

General Secretary Report to Conference

Charles Wesley wrote the hymn:

This, this is the God we adore,
Our faithful, unchangeable Friend;
Whose love is as great as his power,
And neither knows measure nor
end.

'Tis Jesus, the First and the Last,
Whose Spirit shall guide us safe
home;
We'll praise him for all that is past,
And trust him for all that's to come.

I love the hymn which speaks about God who is worthy of our adoration, whose faithfulness is immeasurable, whose commitment to God's own creation is unshakable, whose power is never greater than God's love, and whose love is never greater than God's power.

In the context of this attempt at describing God, Charles Wesley allows us in the second verse, to look back, to see the years that have past, and to look forward to that which is unknown, with firm trust. It is because God is who God is, that we can look at our history, and make sense of suffering, find redemption, and find the grace to make a new attempt at a future. It is because God is who God is, that we can deal with change and uncertainty that tomorrow brings.

One could say that Charles Wesley looks up, and because of what he sees above, he finds the strength to look back, and then to look forward.

In this report, I invite you to join me in looking back, and then looking forward with trust.

Year of Heritage

Conference 2016 declared the year past, The "Year of Heritage" as we celebrated 200 years since the arrival of Rev Barnabas Shaw at the Cape of Good Hope, and his journey to Namaqualand, beginning the spread of Methodism in this sub-continent.

During the year, Districts have had various celebration activities, and so have Circuits. An important part thereof, is the way in which Societies, Circuits and Organisations have begun recording and celebrating their heritage.

Pamphlets on our history and heritage have been made available Connexionally, posters distributed for use in all church buildings, and commemorative lapel pins sold.

Books and resources have been made available, and further writing is taking place. The new-look Methodist website will have a Heritage page, with an abundance of information. Many Circuits have started to record their stories, and have sought information from the Archives and the MCO.

The MCO has established a Heritage display, portraying something of our British roots, and then World Methodism, the history of the journey of Methodism in Southern Africa, our Seminaries, our Presidents and Connexional leaders, our Organisations, First- generation Methodist leaders in Southern Africa, our prolific hymn writers, and heritage locations around the Connexion. We gladly accept stories, photos and artefacts for this display.

As part of our Heritage Year, we have been asking people to send in their favourite hymn or spiritual song, in any Southern African language. This project bridges the Years of Heritage and Unity, because with this we hope to produce a multi-lingual resource that can be used in services at every level on the life of the Connexion. Conference is invited to make their submissions.

The Heritage Committee produced the Phambili study material which is for sale at Christian Connexion, as well as downloadable from the church website.

Two Childrens' books are available. One is obtainable from the Christian Connexion Bookshop, mainly on the story of Barnabas Shaw, for senior primary level and above. The other is for younger children, as an activity book on the heritage and ethos of Southern African Methodism. This downloadable from the website, for use as churches see fit.

As I see the enthusiasm with which the Heritage Celebration was embraced in many parts of the Connexion, I trust that there is also a greater understanding of our unique contribution to faith and society, and a humble pride in our Methodist expression of faith community, praying that it may be infectious especially to our children.

A Reverse Ripple-effect?

The field of operation of the church continues to expand. There was a time that we only needed one District – the Grahamstown District which was established in 1824. By 1863 we had 5 Districts. By the 1970's we had 12 Districts, and for a short time, a 13th. Our external boundary lines have not changed much over the years, except for losing Zimbabwe, 40 years ago.

Our national populations are growing, however. In some, especially rural communities, the need is ever greater, because of the conditions of challenges of people, even if some rural communities or mining communities shrink. On the other hand, cities are expanding, in formal and informal ways, but very few new Societies are doing new work. Although the demographic picture of the Connexion continues to change with the fluidity of the population, we have been very slow in responding to new communities settling.

Over the past 40 years the Clarkebury District had an increase of 18 Circuits, and Mozambique had an increase of 6 Circuits which for that District is a 100% increase. Otherwise the Connexion has been static in the number of Circuits. In terms of membership, no District showed an increase in membership over the past decades. Only Cape of Good Hope, Natal Coastal and Highveld and Swaziland remained static over the last 30 years. All other Districts showed a loss, some of up to 20000 Or even 47 000 members each. Read this statistic in the light of the population of our Connexion - in 1996 of 49 147 700 compared with the 2016 total population of 91 053 000, and it is clear that we have, in terms of spread of our work and number of agency, been static, in terms of membership, reduced significantly, while the population of the countries of our Connexion has just about doubled.

We have certainly, in the last decade, become more aware of the missional imperative of the church, and many Circuits are doing wonderful work. The recent Mission Congress evidenced a great number of Methodists, deeply committed to mission, and very keen on learning and growing in mission. However, the church continues to struggle in understanding its identity. We are all too much wanting to be a structure or an organisation, existing for the sake of its members and their well-being. We are slow to perforate our boundaries, to include, welcome, seek and serve those who are not members. Often we are willing to embark on mission projects, as long as mission does not change us or challenge us. This is a serious issue for the church.

We need to come to grips with the fact that we live in an age where organised religion is no longer a part of the life of a great number of people.

Church, which was at the centre of every community for a very long time, is slowly being pushed to the margins- to a greater or lesser degree in our communities. We are yet to learn what it means to minister, care and evangelise in a situation where church membership is no longer seen as important by many, and church itself seen as merely an option for those who wish to participate.

In local situations we can no longer take our standing in the community for granted. As Circuits and Leaders' Meetings we have to re-think how we relate to the community around us, or we can easily become an insular, obsolete entity.

One response is that we need to continue learning the Wesleyan stance of openness and welcome of all who approach us. We need to put ourselves in the shoes of the occasional visitor who approaches the doors of the church for the first time, whether it be out of interest, need or curiosity, and think of even the little things and actions that will make them feel this is a place for "all people".

We cannot assume that people will come to the church, even when they are in need or crisis. We need to communicate in ways such as Revivals, support groups, clinics, after school centres, and a thousand other ways of ensuring people learn that we are serious about the wellbeing of the whole community.

Another way of placing ourselves in the midst of the community is to be proactive in stepping in where there is tragedy – for example the Bishop of the Limpopo district who stepped in immediately when at Bronkhorstspuit so many school children died in an accident. Before it was on the news, our Ministers were there. The on-going care of and mission in the general community beyond the church, is foundational to the church establishing its credibility in a society, though that is not the main reason for being engaged in mission. We need to be visibly present in Vuwani, Ennerdale, Coligny, etc, and not be too busy with our meetings to take the community seriously.

Circuits and Districts need to continuously look and assess where new work can and should be started, rather than to focus only on what is already there. Some of the tools we have to do this include:

- Our Mission Charter and Mission Imperatives that keep sending us,
- The gift of Bible Women, Evangelists and Deacons who are called to and trained for Ministry and Mission in the community.
- The Mission Resource Fund, which has over the past 3 years been able to help fund 60 stations,
- The Stipend Augmentation Fund that has assisted 50 Ministers in 2017,
- The passion and skill of many lay persons and Ministers.

May I move to a few issues that need reporting, before we progress with our reflection on looking to the past and trusting God for what is to come.

Report on Resolutions 2016 and Current business

Retirement age of Ministers and Deacons.

Conference 2016 requested the MCO to investigate and provide guidelines on how the skills of Supernumeraries can be utilized. This should include guidance on remuneration.

The issue relating to Supernumerary Ministers is a multi-faceted one. We have around 700 active ministers, and more than 600 retired ministers. That is a very large pool of wisdom and experience. Added to this picture, is that 336 Ministers are due to retire in the next 15 years.

Taking into account a multiple of factors, the HR committee is not quite ready yet to give us the requested guidelines and undertakes to do so by Conference 2018. Whilst the Human Resources Committee does a thorough investigation of the issues listed, which they have already embarked upon for a comprehensive and well thought-through proposal, Superintendent Ministers and Circuits are encouraged to value Supernumerary Ministers and their gifts, as part of the life of their Circuits, especially in places such as Mentoring, Training, Pastoral and Communion visiting, Coaching young people in the Circuit, and participating on the Preaching Plan.

Relating to ministers beyond the Connexion

The MCO was asked to investigate why ministers chose to explore beyond the Connexion as well as provide guidelines on the nature of the relationship these ministers have with the MCSA for reporting at the 2017 Conference.

The reasons are, as far as we can ascertain, family considerations, as well as a seeking to broaden horizons. Many intend to return to our Connexion.

Three Ministers have transferred out of the Connexion in 2017 (Two had been in Britain for a number of years already). There are currently 30 Ministers beyond the Connexion. One is at the World Methodist Council. Two are overseas, and now transferring. One deceased, 18 Supernumeraries. Nine are active. It translates to 1% of our Ministers, which I suggest is not a cause for concern.

Ministers Beyond the Connexion answer to the Connexion they are serving in. An L&D amendment proposed to CE this year was that under 5.12 we amend the rubric requiring that Ministers beyond the Connexion also answer the discipline questions to the Connexional Executive annually.

Discipline Process

The Revision Committee has met with the Connexional Discipline Committee, as well as a representation of District Registrars and District Discipline Committee chairs.

The product of their work is contained in the amendments to Chapter 11 of the Laws and Discipline as approved by the Connexional Executive. (The full revised Chapter 11 will be printed in the Yearbook to assist in integrating the changed information)

Order of Deacons and Order of Evangelism

Conference 2016 had a number of resolutions relating to the Orders, which have been taken up by the Orders as well as Unit Directors. There are more issues than stated in the previous resolutions, those being:

- a. The Order of Evangelism has a Convention rather than a Convocation, which has started to take on the form of an Organisation. This anomaly needs to be addressed.
- b. Stationing of members of both Orders is not easy.
- c. Deacons' and Evangelists' stipends are calculated as a percentage of Ordained Ministers' stipends. The basis of such calculation is to be reconsidered in its entirety.
- d. The Order of Evangelism's medical benefit has not increased in the last 12 years.
- e. Candidature age and retirement age differ.
- f. What is the rationale or theology of the dress code for each Order?
- g. Deacons qualify for Stipend augmentation, Order of Evangelism do not yet.
- h. A theology of Ordination vs Commissioning.
- i. How is the business of each Order financed?
- j. How do the Orders relate to each other?

In exploring the history and purpose of each Order, and naming the areas of concern, the Committee have come to the conclusion that the Mission and Education Directors investigate and document, in consultation with the outcomes of the Mission Congress 2016, the purpose of the Orders, and the need for the Orders at this time in the Church, as well as what is required of a Member of the Order.

We request Conference to endorse the proposed workshop in February 2018, which will take all these issues into account, and from a theological, missional and justice perspective, deal holistically with the ministry and care of the Orders in the MCSA and design a strategy for the ministry, stationing, organizing, remuneration and care of Members of both Orders, as well as a formulation as to the relationship between the two Orders.

Women in Ministry

The Connexional Task team continues to do its work, currently working on strategies, in cooperation with the Women Ministers' Consultation. The report is in the Conference Report Book. One note to add is that in this year, broader exposure to women was possible, by sending one Woman Minister to an All Africa Council of Churches Conference, one to the South African Council of Churches Conference, and two to the United Methodist Women's Conference in Houston. Furthermore, about half of the class of Superintendents-in-training in 2017 were woman Ministers.

In 2017, of the ordained woman Ministers who are Itinerant, 23% are Superintendents. Of 287 Superintendents in the Connexion, 8% are women whereas 19% of Ministers are women. A statistical schedule is attached to the report.

Connexional Statistics

The statistical schedule is attached for the record. However, the discrepancies between the 2016 and 2017 returns are either alarming, or ridiculously incorrect. Districts were asked to do an introspection and audit of their figures. We again call for a careful audit of each Circuit in every District. To this end we will design a unique quantitative census schedule for use in 2018, and ask District Secretaries and Statistical Secretaries to tutor the Ministers at a District gathering after Conference, as to the content of the schedule, and the importance of keeping true records of membership, so that realistic figures may be recorded.

One statistic to share with Conference: In 2016 our formal agency included (apart from a valued and gifted mega-team of laity who offer their time, money and talents):

708	Ministers in Circuit
38	Deacons
190	Bible Women
180	Evangelists
153	Lay Pastors
622	other employed staff, with a total of
1891	agents

Trusting God for all that's to come : Boundaries

The Boundaries of the Districts of our Connexion have not changed much over the last 150 years or so, although the population demographic and the mission

needs of communities are always changing. The last big changes that took place was Mozambique that became a District in 1975, Zimbabwe that became an independent Connexion in 1977, and Namibia that constituted a District and dissolved as a District some time later. The Clarkebury District, having left the Connexion in 1978, was reincorporated in 1988.

Following Obedience 81 an intentional process of geographic Circuits was initiated, to give expression to our outward unity as One and undivided. This was more successful in some places than others.

The conversation has been on the table again since 2001. We have been talking, and resolving to talk about District Boundaries for 16 years now. This has been through the initiative of the Structures Committee which was mandated by Conference to do so. In the past few years, Botswana and now Namibia are seeking to become Districts. The Conference 2001 resolution asks the Connexion to investigate and consider boundary changes with special reference to maximising mission effectiveness, maximising organisational and financial effectiveness and any other relevant matters. Intentional conversation took place again in 2007 and 11 with the Connexional Structure Indaba.

In 2016 the Structures Committee under the guidance of its Boundaries Subcommittee called for Connexional Conversations in regions, to begin a consultative process. These conversations have taken place during 2017, with a Connexional team of 6, visiting clusters of Districts that share borders, and invited from each District, to send their Bishop, Lay Leader and Mission Coordinator, District Secretary plus three persons, as well as further representation of three, from other countries, per District.

These regional consultations, under the facilitation of Mr Craig Arends, did very good work, and striking was the similarity in the discernment of all of the four consultations.

Reasons to re-consider District Boundaries

1. Consultations agreed that Districts exist, firstly for the sake of mission. The question is then asked, are our districts currently shaped well, for the purpose of mission? The accompanying question is “Does structure define mission, or does mission define structure?” These theological concepts were considered from the vantage point of the church’s understanding that mission is at the heart of who we are, and Districts should serve mission.

With the size of current Districts, there is not the collective energy in most instances, to focus on each and every corner of districts. Main centres receive disproportionate attention, and the “*Extensio Dei*” – the ever-expanding mission of God, that always considers the smallest and the poorest, is often not central to the strategy of a District, because it is overwhelmed by the expanse of its work.

2. Districts exist, secondly, for accountability, fellowship and administration. However, with enormous distances covered in many of the Districts, all of these key functions suffer, as well as the efficacy of District structures, and the well-being of those who have responsibility for a District. Without trying to emulate our Mother-church, it is useful to see the District structure of the Methodist Church in Britain, where the Connexion- District- Circuit- Society structure developed in early Methodism. Britain is about 200 000 km² which means you can fit 13 Britains into our Connexion. They have 31 Districts and we have 12. What it suggests is, it is no wonder that District officials are over-worked, stretched thinly, and that the administration and accountability in Districts is an extremely demanding task.
3. Sovereignty. Our Connexion is made up of six nations. Dealing with a government, from the Methodist office in South Africa, causes diplomatic and relational challenges. Consideration to countries who are able to form Districts, should be given. Furthermore, the question is asked whether we should be continuing to use the term, District, or consider using the term “synod” instead, in order for us not to say a nation is a District of a church in another country.
4. Fourthly, the consideration of costs for people to travel to District meetings, retreats, conventions and Synods means that if Districts are shaped differently, much of what we now spend on travel, can be spent on mission. The cost factor also impacts therein that some Districts will be able to change to a partially-separated Bishop, which means that a Circuit will partly carry the cost of stipends of Bishops.
5. The geography of the Connexion stays the same, but population growth and population distribution and migration must always be part of the debate on boundaries.
6. All Consultations agreed strongly that the current shape of Districts is not desirable.

Obstacles to change

The idea of changing the configuration of Districts in the Connexion, urgent as we may see it to be, will not be without pain. Obstacles we will have to sensitively negotiate include:

1. There are Methodists with a sense of District identity who might find it difficult to amend their thinking to a Connexional identity that overarches our Methodist identity. There are many members whose focus is the local Society or Circuit where they belong, and they are not concerned about the greater structure of the church.
2. Most people have an inherent aversion to change, and need to be assisted in their thought processes regarding change.
3. The thought that “someone” is designing and imposing something that is not wanted or negotiated, and that there are hidden agendas behind the process.
4. There might be those who see change of District boundaries an imposition to a perceived power to a person or a structure.
5. We are fearful of the unknown.
6. People frequently prefer their known comfort zone.
7. It is easy to ascribe the word “tradition” to the status quo.
8. Circuits and Synods are not always in good communication, and there seems to be a gap between Conference and Districts.
9. We will have to carefully consider our model of financing the smaller Districts.

Principles- agreed to by all Consultations

1. Inclusiveness/ diversity. As far as possible, demographic, language, race diversity etc. is to be an important part of any District.
2. There is unanimity that Districts should be smaller. We need to minimise the distance between the “hub” of the District, and the furthest Circuit.
3. Mission is at the centre of the existence of every District.
4. Structures must be dictated by mission.
5. In considering “Who do we need to be” to take seriously our mission call, we understand that there will be some sacrificial decisions to consider.
6. Connexionality is a cornerstone of our self-understanding, and must not be compromised.
7. Our Methodist ethos is non-negotiable. (Wesleyan)
8. Districts must be sustainable.
9. Boundaries are never designed to be static, they should meet the needs of the time.
10. All places of human habitation are worthy of ministry by the MCSA, however far, small or poor.

11. We express our Connexionality, we commit ourselves as Districts, to support one another, and especially newly-formed Districts with a theological understanding of Kenosis/ self-emptying and a theology of giving and sharing, especially with newly-formed Districts.

A possible picture of the Connexion

Proposal to Conference

The Structures Committee proposes to Conference that:

1. Conference requested to endorse the Process as presented at Conference 2017.
2. Districts to recommend 2 (1 lay/1 clergy) facilitators to lead the process with Bishops.
3. November 2017 –Bishops’ and Secretaries’ Consultation – to be briefed on the Processes.
4. October/November 2017 District Facilitators to be Trained
5. December 2017 – May 2018 District/Inter- District Regional Consultations with Circuits to be facilitated by the District Facilitators where necessary.
6. Synods May 2018 – Connexional Boundaries Committee to prepare Documents for discussion including possible resolutions.
7. Conference September 2018 – To receive reports and recommendations from District Synods and appoint Preparatory Task Teams.
8. October 2018 – 2019 Task Teams to provide operational processes to set up the restructuring including preparatory work and possible elective Synods and endorse the establishment of new structures.
9. Conference 2019 to receive preparatory reports and make the necessary appointments.
10. January 2020 – Implementation and Inauguration.