

The Conference Address 2017

Platform of Work: "TOGETHER a transforming discipleship movement"

Theme: Being together with God's creation.

Readings: Genesis 1:20-31 and Colossians 1: 9-20.

Greetings and Welcome:

The leadership of the Church, members of the 128th Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, distinguished guests and all people of God gathered here this evening, I greet you warmly in the name of the Triune God – Amen! The time you have set aside for holy conferencing at this time is not taken for granted and is much appreciated. Please feel welcome.

The Central District and the Conference Planning Committee have put a lot of hours into preparing for our stay and work during the next few days. We look forward to robust conversations, inspiring imagination as we continue to set the strategic direction for the people called Methodists in the six member countries of our Connexion.

We meet in the Central District in Gauteng, which is historically, the cradle of humankind. Welcome home!

Introduction

We meet in the City of Gold, "Kwa Ndonga Ziyaduma" As we meet, we are mindful that somewhere under large areas of this district, there are miners underground. We mourn the unnecessary loss of life at the Kusasaletu Shaft of the harmony Gold Mine in Carltonville on and we also remember the families of the 3 Lily Mine workers who were trapped underground in February 2016 and whose bodies have never been recovered. We pray that the families find healing and are helped to find closure. Safety in the work place, especially in the mining industry should be enhanced and prioritised.

As we wrap up the year of heritage, marking 200 years of the arrival of Barnabas Shaw and the 500 years of Reformation we want to recapture the words of Hebrews 12:1

Do you see what this means – all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better go on with it. Strip down, start running and never quit. No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus. (The Message Bible)

As we gather here today, let us remember that today is the Kingdom of Swaziland's Independence Day. Next year, the people of Swaziland will mark the 50th Anniversary of their Independence. We continue to pray that the Swazi nation will grow to experience true freedom, justice, peace and dignity.

We further celebrate with the people of Lesotho who managed the transition from the 'no confidence vote' period to peaceful elections which ushered in a new government. It is our fervent hope and prayer that the Kingdom of Lesotho will henceforth experience stability, peace and meaningful access to better life opportunities, where every child born today grows to its God-given potential. The present tensions

are regretted and we call upon the leaders and people of Lesotho to find one another in peaceful dialogue.

Equally so, we ask the member countries of the Connexion to pray for the South African nation as it faces the challenges of corruption, state capture, recession, the appendage of 'junk status' and dangerous fracturing.

We have very high unemployment rates in the Connexion and this is the most challenging socio-economic crisis at this time. The Centre for Development and Enterprise has recently published a Report titled; "No Country for Young People,¹" in which it outlines the crisis in South Africa and what to do about it. The key recommendation of the report is that the scale of youth unemployment must prompt government, business, civil society and all stake-holders to shape a bold, new agenda for action.

For me, our leitmotiv should be: 'access to meaningful economic activity and life opportunities' so that we can be more holistic in our approach at this time of slow economic growth. Time has come for the citizens to 'wake up' and stop outsourcing their future and mortgaging future generations to the political and business elites, some of whom have shown that they have little interest in the well-being of the populace. By this, I am suggesting that governments and business must not be let off the hook, but should be held accountable to participate with all citizens towards the building of a better socio-economic and political reality. This is not only a South African crisis, it is a regional crisis. The situation has to change for the sake of the Region and Continent. To this end, I propose that 2019 be the year of special focus on youth and children.

We meet during a period when political killings are rife; and dangerous, inciting language that depicts people of different opinion as enemies, is the order of the day.

There is a great lesson to be learnt by all of us from the Mexican government who despite the threat hanging over their heads of President Trumps insistence on building a border wall between the two countries, that he would make the Mexicans pay for, extended an olive branch in the form of proffered aid to the state of Texas recently devastated by Hurricane Harvey.

Rather than retaliate in kind, the Mexican government chose to be neighbourly and offered the US government help and cooperation through different government agencies to deal with the impacts of the natural disaster. They chose to rise above petty politics and walk the honourable road of neighbours helping neighbours; they chose to recognise the human impact of the hurricane rather than political expediency.

This is an example of the love we are called to exemplify as Christians of the Wesleyan tradition.

¹ CDE Report 2017, No Country for Young People

Over the last four years, we have been reflecting on the platform of our work –“TOGETHER a transforming discipleship movement.” We salute the Methodist people as individuals, in circuits and organizations, for their sterling work in embracing and unpacking this theme over the years. I have observed with immense pride, the commitment that our local churches have made in following the conference calls. Many attempts have been made in reclaiming our role in education; the forward-looking marking of the 40 years of ordination of women; the focus on heritage and the rigorous dialogues during the Boundaries Indabas on how best we can re-organize ourselves for effective mission. These are clear strategic goals which must be advocated and promoted by all of us. Exciting and innovative methodology has been evident in the work and programmes of societies, circuits, organizations and units. We commend the Methodist people on such positive responses which indicate that we can reflect and self-correct. Both the Mission Congresses of 2004 and 2016 have done well in articulating potential programmes of action. I am humbled by the work of those who lead us and I encourage the Connexion to take that work seriously.

Past, present and a compass for the future:

Barthelemy Boganda, a Central African Republic politician (1910-1959), uttered these words in du Preez 2013:1 “I would stop talking about the past, if it weren’t so present.”² .

The nations of our Connexion are bruised in many ways. The past is present with us. It is haunting and biting us. Wounds of the past continue to divide and shape us. This calls for continuous healing conversations that have to shape the trajectory of our future. Openness, healing, unlearning and re-learning together, must be at the centre of our definition of ‘Church.’ We have all underestimated the real impact and legacy of colonialism. Perspectives have to change and that must begin within the Church. We have to find a way of reading the signs **together**, if any meaningful change is to happen. Otherwise, we are hurtling collectively towards a definite disaster and recklessly squandering the progress of future generations.

Being together with God’s creation is an urgent call at this time, words which I borrow from the sub-title of the book edited by Santhosh S Kumar, 2016, *The Great Commission in Context, Being Together with God’s Creation*³. The book is a collection of scholarly articles that aim to unpack the holistic understanding of the Great Commission as found in Matthew 28:18-20. The emphasis is on paving a way for peaceful co-existence of life on the planet Earth. It is an appeal towards a world with no exploitation, manipulation and destruction of human life and nature. John Piper writes; “Mission is the overflow of our delight in God because mission is the overflow of God’s delight in being God.” (Kumar 2016:1)⁴. The Church is called upon to be present in real life situations as the overflow of our delight in God; in ways that seek to leave no one behind or be exclusionary. In order to respond in a meaningful way, the Structures Committee continues to look at ways of shaping the Church for mission, adaptability, meaningful visibility and effectiveness. There is a resounding call from around the Connexion for our boundaries to be re-

² Max du Preez, 2013, A Rumour of Spring

³ Kumar, Santosh (ed), 2016, The Great Commission: Being Together with Gods Creation , Title and pages 4 and 5

⁴ Kumar, Santosh (Ed), 2016, The Great Commission: Being Together with Gods Creation

defined, so that instead of being a burden, they must be facilitators of mission. That is one of the exciting conversations on the table during this conference.

All things belong and Christ holds all together

The passage in 1 Colossians 1 is a beautiful passage that says more than what the traditional title given to it suggests. It speaks of God's purpose in creation and redemption. It focuses on the whole of creation rather than just human beings. The passage presents Jesus, not only as the image of the invisible God, but also that in Him we must see the purpose of God in all created things as well as understand God's whole purpose in salvation. It speaks of the reconciliation of all things, and the restoration of "all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe, people and things, animals and atoms – which must get properly fixed to fit together in vibrant harmonies."⁵

This analogy is also found in 2 Corinthians 5:19-20, The Message Translation, "God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them... Become friends with God; *God* is already a friend with you," It is the narrative of vibrant harmony, and it should be the narrative of the Church. It is the story of making the Transcendent God immanent, a visible expression of the Invisible God as we live out Christ's message in the world today. As we grow in this Christ likeness and in faith, Richard Rohr writes; "We recognize that the whole world is connected and we feel part of it... As our perspective becomes wider we realize that everything belongs."⁶ It is a journey of becoming and God is at work now, doing it. It is sometimes our thoughts and actions that attempt to push back the ever-flowing transforming grace of God. Our thoughts, prejudices and actions perpetuate a fractured world.

N.T Wright, in his commentary of the passage, says that "The true humanity of Jesus is the climax of the history of creation, and at the same time the starting point of the new creation."⁷ As a transforming discipleship movement, following the example of Jesus Christ, and being God's instrument in the world, we are called to give ourselves in loving self-sacrifice, and sacrificial engagement. This is a call for all disciples to live their lives in all areas of their influence, in ways that create conditions in which **all** can live as God intended. Disciples are God's gift for all of creation as well as stewards of all that God has created. As such, disciples are called upon to be in the fore-front of promoting the following; respect for all people, respect for the ecological order of creation and justice between individuals and groups. It is a journey towards that assured goal that, in Christ all things will hold together. Visible actions and pronouncements must be evident in each local community.

⁵ 1 Colossians 1:20 The Message Bible translation

⁶ Rohr, Richard, 2003. Everything Belongs

⁷ Wright NT, 1986 Colossians and Philemon, page 70

Extensio Dei

Jacob Kavankul argues that, **Missio Dei** refers to the activity of God, as that of sending which is not the only activity of God. The very nature of God is about reaching out. He uses the term “*Extensio Dei*” which means, “divine self- reaching out.”⁸ *Extensio Dei* refers to God going out of God’s self in love. Kavankul explains that, “Humanly speaking (divine anthropology), the first moment of this divine self-reaching out is creation. Creation is the manifestation of divine love and divine goodness. Hence the bible repeatedly asserts that creation is good, and very good (Genesis 1:31). What is to be underlined is that God’s reaching out to the world is not a second moment or attribute of the divine being but an expression of God’s very being.” He also notes that the notion of sending, received high priority during the beginning of colonialism. It was “uni-directional” and carried with it the military language of “conquering the nations for Christ.” Instead of the conquering motif, our focus must be ‘being together’ with all nations for *A Christ Healed Africa for the Healing of Nations*.

The Church’s existence comes out of the process of **divine reaching out**. The Church therefore is the instrument, sign and expression of being God’s presence as reaching out to the world. It recognizes the humanity of those among whom it works and respects their ‘*imago Dei*.’ It calls for a participatory lifestyle in ‘divine self-reaching out.’ It is in the present continuous mode; constantly working on re-establishing broken relationships, between people and God; between and amongst people; and between people and the planet Earth and all that it holds. Psalm 24 writes; “To Yahweh belongs the earth and all it holds, the world and all who live in it.” Ecological mismanagement is part of broken relationships that awaits mending.

Divine-self reaching out continues to this day and is an unending stream of love and fullness. The Church is called to this faith and to give hope and meaning to this truth as well as imagining a better reality for the next generation. It is possible. We have to believe it, and our faith must make us restless and impatient with anything that works against life and all its abundance.

Being together/ Vibrant Harmony:

Being together and striving for vibrant harmony is not a ‘nice-to-have’, but is the Gospel imperative. Running away from it or ignoring it makes us only poorer. The WCC document, titled ‘Towards Life’ writes, “Marginalized people have God-given gifts that are under-utilized because of disempowerment and denial of access to opportunities and/or justice. Through struggles in and for life, marginalized people are reservoirs of active hope, collective resistance and perseverance which are needed to remain faithful to the promised reign of God⁹”. The Church has taken positive steps towards ensuring that mission and ministry do not become the exclusive preserve of those who can pay for such service. The Church’s resources and presence must be tilted towards moving from the margins and unlocking and accepting the contributions of the people on the margins. Furthermore, let us be reminded that whilst the “go” in the Great Commission is important, the main directive in the command found in the passage in Matthew 28:20 is, making disciples. It is making the Transcendent God immanent. We must guard against

⁸ Kumar, Santosh (Ed), 2016, The Great Commission: Being Together with Gods Creation, page 4

⁹ WCC, 2013, Towards Life, pages 10 and 16

the danger of falling into comfortable spirituality that simply makes us feel good while other parts of creation hurt and yearn.”¹⁰

Jay Naidoo writes; “the Social and economic underclass is growing globally. Governments are turned against their own people and forfeit sovereignty to corporate power... We could kick-start a new way of creating harmony between ourselves, other species and the planet, fixing our energy crisis while fighting global warming... for a just energy future.”¹¹ So many people are being left behind in all the member countries of our Connexion and the whole SADC Region. The South African Council of Churches (SACC) Campaign called; “The South Africa we pray for” is a very strategic campaign towards a reconciled society. The elements of a reconciled society include the following: all people must be reconciled with their God given dignity; each child grows to her God-given potential; the yearnings of the marginalized poor people must be reconciled with God-given fortunes; there must be a reconciled economic dispensation for the reconciled existence for future generations.

This calls for active citizenry, because of the realization that we cannot be saved by individual messiahs – but by just actions through all of us – being together with God’s creation. The Church must be actively involved in growing transforming leaders for Church and society; leaders who will be the vanguard of ensuring that all people are seen to be citizens of countries which treat them with dignity instead of subjects to be abused for the benefit of a few.

Being together with all of God’s creation can help us move forward, so that all may have life in all its abundance. The poor and the marginalized must not be left behind by circumstances of life but have to receive agency, nurturing and care.

Obedience 2018

In the spirit of Obedience 81 and the 1958 Resolution, we are called to focus on sacrificial engagements and prophetic actions. The conversation at the 1958 Conference included the following and I quote; “We are convinced that obedience to our calling, demands that we seek to know and to express the mind of Christ on all matters relating to the total life of *human beings*” (Minutes of Conference 1958:137). That Conference went further to acknowledge its share of responsibility for the failure to rise to Christian standards and do the will of God. It resolved to strive to be a united Church in a divided world; to demonstrate the power of the Risen Christ in reconciling all human beings in the body of Christ. Noting the death of Mr. J.G. Strijdom, and the succession of Dr H.F. Verwoed to the office of Prime Minister, Conference expressed its fear of the intensification of the trend of restrictive legislation in the enforcement of the ideology of Apartheid.

It was in that spirit that Conference adopted the following resolution:

¹⁰ Ibid, page 10

¹¹ Naidoo, J,2017 Change: Organising Tomorrow Today pages 213 and 218

The Conference declares its conviction that it is the will of God for the Methodist Church that it should be one and undivided, trusting the leading of God to bring this ideal to ultimate fruition and that this be the general basis of our missionary policy.

This Conference had its own limitations. Its Secretary recorded the number of candidates for ministry as 19 Europeans, 24 Non-Europeans and 8 deceased ministers – with the 2 European ministers mentioned by name and Non-Europeans ministers by number! Have we outgrown that prejudicial thinking? What can we read behind the one directional movement of black ministers to previously white only congregations and no white ministers to black only congregations? These are courageous conversations we must have as we enter into the year of obedience and unity. We must address the elephants in the room. This is a call to transforming actions.

As we mark the 60th Anniversary of the 1958 Resolution in 2018, I call upon this Conference to guide us in a strategic direction that promotes and demonstrates obedience to God. Being together is not a ‘nice-to-have’ fellowship but it is the Gospel imperative. We must hear afresh the Mission Charter’s call that every society should be a centre of healing and transformation. The Church has to demonstrate the oneness that Jesus prayed for (John 17:21) to this fractured world and we must strive to be held together in Christ Jesus.

Minding the way we think, speak and act:

The following saying is attributed to Albert Einstein; ‘No problem can be solved with the same nature of consciousness that created the problem in the first place.’ Therefore, we cannot hope to struggle for climate change with the same consciousness that was responsible for creating it. It is Richard Rohr’s argument that; ‘We do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking.’¹² Therefore, our way of life and what is happening and not happening needs serious reflection so as to help us to be better. The call by Jay Naidoo is relevant, “We have to start dreaming again of a new start. We need to abolish the bitterness in our hearts and turn our anger into a tool that will forge peace, compassion, reconciliation and justice. If we want to practice our right to walk on this earth, we have to acknowledge that it is the earth that has given us this right in the first place.”¹³ We have to look at creation with the same appreciation that the Creator looked at it and not as a commodity to be exploited for profit. God’s earth has been referred to in such terms as ‘real estate, resource, minerals or property. It is bigger than that and deserves much higher respect. We are interconnected and live on an interdependent planet. Our lives must demonstrate that interdependence and shape our thinking going forward.

In order for us to move together towards a different reality, we have to ‘**think about our thinking.**’ i.e. metacognition. We live in a time of dangerous fractures and divisions be they racial, ethnic or sexual orientation. The ‘*being together*’ is more necessary now than ever before. Part of the way forward is reworking our thinking processes.

¹² Rohr, Richard, 2003. Everything Belongs

¹³ Naidoo, J, 2017 Change: Organising Tomorrow Today page 218

Ngugi wa Thiongo, a novelist, theorist of post-colonial literature, social activist and proponent of 'decolonizing the mind' has this to say; "We must be careful with the vocabulary that defines us... and not internalize negativity... Use English but... don't let English use you... In colonial conquest, language did to the mind what the sword did to the bodies of the colonized."¹⁴

How English have we become? How has this contributed to our thinking, the undermining of African thought systems and even worship including the manner of doing business? Is it empowering and striving to enhance our being together as a transforming discipleship movement?

This will need on-going deep theological reflections – reading the signs together. I recommend one such reflective session scheduled for 28-29 September at SMMS, which will focus on the 1958 Resolution of a one and undivided MCSA. These Theological Reflections must continue in all the regions of the Connexion in partnership with the ecumenical movement and tertiary institutions.

To quote Ngugi wa Thiongo again, "Our lives are a battlefield on which is fought a continuous war between the forces that are pledged to confirm our humanity and those determined to dismantle it, those who strive to build a protective wall around it, and those who wish to pull it down; those who seek to mould it and those committed to breaking it up; those who aim to open our eyes to make us see the light and look to tomorrow... and those who wish to lull us into closing our eyes."¹⁵

One of the areas that need deep reflection, engagement and action is the paralyzing effects of patriarchy. The Women in Ministry (WIM) and the Task Team established by the 2016 Conference noted that as a way forward, we must pay particular attention to the following areas: conscientisation, representation, exposure and legislation. In terms of legislation we must look at the areas of legislation that work against recognition and empowerment of women, as well as those parts of the legislation that can be used as excuses to cover destructive and paralyzing patriarchy. The work must go beyond the Women in the Ministry of Word and Sacraments but must deal with all issues which deprive all women of freedom, womanhood, justice and dignity.

In Greek mythology, there is the story of a beautiful youth who pines over the love of his reflection. At a time of no mirrors, he was taken to see a pool of clear water, where he saw his face and was mesmerized by its beauty. Some say he drowned as he admired his reflection, others say he lost the will to live for anything else and just stood transfixed, looking at his face narcissistically. Yes, there is so much to celebrate, but we must guard against the danger of being mesmerized by our own beauty, heritage and resources, thereby missing the opportunity of journeying in divine self-reaching out. What are the things that hold us back and press the

¹⁴ Wa Thiongo, N, 1986 Decolonising the Mind

¹⁵ Ibid, 1986

pause button in the journey of our transforming discipleship movement? What is this divine self-reaching out calling us to be and to do at this time? I leave the questions for our collective reflection.

Going Forward

Disciples are God's gift to the created world. We have to 'church' in a way that demonstrates faith in God and obedience to the Gospel call, a Church that demonstrate intentionality in imagining and working towards a world waiting to be born - being together: young and old, male and female, haves and have-nots, human beings and all of creation – we belong together and this is what God called 'beautiful.'

This is the Church that the world waits to see. It must be seen to be so in a way that imagines God repeating the words recorded in Genesis 1:31; "God looked over everything *God* had made; it was so good, so very good." (The Message).

May it be so! **AMEN!**