and reflect on the way forward.
- The Mission Congress will continue its work to ensure there is follow-up and feedback that is given back to district and craft proposals for consideration by 2017 Conference.
- Conversations will ensue early in the coming year to ensure that districts make the necessary follow-ups and draw implementations strategies that need not wait for Conference directives.
- Plenary presentations and elective presentations will be published to serve as a resource for ongoing reflection, planning and implementation.

Conclusion

A mission congress of this nature should be an event that carries with it a deep sense of accountability, responsibility and commitment”. I make an earnest appeal to all of us here, especially the delegates, not to miss the opportunity to make this time worthwhile for the sake of the witness of the church, from the local to the global context.

The concept of igniting is fundamentally connected to what happens at the fireplace. After the fire has been burning for some time and the flames have subsided, the ashes cover the coal yet the coal is not completely dead. To ignite the coal and to get a fresh flame going you need to remove the ashes that cover the coal, the coal that seemingly looks insignificant and yet deep inside them resides the power that makes the fireplace what is it.

If you uncover the coal, add simple insignificant little dry grass and twigs or small and thin pieces of dry branches of a tree, then the dormant or sleeping power the coal shows itself. The igniting begins and there is a flame. While all illustrations have imperfections, this image for me relates directly to what we are seeking to achieve in the next few days. Sometimes in our journey of ministry and service we get weary. But that does not necessarily translate into lack of faith or passion for the gospel and living it out in practical and visible ways. You might think you are insignificant and your ideas do not matter. Please allow the passion within you to be ignited so that when you leave this place you are ready to carry the flame of the gospel in ‘Word, Did and Sign.’.

It is our prayer that Mission Congress 2016 will give us an opportunity to reflect on the seemingly overwhelming contexts within which we do mission, as well as learn, inspire and educate one another on how we can continue to do effective, impactful and sustainable mission.

