

Conference Address 2014

READINGS: Micah 6: 1- 8 and Luke 19: 37 -45.

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

Sub-theme: **The marks of a true transforming discipleship movement**

Greetings

The General Secretary, General Secretary Elect, Lay President, Bishops, Lay Leaders, and Members of the Conference, Guests and all people of God gathered here this evening, I greet you warmly in the name of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – One God, Amen. It is with joy and a sense of expectation and prayer that I welcome you to the 125th Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in the year of our Lord 2014, the tenth anniversary of the Mission Congress which met at Mthatha in 2004. Durban and the Province of KwaZulu- Natal is a good place to be. I trust that many will find time after the rise of conference, to explore the places of interest in the Province. We all know that the Natal Coastal District people are good hosts, having hosted the successful 2011 World Methodist Conference. It was here that the first Triennial Conference was held in 1998, under the Presidency of Rev Dr Mvume Dandala. We meet in Durban in the year and month of the completion of the move of the MCO to Johannesburg. Our gathering here today is a symbolic salute to Durban for having hosted the Head Office for 78 years, since 1936. It is therefore understandable that the move to Johannesburg, which was completed at the beginning of this month, was an emotional one to say the least. We salute Mr Anthony Tibbit, Mrs Joanne Trytsman and the staff at the MCO – now the Finance Unit, for having handled the move with extreme care and sensitivity. Welcome to Conference 2014 in Durban.

Context - the positives:

The Bishops had an opportunity to visit and take part in many mission and ministry activities throughout the District in the last week and for that we are grateful. I do know that they will agree with me that the church is alive and God has given us inspiring leaders in our societies, circuits, units and organisations. Yes they may be brief seasons of leadership drought here and there, but we must praise God for what he has given us and celebrate. I also had the privilege of visiting some parts of this District in May and it is proper to acknowledge the leadership of the District – in Units, Organisations, Circuits, Societies under the direction of Bishop Mike Vorster and his team. Having been in KaNgwanase, near the border of Mozambique, Ingwavuma and the centre of Durban I was pleasantly surprised, inspired and encouraged by the resilience, vision, love and serious discipleship of the Methodist people. Evidence of the work done here is abundant. You have to meet and listen to the story of Mrs Ntuli, a retired nursing Matron, who spearheaded the birth of a school which has grown to be one of the projects we are all proud of. The story of Mrs Jabu Mkhwanazi and her team at Ingwavuma, and how through prayer and their accompaniment of schools has enhanced the church's role and contribution towards quality education in that region, resulting in a qualitative increase in pass rate. I visited a number of Pre-Schools, too many to list here but I was encouraged by the three I visited in Durban. The vision of a Christ Healed Africa and obedience to the Conference call of becoming a true, transforming discipleship movement can be realised. With God's help we are equal to the task ahead. Read again the reports that are in the Conference package. Amazing stuff!

You need to pat yourselves on the back and dance with God. God is indeed faithful. Our source of hope and encouragement is not from us, but from the One who has called us at this time.

An opportunity has arisen again for our faithful witness in three countries in our connexion, with Mozambique going to the polls on 15 October, Botswana on 24 October and Namibia on 29 November. We call on our members and all citizens of these countries “to discern God’s direction as they cast their votes and for all Methodist people across the Connexion to pray for these elections to be *free, peaceful and fair.*” (To use the Mission Director’s appeal). I need to express concern at the developing trend of how elections within the church are conducted, especially when we are electing Bishops. Because these elections are conducted by the select few who are assumed to be mature and discerning members of the church, what message are we sending when we conduct ourselves in disputable ways? What moral right will we have to speak to the nations? It is very painful, costly and time consuming when our office is called upon to intervene and some of the situations are very embarrassing to say the least. We can do better.

Let us also remember our sisters and brothers in West Africa, during this time of the outbreak of killer Ebola virus.

Context – negatives:

It is a time of religious fanatics who cause havoc in communities and they are not new. Let us take seriously Wesley’s call ‘to hold fast to the spirit, doctrine and discipline’ with which we started. Let us take courage in that God is with us. It is also a time of pain highlighted by such incidents as the conflict and horror of bombardments and rocket launching between Israel and Palestine, the Boko Haram abduction of girls in Nigeria, the persecution of Christians and other minority faiths in Iraq and conflicts in other parts of the world – Syria, South Sudan, etc. As if that is not enough, daily news reports bombard us with more violence and terrible acts of abuse. The deaths and violent abuse of women by their so-called lovers and spouses is a cause of much concern and must be condemned by all of us. We must support the Thursday in Black campaign towards a world without rape and violence. Let us not only speak loudly, but act visibly. These abominable acts happen behind closed doors and the police can only react. If we ignore this scourge, we crucify Jesus again and again.

The pain in the heart of God is surely aggravated by the grinding poverty among some of His people as those charged with responsibility to be stewards of resources continue pilfering these for themselves through corrupt actions. Unemployment, poverty and inequality continue to pose a challenge characterised by some commentators as a ticking time bomb. We ignore this at our peril. The incidents of road rage and road fatalities cannot be ignored by a movement of transforming disciples. We must teach, and campaign for safety, courtesy and care on our roads. We have to work with ecumenical bodies and other local agencies to strengthen our campaigns in this regard.

Let us continue to pray for peaceful resolution of the conflict in the Kingdom of Lesotho; may all the matters there be decided through constructive dialogue. We salute the parties in Mozambique for having signed a peace deal. We express our appreciation to Bishop Dinis Matsolo and our colleagues in faith who have done an outstanding work in the facilitation of dialogue. Our life together can be better.

Appreciation of Connexional engagement with the Conference Theme:

It was in this context last year that the Methodist people resolved through this Conference to adopt the Conference theme as a platform of work and stay with it for a while. I am pleased at how this has been embraced and made a focus of our work in all societies, circuits, organisations and units. The innovative strategies and initiatives as we continue the journey of being a transforming discipleship movement are very encouraging. The conference call to reclaim our role in education has been received with enthusiasm, sacrifice and resolve to make a difference throughout the Connexion. Our Methodist Schools in Lesotho continue to be a sterling example in the midst of challenges. They will need special recognition at an appropriate time. As a symbol of appreciation and encouragement, the bishops have asked that we establish a Conference Award to celebrate what God is doing among and through the people called Methodists. Two such awards will be given during the course of this conference in recognition of faithful service and obedient discipleship. The two recipients represent the Methodist ideal of following the Lord and in their particular case, in striving to provide access to quality education by all. We will continue with these awards at every Conference.

I call on Methodist people to encourage the culture of appreciation and acknowledging the good that God is doing through His people. I call for a culture of blessing and not cursing; a culture of painting God's world with beauty and spreading a transforming fragrance. I call on all of us to engage in healing conversations and speaking transforming words even to the timid and the wayward. Words have power to create a new culture and build new people; a transforming trajectory and transformative discourse. Indeed we are called to be a transforming discipleship movement.

The basis of our calling:

Our conviction as people of faith is that our life together can be better and our calling is 'to reclaim Jesus's ancient and compelling vision of the common good' (Jim Wallis). The common good has become very uncommon, writes Jim Wallis in his recent book 'The (un) common good.' In many areas of our existence, self-interest and fighting for political ideology has replaced finding solutions to problems in a genuine way. In so doing human beings continue to inflict pain, suffering and destruction on each other. Seeds of division are sown every day of our lives in different forms of actions and words. These seeds germinate and grow and when we least expect it, show up in families, communities, churches and nations causing unending devouring of each other. What can be done and what does the Lord require? Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God, who has shown what is good. *Pope Francis*, in his address from St Peter's Square on 18 May 2013 said; *"Today's world stands in great need of witnesses, not so much of teachers but rather witnesses. It's not so much about speaking, but rather speaking with our whole lives."* The theme calls us to speak with our whole lives.

Our conviction as John Wesley aptly articulated is that the Methodist movement was "raised by God to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land and reform the nation beginning with the church". Joyce Moore speaks of the church being a "peculiar community, formed by the story of God's redemptive activity, being peculiar because it favours mercy, lives out justice and visibly honours God" (2011 WMC addresses). It is a community that responds to the prophet Micah's words in 6:8: "The Lord has shown you what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." Justice, mercy and humble walk with God are highlighted as the marks of a transforming discipleship movement. As I will illustrate later; what is

called for here is a humble walk with God. It is possible to walk nicely and be a nice 'church' – but without God. The target of this transforming discipleship movement is not just doing nice things, planting new churches, or simply adding numbers and having a strong financial base, but transformation of persons and creation for a better social reality. All these form part of a whole

A transforming discipleship movement will be characterised by what the Lord requires because our journey is one of God's mission (*mission Dei*) and not our mission (*mission homo*). What does the Lord require? Justice, love of mercy and a humble walk with God!

What does Justice, mercy and humble walk with God mean for this movement?

These are the marks of a true transforming discipleship movement. They are the dipstick with which we check if this vehicle still has enough oil and is therefore in the right condition. Will it carry us to where we are going? Our journey is towards Christ- likeness. The name of the Prophet Micah is an abbreviation from Hebrew Micaiah which means 'who is like Yahweh?' His message was primarily to the leaders of Jerusalem at a time of crisis in Judea. Commentators suggest that chapters 6 and 7 are more of reflection on the themes of Micah's actual prophecies, and could have been written by a later Psalmist. But that is beside the point. The message of the whole book is drawing the attention of a people over whom hangs the cloud of destruction. The intention is to sound the warning and inspire soberness. Because of the transgressions of the nation which will bring about suffering and pain, the Prophet says; *"I will weep and wail; I will go about barefoot and naked. I will howl like a jackal and moan like an owl. For her (the nation) wound is incurable; it has come to Judah. It has reached the very gate of my people, even to Jerusalem itself.* Later on according to our Gospel reading, when Jesus was approaching Jerusalem, he saw the city and wept over it. More than the weeping are the words he uttered; *"If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes."*(Luke 19:41). Jesus must be weeping even this day, over many nations, peoples, communities and families because things that bring peace are hidden. What is tragic is that they are hidden even from those who claim to be His followers.

I have painfully followed the events in many parts of the world and the utterances from those who are pro-Palestine and those who are pro-Israel. The things that will bring peace are hidden from their eyes. I have listened to spats between those who support the South African Public Protector and those who support the President. The things that will bring peace are hidden from the eyes. Corruption continues to eat at the very souls of our nations, communities and conversations points to the fact that the things that make for peace are hidden from our eyes. The followers of Jesus must not take sides blindly, but must always be found on the side of justice. It is when the actions are just, informed by mercy and guided by a humble walk with God that our eyes will be opened and we know true peace. When people kill each other and steal resources meant for the poor;, seeds of hatred, hurt and suffering are being planted. I must be quick to add that the new trend of seeking to destroy public institutions instead of using available recourses is a very dangerous game. Those who are alleged to have acted improperly in the reports of official and constitutional bodies must use the available avenues to answer or they have no right to lead.

Going back to Micah. After outlining the transgressions which will bring about the fall, the Prophet summons the nation to remember the saving acts of God. For Micah, the Lord requires just actions, love of mercy and a humble walk with God. He says the liberating light of grace will not come from ten thousand rivers of oil (verse 6:7) but from a humble walk with God (6:8). It is the humble walk

with God that will set the world on the right footing and the liberating light of grace will be witnessed by many. It is sometimes easy to meet at religious gatherings and formulate resolutions and strategies that will make us appear nice, but walk alone, taking leave of God, without taking leave of the church. We must ask the Holy Spirit to assist us to examine our consciences, our intentions and our actions. Christianity without Jesus the Christ is a meaningless project if not a dangerous one. It results in a church that is deaf to the cries of those at our doorstep, a church that is blind to the corruption that ravages the livelihood of many, a church that provides pastoral agency only to those who can afford it and then we move on and do business as usual. As demographics change, these must not negatively impact on how we resource mission. This must happen through a well thought out and accepted model. I have heard of sister Methodist Churches, poaching resourced members from other churches in order to access resources. We sometimes ignore the destitute in vast areas of need and Jesus is left behind weeping with those who wait for agency. In the words of the Rules of a Helper, we must “go not only to those who want you but those who need you most.” We need to re-visit the way we resource mission and ministry and ask tough questions, informed by just actions, love of mercy and a humble walk with God.

Walking humbly with God:

A humble walk with God requires obedience to God. As followers of Jesus, we are part of “divine intention to make the world right again.” (Joy Moore). Since we are the followers of Jesus Christ, we will do well to learn from Him. The story of Jesus is best summed up in the word ‘incarnation.’ It is the story of God becoming flesh and dwelling among His creatures. Joseph Galgalo in his book; *African Christianity, the Stranger within*, writes that God is the “missionary God.” In incarnation, the Missionary God enters into a special relationship with creation. The missionary and the mission become inseparable. John writes; “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have beheld his glory, the glory of the only Son from the Father, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”(John 1:14)...And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. (John 1:16). The heart of God’s mission in the world is built on love and grace; the love and grace that compelled God to descend to the level of His creatures, revealing His glory. Those who follow Jesus are to strive to be a sign of God’s presence in the world in a way that reveals His glory. The responsibility is to live among the people in a way that the world may say; ‘we have seen His glory even grace upon grace.’ It calls for speaking with our whole lives, not only reaching out in mission but living out the mission. Mission and the missionary becoming one! Incarnation is God’s model of our mission and our lives. Galgalo calls it ‘mission to self.’ In the words of Paul in Philippians, Jesus “emptied Himself... humbled Himself... and became obedient unto death even death on the cross. The act of self - emptying is not an easy thing. To understand it you have to visit the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prayed that God’s will be done (Luke 22:42). As Jesus prayed this prayer, he started sweating and His sweat was like drops of blood falling on the ground. It was a battle of wills. The follower of Jesus must enter that battle and focus on the prayer of Jesus; “Your will be done, not mine.”

Acting Justly:

Again, we will do well to remind ourselves that the mission is the mission of God (Missio Dei), and not a mission of human beings (mission homo). Missio Dei implies that God sends Godself and invites us to follow. As such it is the mission of the Just God whose intention is articulated by the

Prophet Amos in Amos 5:24 *'let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.'* As invitees we become the apprentices/learners in the business of God and in turn become the medium through which God's redemptive activity and justice can touch the world. Galgalo observes that there is an imbalance of *too much of the world in the church and too little of the church in the world.* God's justice and God's redemptive activity must touch the world and there will be evidence at the doorstep of our congregations. The question that must be the guiding principle of the life of every follower and every congregation is 'how have we touched the world' in the period under review – in the agendas of each Quarterly meetings, society meetings, gatherings of every organisation and every small group as we search our own journeys. Jesus the liberator takes sides with the damned world, and on the side of justice, bears the suffering of the damned world, "enlivening hope and inspiring actions that relevantly contribute towards the realisation of a just society.

A story from Brazil told by Jim Wallis, illustrates this point well. A community of subsistence farmers were about to lose their land to a big Government project. No amount of engagement or protests helped. Instead protests were met with violence; even death. Then when a final vote was to be taken a group of mothers went to the area where the senators lived. They set on the lawns in big numbers. When the wives of the Senators came to offer them food, they refused, and when offered money, they did not take it. When asked, what then do you want? They said; "we have come here to die with our children. We see this place as a nice place to die." It was then that wives of the senators listened to their story and began telling their own stories as mothers. Then telephones started ringing in the corridors of power. The weeping together of the women; sounded a call to the corridors of power. Justice prevailed. The vote was not taken as the senators rushed back home to listen to the weeping of their wives and in the process heard the weeping of the wives of the poor and understood the pain their votes would have caused. The church of Christ weeps together for justice and liberation from all that dehumanises. It is a church without Christ that does not weep and it is easy to become a church without Christ. Let me allow Galgalo to speak for himself:

"When the Church blindly follows every worldly trend in the name of staying relevant, there is always the danger of darkness overcoming the light...many today would identify themselves as Christian and yet find it easy to take leave of God without taking leave of the church... It explains why a country said to be over 95% Christian can easily dispense with the two dimensional law of love of God and neighbour and carry out ethnic cleansing of fellow Christians. Or that a country rated as 80% Christian also tops the list of most corrupt countries in the world... missio homo has created Christianity with no Christ at the centre."

Let me add that it explains why there is so much injustice in the world today when Christianity claims to be growing. "God has shown you what is good and what the Lord requires of you? The call is to act justly, and to love mercy." When we weep together, we are able to listen to each other's stories, then moral economy emerges, where there will be no more Marikanas , or Nkandlas or arrests and silencing of cries of people in Swaziland and elsewhere or public spats seeking to hide the truth at the expense of the poor. In South Africa millions if not billions are wasted on commissions and court appearances. Let us learn to listen, without resorting to senseless waste of resources.

Loving mercy:

The word translated mercy is the same as the word translated 'loving-kindness' elsewhere. Loving mercy is a state of being. It is compassionate living. It is not something you do sometimes when you feel like, otherwise one would be guilty of "schizophrenic religiosity" where doctrine is not always translated into practical matters of compassionate living. When we follow Jesus, the source of compassion and the omnipotent liberator, living out the love of mercy, He offers infinite possibilities in overcoming the difficulties in this life. Let us respond to the call.

The encouragement for the journey:

The good news is that it is God who acts. We are only invited to join. The idea of the common good derives from Jesus's command to love God and to love neighbour. Love of neighbour is required if we say we love God. It is then the love of God that overflows towards a common good. The call of the Conference theme is a call to love God. The longing for an inclusive vision of the common good is a longing that comes from God's heart. It must be defined by a walk with God. It is the love of God that seeks to burst out even through us, unleashing the people of God for the purpose of God. Don't do it on your own, you are going to break down and suffer 'burn-out.' Let us do it TOGETHER in the footsteps of the One who created us, called us, and formed us into the movement we are today. Justice, love of mercy and to humbly walk with God must be a golden thread in all our:

- Time spent in prayer hearing God, and honouring Him in a noticeable way
- Listening to each other and our love of neighbour, evidenced by the sharing God's resources
- Structuring of worship services, taking into consideration the changing demographics
- Holding each other accountable and not applauding what is abominable
- Respect of our discipline and usages in ways that will minimise unnecessary conflict and risk
- Following of Jesus in healing words, thoughts, actions and signs
- Continuous support of the call to reclaim our role in education. Remembering that the first week of February is set aside as time of praying for education, supporting the teachers, reflecting on our actions to make a difference. As we do this let us heed the call to take early childhood development seriously.

CONCLUSION:

As we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Mission Congress, let us strengthen our resolve that each local congregation becomes a centre of healing and transformation. May the words of Charles Wesley's hymn be our prayer and guide:

Finish then Thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see Thy great salvation perfectly restored in Thee;
Changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before Thee, lost in wonder, love and praise. Amen.

TOGETHER a transforming discipleship movement!