

Conference Address 2015

THEME: **TOGETHER** a transforming discipleship movement

Sub-theme: "Shaped for Mission"

READINGS: Isaiah 32: 1-7. Acts 2: 42-3:10. Matthew 25:31-40

Greetings:

The General Secretary, Rev Charmaine Morgan, the Lay president, Mr Mabhalane Nkosi, District Bishops, District Lay Leaders, members of the Connexional Executive, team leaders of our units, leaders of organisations, members of conference and all our guests and visitors, people of God gathered here today, I greet you warmly in the name of our Triune God – AMEN.

This is Nelson Mandela Bay. It is here that the 1820 British settlers landed, bringing with them the Rev William Shaw whose missionary calling changed the landscape of this part of the world with the establishment of a chain of mission stations that touched numerous lives in countless ways. It was here that umJwarha, Rev Tiyo Soga landed on his return from Scotland, where he was ordained in December 1856. When Tiyo Soga landed in July 1857 with his Scottish wife the colonial agenda to subjugate the "natives" was in progress. He was taunted here in Port Elizabeth and told that the African people would be overcome by Europeans and his culture and all that it stood for would be forgotten. It was the year of Nongqawuse and the cattle killing that broke the back of the native people's resistance. The song Tiyo Soga wrote was a response of faith and hope at a trying time: "*Lizalise idinga lakho Thixo Nkosi yenyano.*" Malusi Mpumlwana notes that Tiyo acted unlike the exiles in Babylon who hung their harps on willow trees refusing to sing the Lord's songs in a foreign land and refusing to forget Jerusalem. In the face of ridicule and taunting, Tiyo Soga dug deep from the well of his faith and hope in the Living God: "*Fulfil your promise O God...*" What promise was he speaking of? What hope did Tiyo Soga have? What picture of a transforming discipleship movement did he have? Let us bear that in mind as we engage in conversations at this conference. We meet at a place of many struggles and hopes.

We meet in the year of the 30th anniversary of the Kairos document, and only last month people of faith from around the globe met in Johannesburg to reflect on that experience. Allan Boesak, one of the key theologians from our mission area launched the book entitled; "*Kairos Consciousness.*" The Masikhulume Group issued a statement with a title; "*Asikaqedi*" meaning the journey is not yet finished. In that statement they assert that many people's lives were put on hold by the brutalities of the past and may I add that even today many people's lives are put on hold by the circumstances they are subjected to. The people of the member countries of this Connexion are free from colonial subjugation, but "*asikaqedi.*" Old and fresh wounds continue to put people's lives on hold. Healing and change is critical – hence this Conference asked that we hold on to the current conference theme "TOGETHER A transforming Discipleship Movement" longer than just one year. The mission of the church is to be awakened and sharpened like never before. The shape of this movement must speak to the realities of our context in a representative incarnational model. It has to be a movement that has space **for serious reflections, Kairos consciousness, soaked in prayer, punctuated by moments of forgiveness and openness.** It has to be a movement intentionally shaped that we 'may know one another instead of running away from each other.'" The Kairos

document used the analogy of needing to take the cattle out of somebody's garden before you lay claim on the need to be forgiven. You cannot be shouting forgiveness, while your cattle continue to graze in my garden. The call for a transforming discipleship movement is that we become followers of Jesus in a way that visibly reflects our identity as the agents of genuine forgiveness, restoration and healing touching the world with Scriptural holiness. What are the figurative cattle that continue to graze on each other's gardens in ways break our relationships?

Moments of celebration:

We "meet at the best of times and at the worst of times." I choose to focus on the first part of this dictum by Charles Dickson. The best is that God is with us. Martin Luther King Junior puts it thus:

*"When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let **us remember** that there is a creative force in this universe **working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil**, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long and bends toward justice."*

We are agents of love, mercy and justice. We are citizens of the moral universe whose arc is long and our calling is to expedite its bending towards justice.

It is therefore fitting to reflect on the missionary shape of our discipleship movement at such a time as this. Next year marks 200 years of the arrival of Barnabas Shaw who landed in 1816 and was the first to introduce Methodism in this country. It is appropriate therefore that **next year we will launch the celebration of our heritage until Conference 2017**. Let us also recall that in 1958, this Conference made the declaration of its conviction *"that it is the will of God for the Methodist Church that it should be one and undivided."* That decision was a protest against the onslaught of dispossession and separation. The year 2018 marks 60 years since that declaration. So in 2017, we will launch the focus on unity – reflecting on the impact of that resolution on our life together, culminating into the 2018 Conference. **I suggest that we declare the 2018 Conference – 'Obedience 2018' in the Spirit of Obedience 81**. Mrs Graca Machel, addressing the BMC gathering in July, expressed how intrigued she was at the deliberations of Obedience 81 which she had followed with keen interest.

My car has scratches which disturbed me greatly when they happened, but I have not had them fixed yet I have gotten so used to the scratches now that I don't always notice them. They no longer disturb me as they did on the day it happened. Our discipleship vehicle has some scratches we have become so used to. Now is the time to reflect on these as we draw near to 2018.

However, at this Conference, **we launch the celebration of Conferences decision to allow the ordination of women as presbyters – 40 years ago**. This was a move that was in obedience to God's call of how to be and do church. It is time to pause and praise God that our mothers and fathers acknowledged that in Christ we are one.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."(Galatians 3:28).

I plead with the Connexion that we make a big deal of these moments. It is time to reflect on what God is calling us to be and to do. Let us celebrate together and be inspired to rise to greater heights of God's call on the life of the church. We plan to use the time after this Conference up to the 2016 Conference to open our eyes even more intentionally to a greater awareness of what God is doing in our midst. Our mothers, sisters and daughters are a special gift to this discipleship movement. Male and female, God created us although the journey of the church has not been great in appreciating this gift. Now is the time to reflect, engage and take appropriate action to redress this. . We are asked to showcase and celebrate the work of women ministers in a visible way. I will request the 2016 Ordinands to consider including a Woman Presbyter among those they select.. I will also appoint a Woman Presbyter.

I must pause here and applaud the South African government as it is ahead of the pack in addressing gender justice. Prior to 1994 there were 2.7% women parliamentarians. Today they stand at 42%. Big strides have been made in just 20 years. I lament the fact that in our 40 years, we have only had one woman Bishop.. Only 4% of our Superintendents are women and I have no record of how leadership at Circuit and Society levels stand, but Circuits and Societies can do their own introspections, beginning now as we move towards 2018.

Conference Theme:

In my 2013 Conference Address I referred extensively to the then unpublished booklet of Rev Dr Martyn Atkins. He writes the following:

"A desire to be a Christian disciple shaped the early structures of Methodism. It's probably unsurprising then that the divine disquiet some Methodists experience today stems from the fact that they feel Methodism is no longer best structured and shaped to enable Christian discipleship. This disquiet may be the prompting of the Spirit of God, and if so we can expect revelation and guidance as we seek to respond and discern the way ahead."

Malan Nel in his new book, *Identity-Driven Churches* quotes Zscheile, I quote:

"By missional church I mean a church whose identity lies in its participation in the Triune God's mission in all of creation. In the view of missional ecclesiology, it is God's mission that has a church, not the church that has a mission."

God's mission is bigger than the church but he uses the church as a visible symbol of the transforming presence of God. The tune must be taken from God all the time. God's mission will always survive in spite of us. Hoekendijk says that a sign of deterioration is when the church focusses more on its survival at the expense of taking the tune from the God of life. The church must remain faithful and obedient to God's purpose for it. I have witnessed how many local congregations lose their sense of purpose and go under when the concern becomes the survival of a particular group interest and they take their eyes off the purpose of God which goes beyond any particular group interest. The world is rapidly changing, and demographics change with it. God is creating a new thing. Tim Attwell writing in the New Dimension in November 2014 put down these words: *"change/transformation is inevitable, it has happened and is happening whether we like it or not. The major transformation is in the scale of human interactions as the modern world arrives at our doorstep."* Quoting Monica Wilson, Attwell writes, *"Faced by the vast scale of interactions presented to us, we*

can hanker after the close knit community of the small society, in which faith becomes religious expression of fear.”

How are the local congregations visiting their shape for mission in this time of rapid change? Will the church take the tune from God?

The structures of the Methodist Church which initially came to being at the first Conference in 1744 and subsequent conferences were intended to facilitate the ministry of a growing movement. They had a purpose. It was the 1748 Conference that resolved that societies should be firmly and closely united.. Circuits must make geographical, missional and pastoral sense, Michel Hansrod concluded in one of his presentations. *‘We have to constantly reflect on foundations, the motives and aim as well as the nature of mission,’* writes David Bosch. There are instances where the way we are organised becomes more of a bottleneck than a conduit of Connexional vision and a facilitator of mission. We can do better.

I need to immediately acknowledge that there are many good practice models in our local congregations, circuits and organisations formulated when we embraced the Conference call to be a transforming discipleship movement. A message needs to go to all Methodist people in appreciation of their obedience to God’s call on the church. Staying with that theme, the sub-theme for this year is ‘shaped for mission.’ It is aimed at unpacking the cliché – “transforming.” How do we go about responding to this call? We have to be intentional. Surely we must not stop asking the question: ‘What creates marginalisation?’ The tools developed over the years must not be abandoned – “See, Judge, Act” – model of reflection and action. In some way we are doing it. I urge this conference to keep reflecting on best practice models in search of mission effectiveness and obedience to God. Next year we will be having the Mission Congress and the details thereof will be presented during the Mission Unit Report slot.

Igniting transforming discipleship communities:

I came across this notice on a huge vacated building up for sale: *“This building is not empty but full of possibilities.”* I am bubbling with joy as I witness the mission enthusiasm of our local churches and organisations as they explore the possibilities for this transforming discipleship movement. We are a people of God, called for the purposes of God. Ours is to follow the distinctive teachings of the Master. God is active in the world, igniting transforming discipleship communities. I have found the Resolution on Pastoral Work in our Book of Order (Laws and Discipline) Appendix 2, a helpful guide. I call on each congregation to read and engage this resolution. That resolution speaks to our shaping for mission effectiveness. How do we best shape our work at the local level to respond to that resolution? Surely this movement is not empty but full of possibilities.

I dream of transforming discipleship communities coming up all around the Connexion, in every new settlement area as well as in old previously abandoned ones where there is a return of people and in most cases they return as exciting people of many languages and backgrounds. As we do this we have to be serious about taking changing dynamics into consideration as we organise worship and our life together in these places. We have to tell ourselves that these are changes which cannot be reversed. The stories we tell ourselves have power of forming or deforming us. Therefore the liturgy we use is a powerful tool that shapes the lives of people as these are repeated every Sunday. Reflecting on the Power of Liturgy John van der Laar writes;

“As we gather for worship, we encounter narratives that are different from ours. There is the narrative of faith, contained in the Scriptures. There is the narrative of our particular theology or denomination. And there are narratives of various groupings and people that gather with us. As we allow these narratives to impact us... they expand and change our story, making it more whole, more objective and more connected to the story of God’s Reign. The most influential role of liturgy in shaping our stories is that it begins to unite our story with God’s story”

John also quotes Anais Nin who wrote: *“We do not see things as they are. We see things as we are.”* Lets allow our worship to touch our stories and make them whole.

The hope expressed in Isaiah 32:

The Prophet here gives us a pictorial view of what is not yet but what is hoped for. The time is in the future. The Good News Bible calls it “someday.” The passage expresses a cry and a hope which come from the well of faith in God who is able to do it. In a typical quality of the Hebrew language we are given pictures of how it will be. It will be like having a hiding place from the wind and a shelter from the storms. There will be **protection** from those things that blow havoc and destruction in people’s lives. The dry places will be transformed and have streams of water and the craving of the hungry will be satisfied. There will be **provision** for the needy. Eyes will see and ears give attention and there will be no ruining of the poor with lying words. The Prophet speaks of the moral quality of life that will replace the empty words of the eloquent. There will be **care, compassion and honesty**. The spirit of God will permeate life. The passage speaks of deep longing for a moral reference point. It is hope for a purifying and transforming presence from those who have influence on the lives of others. How do we shape the conversations and actions of our gatherings and the daily lives of the people called, Methodists?

The pillars or imperatives of mission agreed upon by Methodists seek to guide us in the transformative direction. In every church, which is the centre of healing and transformation, there will be:

1. education and Christian formation taking place.
2. human and economic development and empowerment.
3. justice and service actions.
- 4 evangelism and church growth and
5. All these will be rooted in authentic spirituality.

All these speak of protection, provision, care, compassion and honesty. The Spirit of God will permeate all that we do. I have paraphrased these imperatives for my own clarity as follows: We have one pillar/ one stem which is authentic spirituality and from which grow the branches of mission as outlined above. The impact in our world does not depend on our resources and strength but on God who can make all things new. The focus is on the “hope of a messianic reign.” Impacting the world and transforming the church and nations according to the MCSA Vision! We are not designers of mission but disciples and lifelong learners of the school of God’s mission in the ever

changing world of the ever present Creator. The shape of the movement must be determined by what God is doing at any given time.

I repeat here what the Port Alegre Assembly of the World Council of Churches concluded; *“The local church is the church catholic, but not the whole of it. The church is the church catholic when it is in connection with others.”*

Imagine the people in each geographic area sticking together and committing to strive together for the transformation of everything in their town or city or group of villages. Think of the mission area in which you find yourself. Is it best positioned to be responsive to the call of God on the church? We are adequately resourced to respond to God’s call on our life together. There used to be something called the “Malihambe Home mission” model which was a glimpse of how we can facilitate togetherness. I wonder if it cannot be revived for the new context and involve a wider section of membership in order to sharpen our character for effective mission. Let us learn and be inspired together. The continuing call for the review of structures for mission effectiveness is not a nice to have option – it is a must. What are the things that hinder mission effectiveness? Let us talk about everything and act on it. We have to ask this question all the time: “What are the challenges that God’s people face and how do we become God’s transforming presence in those situations?” How do we join hands to maximise mission effectiveness?

Building strong and effective partnerships to maximise the impact of God’s resources:

Speaking at the Maramon Convention in India, Rev Dr Sam Kamalesan said *“no tree eats its own fruit.”* The blessings and mission resources that God channels our way are for the mission of God articulated in John10:10; *“I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.”* Many are waiting for that life and daily God is giving out resources to those He intends to use to be His transforming presence. May the tree that bears that fruit not eat it only for itself.

We have been shown the way in Acts 2:42 - 47. There was devotion to teaching and seriousness in prayer. Resources were passed on to where they are needed most. There was joy and there were generous hearts. The Lord danced with them and there were wonders and signs and God saw it fit to add to their number day by day. NB: *They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teachings and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.* (Acts 2:42-43). Note that awe came and was not mimicked and wonders were done **through** and not by the apostles. There was growth in the quality of serving God and God being pleased with it added growth quantitatively. God added to their number day by day. Here was the shaping of an enthusiastic community of disciples of Jesus Christ. The believers were together discerning God’s will and bringing in their individual gifts for mutual service of all. Teaching was a serious activity so that the world would know God and follow him. Their vision was: *following God in the business of transforming God’s world to the likeness of God’s Kingdom.* It is not a programme but a lifelong commitment and learning. Eskia Mphahlele’s words; *“Education is a process of becoming.”*

You have heard often the story of Dr Albert Einstein who had lost his train ticket and was frantically looking for it. Even when one of the train crew assured him not to worry, because they knew who he

was – a world-renowned professor and Nobel Laureate, he would not stop. When the conductor said; “Relax Dr Einstein, we know who you are. He responded *“it’s not that I don’t know who I am. I know exactly who I am. I’m looking for my ticket because I don’t know where I ‘m going!”* Commenting on this, Bryan Loritts writes; *“Identity and direction lie at the core of humanity’s soul.”* Failure to find answers to these questions leads to a life devoid of meaning and satisfaction. People do look for answers, but the tragedy is filling the soul with the wrong answers that cause anxiety, and even conflict. Jesus Christ is the Light of the world and direction for our life together comes from following Him. We have to remind ourselves about who we are and why we are we in this movement together. Issues of identity call and obedience should characterise our conversations on the work of God.

Mission is the act of compassion: Connecting people with God and one another:

I repeat here the question I quoted before which came from Rorisang Tshabalala who wrote in the Sunday Independent of 9 September 2012; *“How do we break the hypnotic spell of division...?”* In this day and age we still have structures that are based on racial, cultural and economic **exclusion**. Jesus in Matthew 25 gives us a clue of God’s dream for the world. It gives us a view of the shape of the church that serves the purpose of God. It is a church where the hungry and the thirsty find satisfaction and the naked are clothed. It is the church where the sick and the vulnerable are cared for. It is a church where strangers are welcome. It is a church where the bereaved find comfort without having to pay for it. Such a church becomes the sign, witness and foretaste of God’s dream for the world. Matthew 25 is a call for a contrast society. Alex Roxburgh and Scott Boren describe the contrast society as a *“people shaped by an alternative story, living by a set of distinctively Christian practices.”*

We must be careful here when we interpret the passage. Mission is not primarily about charity, though it does not exclude it. Mission is about joining with all, including the poor and the vulnerable in working for justice and the eradication of all those things that rob God’s people of dignity. It is the lifting up of the downtrodden. In our immediate mission areas it means churches that reflect the demographics of the area – the poor, the wealthy, the strangers and the wounded joining together and seeing each other as human beings made in the image of God. In the wider field it means pilgrimages of pain and hope to witness to what God is doing and respond to the invitation to go with God where he is working; to turn things upside down to God’s glory. Last year we made the call for people to hear the call of the Palestinian invitation to “come and see.” Those who have the opportunity to visit the Holy Land, are asked to include an alternative visit to the Palestinian territories and interact with Palestinian Christians particularly but also with all people in Israel/Palestine.

It is a call for the church working with all stakeholders, to deal with issues that continue to bring injustice to God’s people. The Handbook for Volunteers of the United Methodist Church says that our work should embody **the mission of erosion** slowly wearing down the resistance of the powerful to allow the offering of life in all its fullness to all people. May I add slowly bringing down the gigantic mountain of evil that Martin Luther King Junior spoke about. We cannot be silent and inactive when there are still landless people whilst others own land that is the size of some cities and towns for their exclusive use. We cannot be silent and inactive when our grandmothers, mothers and sisters live in constant fear of violence and rape. Let us work together towards a world without

violence and rape. We cannot remain numb when the global refugee crisis reaches an alarming level and we witness the vulnerable crossing rivers, forests and even oceans in dangerous ways. These have to be in the conversations of every congregation and organisation. The websites of Ecumenical partners have adequate information about situation in Syria and other parts of the world.

The hope of Isaiah 32 and the mission of the faithful in Matthew 25 have the power to make unjust authorities uncomfortable and to invite all to move towards authentic mission, actively anticipating those words which will come as a refreshing stream; “Come you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34). This is mission informed and shaped by compassionate and unifying justice.

Conclusion:

Let us now go and take a hard look at the shape of our societies, circuits, districts, organisations and all structures and sharpen them for effective mission because God loves it so. Let us go in faith in God who is working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil. Let us go encouraged to hear the good news that the arc of the moral universe is bending towards justice. Let us go in hope that someday, there will be justice, protection, provision, compassion and care. Let us go in the knowledge that God’s dream for the world will be a reality and on the stem of authentic spirituality will grow strong branches of mission obedience and God being pleased will add more and more disciples to the movement. The words of the song will ring beautifully in our ears:

“Wosiphatha ngobubele, wosinika ubungcwele, wopha abakukhonzayo okuthamsanqekekayo. Ithamsanqa elikhulu, ithamsanqa elezulu, likho kothembayo kuWe ngokuba ethandwa nguWe.” (IsiXhosa Hymnal 18 verses 3 and 4). AMEN.