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MCSA ECUMENICAL AFFAIRS UNIT FIRST THURSDAYS NEWSLETTER

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Greetings in the name of Jesus

COVID 19 has compelled us to turn to social media to communicate.

One hears more and more from our rank n file membership that they are getting tired of virtual church. Everyone is doing it – from podcasts to sophisticated You Tube presentations – the gospel is being preached. People are now so spoilt for choice (those of course who have access) as they sit in the suburban lounges; *olungakahleleki emjondolos*¹; rural homesteads. There is a growing angst about not getting out to be with others. To sing together; to move together; to be together. Is this not your longing?

When I did my first podcast sermon (never done this before) and sent it via WhatsApp to congregants. They responded with Amens; praying hands; thumbs up etc. After week three the responses became less. Is the novelty beginning to wear off? It is like when one walks on the promenade at Mhlanga rocks next to the Atlantic Ocean, and a pod of forty dolphins break through the waves, 20 meters from shore. All the upcountry folk holidaymakers are excited and tell everyone else. Spot the local who casts a glance and seems indifferent to the wondrous spectacle of dolphins prancing about the waves. Locals have seen this spectacle often and no longer view it as wondrous. This I suppose is part of human nature. We tire soon even of the wondrous encounters.

Perhaps this is a valuable lesson to us all that nothing can replace presence of the other. Virtual presence does not give us the essence of the presence of the other, through sight, touch, smell and gestures. The early church was often divided between those who believed Jesus was spirit only an apparition a virtual Christ and those who believed he was only human. Then the church settled on a hypo stasis union both divine and human.

In the 21st Century the more authentic expression of messianic Judaism is through the presence of others in the flesh. Paul (or whoever wrote it) used the image of the body of Christ a functioning living organism that moves; breathes and has its being bringing justice; healing; liberation and salvation in a very broken world seeking ultimate meaning and daily bread.

In terms of Church Unity – are we further becoming a church that is not only divided on doctrinal lines but also on resources; those who have access to enough data to view virtual church and those who have uncapped data? Will this not also further divide us when we have meetings on Zoom – the other day I wanted to include a refugee Pastor in our local ecumenical meeting to discuss the needs of refugees and other COVID 19 related issues. He was not able to be part of the meeting because he

¹ Informal settlements and shack-dwellers

has limited access to data. Does this mean that decisions within the church are going to be made only by those who have data during this Lock Down period?

Will people so tire with WhatsApp; Zoom, YouTube; FB; Instagram, that post COVID 19, we move to a post social media society or at least a minimalist social media society and become real people again? (Of course, there will always be the social media addicts among us). This will hopefully see the decline of digital churches and pseudo-televangelists- making wealth out of exploitation of vulnerable poor and sick people.

Will the choice between social media and real presence: Separate the sheep from the goats? Authentic Christianity from pseudo- virtual Christianity in cyberspace? The workers from idlers? The disciples from the watching onlooking crowd?

A large crowd gathered at the gates to Heaven. A voice went out:” All those who went to church on Sundays, raise your hands?” A section of the crowd waved their hands. “Come in”, said the voice.

“Who of you watched church online; on You Tube; on TV and any other form of digital means?” said the voice.

All the remaining people raised their hands enthusiastically. “You will from now on only see heaven on TV and other digital and social media platforms”.

Will I continue to watch devotions; sermons worship liturgies on You Tube beyond COVID 19 Lock Down – definitely not. How about you?

Be safe; take care

Peace and Grace

Rev Mike Vorster

MCSA Director Ecumenical Affairs Unit