

THE GENERAL SECRETARY'S REPORT

2012 CONFERENCE

1. INTRODUCTION

This report is an aerial view of Connexional operational matters, reflecting on some of the highlights, challenges and concerning trends.

As with all other reports, it is meant to stimulate debate as well as surface areas and developments that require collective attention.

Ministers and members are encouraged to read, interrogate, follow up and action all matters raised through Conference addresses and reports.

2. OVERVIEW OF THE CONNEXIONAL WORK

2.1 Revisiting our vision and mission

The Bishops as mission leaders spent time revisiting, interrogating and unpacking our vision and mission statements.

Question asked were:

- Is it still relevant?
- Is it achievable?
- Do our ministers understand it?
- Is there something we need to do differently?

There were mixed responses to these questions. Some felt it was too ambitious and cumbersome, but in all there was affirmation of the relevance of the vision and mission statements, the transformational calls as well as the pillars of mission.

It was strongly felt that the statement of A Christ Healed Africa was an appropriate response to the woundedness that has socio-economic; religio-cultural; pyscho-emotional; political and environmental manifestations. Africa is where we are and not out there.

Transformation was seen as a mission imperative as it is about renewal and *metanoia*.

There was a general recognition that implementation was happening throughout the Connexion concerns were raised about the inefficiency of communication from a success and learning perspective. Another area of concern was that of insufficient explanation of the theological rationale of respective vision and mission.

It was strongly felt that there was a need to reignite passion for spreading Scriptural holiness and evangelism spirit.

A number of proposals are under consideration on how the concerns raised could be addressed. There is a need to call Methodist people to a deeper understanding and

commitment to the intentional implementation of the Mission Imperatives and Transformation Calls.

To this end a communication tool that includes “The Pledge” has been designed as a messaging tool to invoke participation, deepen understanding, stimulate dialogue and commitment to our vision and mission. We encourage use of this pledge at Covenant Services and other significant occasions.

2.2 Structures Review Process

The structures review conversation was initiated to create space to reimagine the way of ‘being’ and ‘doing’ church with the focus on:

- *structures* – how to reconfigure;
- *leadership* – how to ensure continuous improvement; and
- *Resources* – how to ensure maximum utilisation of human, financial and infrastructure capital.

The conversations once more confirmed that fundamental problems, as Einstein once noted, cannot be solved at the same level of thought that created them. Otto Scharmer in his ground breaking monumental work *Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges*, invites us to see the world in new ways and to learn from the future as it emerges. It all hinges on our attention. He warns that unless we become aware of our *blind spots* - the inner place from which each of us operates - both as individuals and as communities, we won’t be able to successfully address the pressing issues and challenges of our time. It behoves on us together to take heed as we grapple with change and transformation.

2.3 Enhancing capacity of the Presiding Bishop’s Office

At the beginning of this year a Work Study by an independent consultant was commissioned to do an operational overview of the Presiding Bishop’s Office. The findings confirmed the view that the office was seriously understaffed given the work load, challenges, demands and expectations. The Study observed that the current staff compliment was doing a great disservice to the work of the Church and recommended that from next year (given budgetary constraints) consideration be given to at least two additional staff to strengthen office administration, procurement, research and internal and external communication capacity.

2.4 Preserving our Heritage

The importance of preserving our Methodist Heritage has been highlighted in previous Conferences. The recent Heritage Indaba held in Durban once more reemphasised the need:

- To retain and build on our heritage
- To celebrate and affirm contribution of many who made and continue to strengthen Methodist witness in Southern Africa
- To finding creative ways of honouring and remembering those who faithfully served the Church over the years
- To instil a culture of story-telling as a way of passing information from generation to generation.

2.5 Record keeping & archiving

The Laws & Discipline dictates that all Society, Circuit, District, Organisational records be safely kept and those that are over 50years old be placed in the custody of the Methodist Archives at the Cory Library for Historical Research at Rhodes University.

It has been observed that most Circuits and Organisations do not comply with this requirement and are urged to act accordingly.

2.6 Circuit Conflicts

Someone once said people are messy and leading them is a messy business. Our experience during the last twelve months has confirmed this assertion.

As reported previously, in as much as it is understood that conflicts will always be part of church life, it is absurd when such result in destruction of church property. Such acts are a reflection of sick minds and militate against our vision of making every local church a centre for healing and transformation.

Conference must strongly condemn acts of violence and destruction of property and call upon all our ministers and members to act in a manner that does not compromise the witness, integrity and image of the Church. The ministers must be assisted and equipped to deal with conflict situations in manner that is pleasing to God.

3. HIGHLIGHTS

3.1 District Visits

During the year under review the PBO's paid official visit to two Districts – Cape of Good Hope and Northern Free State & Lesotho Districts.

The purpose of the visit, to use the Presiding Bishop's analogy of five senses, was to:

- *See* – what was happening in terms of mission;
- *Hear* – stories of God's activity amongst His people;
- *Taste* – the love of people called Methodists;
- *Touch* - the lives of those who needed us most;
- *Smell* – the sweet aroma that comes from a service that is dedicated to God of committed and dedicated servants

The visits opened our senses to great work that is done by our ministers and people in many parts of our Connexion. Visiting Namaqua where Methodism started in our Connexion and to witness the dedication and spirit of contentment of the Nama people was inspiring.

The Northern Free State & Lesotho District, despite its economic and conflict challenges demonstrated that it was on fire for the Lord. The ground breaking mission projects, in the form of children's work, women empowerment, education, were a clear indication that there were signs of new life in the District.

3.2 Mission Consciousness

As we traverse the Connexion and read reports from various Districts and Organisations we witness a new mission consciousness that is catching fire across the Connexion through the cross-section of MCSA organisations. One finds it most humbling yet heart-warming to see ‘the word become flesh’ through the people called Methodists. The Presiding Bishop’s office as well as the Mission Unit office are always invited through the year by different organisations or districts to either launch or preside over mission handover ceremonies ranging from services, donations of buildings, furniture, clothing, food parcels, school uniforms etc. which are given by the church to the needy in community. We are obviously pleased by this amazing spirit of mission. Looking after the poor is becoming our flagship, rightfully so, being the church that believes in ‘healing’. Indeed the river, portrayed by the prophet Ezekiel, that flows from the alter (of the MCSA) is gradually flowing down and finding its way into the valleys down below, giving healing and restoration.

This shows that *Together as a healing community* we can make a positive difference reversing the effects of the evil triplets of unemployment, inequality and poverty. We cannot look the opposite direction with so much need and suffering around us!

3.3 Human Resources Development

The Human Resources Unit was almost non-functional for a period of three years since the departure of the previous Director. We are grateful to Conference, which last year appointed Rev Dr Vukile Mehana, who has enthusiastically taken up the task, formed an Advisory Committee and prepared a comprehensive Strategic Plan which will be tabled at this Conference. Although Rev Mehana is part time, non stipendary, the amount of and energy, time and resources he invests in his portfolio is beyond measure. He is indeed a valuable asset to the Presiding Bishop’s Office.

3.4 Childcare

Our partnership with the UK based Children Action Group came to an end in May this year. We were sorry to say ‘Good Bye’ to Barry Barnes who had been working alongside us for the past seven years. We are however grateful to the Children Action Group for sharing their financial resources and their expertise in helping us to establish the Childcare Desk under the extraordinary, able coordinatorship of Mrs Victoria Sikhakhane.

As mentioned in the Mission Unit Director’s Report, the Childcare Desk was established to help the Church understand the complex legal framework relating to working with Children; set up appropriate policies to ensure compliance and navigate through the challenges that face the Church regarding children at risk.

3.5 Education

Last year a call was made for the Methodist Church to reclaim her role in Education. A Task Team met recently to discuss how this could be done and the following action steps were suggested:

- Ministers be encouraged to offer chaplaincy services to schools;

- Societies be urged to provide space, support and resources to learners as after schools centres e.g. reading rooms, use of retired teachers, taking care of the needy child, the need to address those at the “back of the queue”;
- Parents be encouraged to play a more active role in their children’s education
- Covenant with Methodist teachers to be on time everyday and go to school prepared to teach;
- The need for a policy position in Education which requires Transformed Leaders
- PB to send a pastoral letter from his desk to all Bishops, all Superintendents, all Ministers, all Organizational leadership and all Societies.

We call upon our ministers, teachers and parents to take an active part in education matters.

3.6 Leadership Development

The Archbishop of Canterbury, at the last Lambeth Conference, called upon the Anglican Bishops to strive to be better Bishops for the sake of a better Church. He contended that the Church cannot be better unless the Bishops are better equipped. It is for this reason, amongst others, that for the past two years we have embarked on organising Capacity Building Workshops for new Bishops in order to prepare them for their office.

We are grateful to God that two prominent Methodist lay people have offered to sponsor next year’s leadership development workshop as they want the MCSA to be a better Church.

Continuous improvement is what drives most successful organisations. It is therefore imperative that Circuits and Districts create a budget for the formation, development and skilling of those entrusted to lead, especially the ministers.

4. CHALLENGES

4.1 Human Resource Planning

Future projections in terms of natural attrition and agency reduction in some Circuits indicate that we have to monitor our intake of candidates accordingly. During the next five years about **90** ministers will be due for retirement and our current average intake a year is **25** which mean that we may have an over-supply of ministers in coming years.

We therefore either have to reduce our intake or devise other means of utilising the surplus resources. This may be an opportunity to reintroduce the vanguard mission initiative, which will go a long way in establishing new work in developing areas. That of course has implications in how our ministers are trained.

4.2 Property Registration

The Church has recently been faced with a number of cases where our properties are hijacked by renegade ministers and splinter groups. The properties that have no title deeds and operate under the old municipality provisions of Permission to Occupy are the ones that are at risk.

Superintends and Trust Committees are urged to ensure that all properties are properly registered and that title deeds for PTOs are urgently applied for in accordance with the relevant Act.

4.3 Rising Conference costs

There are number of Synod resolutions that complain about rising Conference costs and it is implied that the Connexional Office is to blame. The truth is that the reintroduction of annual Conference was a response to Districts demand. Moreover it is the hosting Districts that choose venues for Conference and determine the cost. Ours is to comply implement Conference directives.

It may be wise to seriously consider holding Conference in one venue instead of the current rotation system. In that way we would drastically reduce costs and operate on a predictable budget in terms of both travel and conference costs.

4.4 Ministers well-being

The tragic death of Rev Dr Ross Olivier was for us a wake-up call about the need to intentionally look after the well-being of those who serve the chapel. I

There is noticeable increase of ministers suffering from burn out, depression and other related diseases. Dr Fred Child identifies the causes for such as work/life balance; being overwhelmed; neglect of personal care; refusal to delegate; abandonment of family etc. He further cautions clergy to *quit trying to play God and spend more time seeking after God.*

The HR Unit has been tasked to develop a strategy to respond to this need but ministers are also urged to attend to their wellness holistically.

4.5 Managing transitions

There is a growing tendency of unnecessary acrimony in the handover and takeover of offices across the spectrum. It is worse when such happens at a higher leadership levels.

The reason may be that people are generally not equipped and/or prepared for transition.

William Bridges in his book *Managing Transitions* makes the following observations:

- Change is inevitable
- Transition is psychological and affects people mostly at emotional level and that there is a feeling of loss and losses are subjective
- When not managed it can lead to toxic dysfunctional behaviour and unethical conduct

A brief presentation on Managing handovers and takeovers is available from our website. Organisations, Circuits and Districts are encouraged to make use of this resource.

5. WORRYING TRENDS

5.1 Reduction of agency

The continued reduction of agency in Circuit is a cause for concern. More and more Circuits are reducing staff at an alarming rate. Dwindling financial resources, increase in Circuit assessments and decline in membership are often cited as major causes. These cannot be the real reasons. There is ample evidence that resources grow with the increase of agency as such contributes to the improved quality of service and greater pastoral care for people.

There seems to be lack of passion for mission and the growing tendency to operate on maintenance, survival mode. For instance there are a number of growth points in almost all urban areas where there is no Methodist work. The harvest is still plentiful, the labourers are there but there are few takers. Evangelism must be at the heart of the church's life. The church must regain confidence in the gospel and the clarity of the good news. Let's re-imagine ourselves as a gospel proclaiming, church planting, disciple making, grace filled movement bringing life and hope to all!

This year we are faced with an unprecedented situation in the history of our Church where we cannot find placement for a number of our qualified, competent ministers.

5.2 Breakdown in family life

The nature of our society is rapidly changing and that comes with the increasing pressures on family life. Recent research shows that many families are operating at "dysfunction junction". There is a growing relational meltdown.

The Church is not immune to these growing trends. Circuits and other organisations are encouraged to promote teachings that foster healthy family life and set aside time in their calendar to focus on Family Life.

5.3 Synod resolutions

Synod Resolutions continue to reflect a worrying trend. Out of about forty eight (48) received this year only five (5) spoke on issues that affect society. One Synod lambasted the leadership of being silent on socio-economic issues and the lack of a prophetic voice, but not a single resolution from that Synod spoke on such issues.

There is also a tendency to think that resolutions are about bringing complaints and problems to Conference instead of recommending solutions to advance God's mission and promote the purposes of the Kingdom. There needs to be a paradigm shift.

We had long resolved to move from maintenance to mission. That must be evident in our Quarterly Meeting, Synod and Conference agendas. We must walk the talk.

5.4 Paucity of theological reflection

Methodists were in the 70s and 80s in particular leaders in theological thinking. They contributed to the critical theological discourse on Church and Society, but there seem, of late, to be an appalling paucity of theological reflection. Some attribute this to ministerial training and the demise of Ministerial Sessions. Whatever the reason may be those entrusted with ministerial training must purposefully rejuvenate our theological and intellectual curiosity.

6. CONCLUSION

Without the input and help of the PBO staff, most of the work reflected on in this report would not have happened. The Presiding Bishop as 'new kid in the block' has helped stimulate new thinking and different way of doing things. We thank him for enriching us with his insights and a wealth of hands on experience. Mrs Heather Fleming's name has become synonymous with the Presiding Bishop's Office. She is the face of that office. We look good because of the tremendous amount of work she so efficiently does at the backstage. Ms Vanessa Peters, a temp who came to assist with the Heritage Indaba organising has proved to be a valuable hard worker who keeps us on our toes. Ms Bongzi Moyo, our Communications Director has for the past eight months single handedly managed the Communications Unit. She is an on-time person. The New Dimension publication has gone out on time every month. She also keeps our website fresh, keeps the social networks alive and profiles the MCSA in the public space.

Last, but not least, a big thank you to my wife, Nonkazimlo, who is a source of encouragement and pillar of strength. She makes sure that I do not rest until I have fulfilled my work responsibilities. Without her prayerful support I would not cope. She is indeed a blessing!