

CHAPTER 1

MESSAGE TO THE METHODIST PEOPLE

CONFERENCE 2010

The 121st Conference meeting in the year of the First Fifa World Cup on the soil of Africa kicked off with the opening service at the Quigney Baptist Church – East London. The Queenstown District, as the host District, displayed the beauty of diversity of God’s people in choirs, worship team, YWM and excellent team of organisers, and blessing of the seeds. We will always remember the ‘medicinal’ sound of the flute and the beautiful music rendered by the choirs. We salute the hospitality of the people of the frontier region who have a rich cultural, religious and political heritage. The Presiding Bishop on the 1st anniversary of death of his father and 2 days later the death of his mother – delivered the opening address in which he called for “An Invitation to a Round Table”:

- Where there is mutual respect, diversity celebrated and relationships nurtured
- Where there is a place for all and space for active participation and dialogue
- An inclusive community of love, justice, peace and dignity
- Where all are welcome especially those who feel marginalised, excluded and have no voice.
- In calling for the Clergy Indaba – crises of discipline...
- Called Conference to take seriously the composition of Conference with respect to creating space at the table for women and children

The Bible Studies were ably led by Rev Dr Simanga R Kumalo , who is the Head of School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. In these Bible Studies which unpacked the theme of Conference, the delegates were powerfully reminded and challenged to put more emphasis on grace rather than law. Where law overshadows grace, a context is created of exclusivity and disempowerment. The church was invited to embrace unity not only over meals but ‘truly’ at the Lord’s Table. May the Holy Spirit hold us together as a family even when we are angry with each other. Salvation is for all. We were called to note the geography of the table and move the table to social locations that need it most and ensure that the table is accessible and seek to meet those not at the table and to reflect on the economics of the round table. The church should be a symbol of unity where people of all races, colours, sexual orientation, masters and servants, male and female all find a place at the table. This should include giving a voice to those who come from all countries of the connexion, and intra-missional in engaging those in splinter groups of the Wesleyan family.

The Lay President, Mr Fungile Dotwana once again challenged the church to strengthen the team spirit of lay and clergy and move forward in mission, out of our comfort zones into unchartered waters of the mission field and display a model of servant leadership to all. We were called to face the challenges and always seek to work towards healing and transformation in the example of Jesus Christ in Philippians 2:5.

Conference received the report of the General Secretary who highlighted the following:

- There is a reported membership growth of 38% over the last 3 years and this is specially so in the 'blacks' areas.
- Lack of transformation and this is disturbingly evident in the fact that women ministers are by mostly stationed by Conference and not invited by circuits. Circuits are called upon to work towards correcting this unpleasant reflection on our witness.
- The need for focus on Christian Education – people are 'over-churched' and 'under-disciplined'. Therefore the Lay Training wing of EMMU needs re-alignment taking cognisance of this need.
- The mission of the church should become a dominant pre-occupation of meetings of the church
- There is an urgent need to appoint a Registrar at the office of the Presiding Bishop.
- Corporate identity and profiling of MCSA needs looked at.
- The cost and effectiveness of annual conferences need to be re-looked at.

Unit Reports:

Conference received the report the Methodist Connexional Office with much appreciation. The Pension Fund story was once again told and received the resounding endorsement of conference. The fund is well managed and is in a healthy state. After arbitration there will be a Road show, before Conference 2011, to communicate clearly and listen to concerns regarding matters of the Supernumerary Fund.

The pending arbitration on this matter was noted. Conference further noted that the budget of the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary will not be increased.

The Report of the Education for Ministry and Mission Unit reflected that there are no 'white' candidates further for 2010, and this is a matter of concern. Conference received 49 ordinands – 44 to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments and 5 to the Ministry of Word and Service. These newly ordained servants, together with those returning from the Seminary and those already ordained have enabled the Conference to provide clergy agency to our circuits. Conference noted that there should be parallels in the level of training for both non-itinerant and itinerant categories of ministry.

Despite the concerns raised and pain expressed with regard to the events at the opening ceremony of the Seth Mokitimi Seminary, Conference applauded the completion of the historic formation campus and celebrated the official opening of this magnificent 'debt free' legacy project of the MCSA. The hard and tireless work of Rev Prof Peter Storey and the wonderful team of the 'birthing task team' is recognised and appreciated. The report of the Seminary was received with appreciation.

The Communications Unit report highlighted the challenges of understaffing and budgetary constraints. We await the implementation of this Unit's strategic plan. The New Dimension is up and running and a call for support was expressed.

The Revision Committee presented their report and Conference noted that work has begun towards the publication of Edition 12 of the Laws and Discipline. A document will be sent to

circuits/synods pointing at amendments and inviting input before the 12th Edition is published.

Conference noted the call for age limit of 35 for leadership of Youth entities. This is in the spirit of opening space at the 'Round Table' for the younger generation. There is also a need to redefine "youth." The creation of the Youth website: www.mcsamyu.za.org is reason for celebration. Several resolutions were heard and passed aimed specifically at youth ministry. The church takes youth seriously and this is a good indication of the invitation to our young people of their place at the round table. It was further noted with appreciation that the Women's organisations are working towards greater cooperation.

Conference received the report of the newly established Child Care Desk in the Mission Unit and the first Coordinator of the Desk in the person of Mrs Victoria Sikhakane. The achievements of this so far are noted. Conference further noted with appreciation the increase in the number of Clinics focussing on HIV/AIDS in our connexion. Conference welcomed the news that we will be receiving funding from the Global Fund to support and strengthen our response to HIV/AIDS. Conference reaffirms the establishment of the Justice, Service and Christian Citizenship Desk in Mission Unit. Conference declares that the first Sunday of November to become Social Awareness Sunday, focussing specifically on substance- and other forms of abuse. Structures are also to be put in place for the church's prophetic voice to be heard, from Circuit level right through to Connexional level.

In the ongoing discussion regarding same sex relationships, DEWCOM produced the material ***"In search of grace and truth: Christian conversations on same sex relationships"*** which can be used as a tool for furthering discussions. All levels in the church are encouraged to engage this material. Conference asked that it be translated into various languages to make it accessible. It was also noted that there are countries in our connexion where this conversation cannot take place. The church's prophetic voice and influence will make a difference in this matter.

The report of the local World Methodist Conference preparations committee was received. We are looking forward to welcoming the World Methodist family on our shores in August 2011. The countdown has begun! This will be preceded by the 'Evangelical Crusade in' Bloemfontein on 23 – 24 October 2010 where every Methodist will be welcome.

The General Secretary Rev Vuyani Nyobole was re-elected for a further term of office. We congratulate Rev Nyobole on this affirmation. Conference further appointed 3 Bishops for the Grahamstown, Natal Coastal and Highveld & Swaziland Districts for further terms of office.

In a moving and celebratory service, Conference remembered those who have been called to higher service. Rev Dr T. Simon N. Gqubule called us to invest our lives between the entry and exit points into the garden of life, in things that enhance the well-being of others. We have treasure in 'earthen vessels' that can and will break, so we are called to use it to bring comfort to the weeping, the wounded and weak. We salute this servant of God and have fond

memories of his dear departed wife who in her own right is the mother of many in this connexion – “Sis’ J.”

CONCLUSION:

The words from the Song that was sung throughout Conference are an invitation to all Methodist people to live their lives in a way that reflects the response to God’s Love and calling:

“Here I am Lord...I have heard You calling in the night. I will go Lord, if You lead me.

I will hold Your people in my heart.”