

The Presiding Bishop's Address to Conference 2018

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Platform of work: TOGETHER a transforming discipleship movement

Theme: "Shaping tomorrow- today."

Reading: Matthew 18: 1-20.

Text: "he called a little child and had him stand among them... And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me." (Matthew 18:2 and 5 NIV). "But if you give them (*these little ones*) a hard time, bullying or taking advantage of their simple trust, you will soon wish you hadn't. (Matthew 18:6, Message)

Greetings and acknowledgements:

In Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, is found the following conversation:

"Would you tell me, please which way I ought to go from here" asked Alice. "That depends a good deal on where you want to go to," said the Cat. "I don't much care where – 'said Alice. Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

General Secretary, Lay President, Bishops of the Church, Unit and Organisation leaders, Lay Leaders, former General Secretary, all the members of the 129th Conference, distinguished guests – we are all God's beloved people. Welcome to a special time of holy conferencing. The Bishop, leadership and people of Mozambique have expressed and demonstrated a warm welcome to us all. Be assured that we are in Mozambique and not in Wonderland.

The theme of this Conference, the vision of the MCSA as well as the strategic direction set by Conference from 1998 at the turn of the century is very clear about where we want to go. We continue with our prayers, reflections, imagination and commitment towards the vision of "A Christ Healed Africa for the Healing of Nations." We thank the leadership and all the people of Mozambique for their hard work in preparing for a successful conference.

We meet as conference, for the very first time in Maputo, Mozambique. As we gather here we think of pioneers of the work of the Methodist movement in this country beginning in 1887 by Rev. Robert Ndevo Machava, a Mozambican citizen who brought the Methodism from from South Africa through Catembe and to many other parts of Mozambique. We laud the diligent work of leaders like the Revs Isaac David Mahlalela, the first Bishop of Mozambique; Bernadino Mandlate, Hendrique Mahlalela , Brian Mabone and the current bishop of the district, Dinis Matsolo.

It has been a long journey with many sacrifices made along the way but the church of God continues.

Not far from this venue, is the welcoming salute from the founding President of a free Mozambique, Samora Machel - a clear reminder that together with our forebears, we are on a journey of decolonization, reimagining, rebuilding and struggle towards a better life for all. The prayer of the All Africa Conference of Churches resonates with this, our common cause: “God of Life, Lead Africa to Justice, Peace and Dignity.”

Context:

According to the 2017 study by the African Union Youth Division, 65% of the African population in Africa is under the age of 35. Africa is therefore a youthful continent within young democracies. This calls for a contextual reimagining of being and doing church with relevance.

The mission field has changed. The dynamics are constantly shifting.

Nathan Mokoma notes, “Recent years have seen an increasing popular appeal of youth uprisings in Africa. Some believe this to be effect of the Arab spring, giving rise to the term ‘African Spring.’ While dissatisfaction with socio-economic conditions has been a key motivator behind these uprisings, frustration with political leadership is at the centre.” (Africa in Fact page 67).

There is a growing feeling among young people that they have no stake in the countries of their birth or abode. This generates a lot of anger, restlessness and frustration. Unemployment is rising at an alarming rate as economies shrink and fold into recession. It begs the question: “What are we breeding? What future are we building?”

The church has to be actively involved in actions that create a transformed future, especially in the real-life issues of young people. We have to be relevant and active now. It is imperative because our action or inaction will shape tomorrow. It is up to us what shape this becomes. As Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana wrote in the Peter Storey lecture at the SMMS in May 2018, “*Prophetic voice without disciplined action and reflection has only noise value.*” We long for a future where all children grow to their God given potential. But how do we achieve this? This is the question that this Conference 2018 is asked to grapple with. Creating an environment where young people are equipped with the skills necessary to access life opportunities and feel that their contribution towards this goal is valued and accommodated.

The world is hurting in many ways. The Global Report 2017 on ‘Ending Violence in Childhood,’ further paints a disturbing picture of violence against children and calls on us to break the silence so that the scourge can be dealt with. The first President of a democratic South Africa, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, who would have turned one hundred this year, is quoted as saying: *the world has to be more familiar with the laughs of children than their tears.* Last year I referred to a report from the Centre for Development and Enterprise entitled “No Country for Young People.” I trust that people have had an opportunity to read that report in search of what can be done to fast track hope-generating activities and conversations especially among children and young people. As people of faith and members of a transforming discipleship movement, we believe that there is a tomorrow. The assurance comes from the transforming presence of God with us – “For in Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

The statement adopted by the World Council of Churches – Conference on World Mission and Evangelism on 13 March 2018 included the following:

The Holy Spirit continues to move in our time, and urgently calls us as Christian Communities to respond with personal and communal conversion and transforming discipleship. Discipleship is both a gift and a calling, to be active collaborators with God for transforming the world... Thus, we are responding to Jesus' call to follow him from the margins of the world.

As we respond to this call, we have to keep in mind the groans of the vulnerable people on the margins of society; amongst whom are children and young people.

As we do that, let us remember that the world is our parish and the journey of the church must not be from the church to the church (Hoekendijk). We are not called to try anything that God has not provided for. In our pews sit policy makers, thinkers, skills of every description. As we engage in these issues, we equip each other for the ministry in the market place and in the public arena, contributing to the shaping of a better world where future generations will live peacefully with justice and dignity.

Matthew 18

In our text today, the disciples grapple with what seems to be an important concern for them. They are bold and walk up to Jesus and ask; "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

The disciples had willingly abandoned their fishing and tax collecting businesses to follow Jesus. They were the closest circle of Jesus' friends; the inner circle. Now their concern is appraisal. Who will be the greatest? This is a fair question in life's daily struggles where the greatest is respected and treated with pomp and ceremony. Without saying anything, Jesus reaches outside the circle, and picks up one of the most vulnerable present at the time, a child, and puts him in the centre. The inner circle is disrupted and the child becomes the centre of focus. Jesus speaks: "*Whoever becomes as humble as this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 18:4). An emphasis is placed on change in disposition and habits; on a new configuration and arrangement and this turns the disciples' world view upside down.

Greatness in the kingdom of God is based on humility, vulnerability, receptiveness and a childlike-wonder at what God is doing. It is not strength but mercy that puts us in the inner circle of the kingdom of God; a dependency and faith in God's active initiative to create a new world. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and it is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." (Ephesians 2:8).

Children in the New Testament times, were at risk and vulnerable. Many died at infancy and there was no real will to take them seriously. They were perceived as making no significant contribution to the success of society and therefore deserved no serious investment. It was during this time that Hilarius, an Egyptian man working away from home, writes to his wife Alis; "*When our child is born, look after it if it is a boy, but if it is a girl, allow it to die.*" (Papyrus Letters in Lefkowitz and Font, Women's Life in Greece and Rome). That is how dispensable girl children in particular, were at the time.

Prevalent inequality, reported and unreported cases of abuse, violence and the killings of women and girls points to the fact that the culture of viewing and treating girls as less stills exists today. The notion of a child in the centre was unthinkable. By putting the child in the centre, Jesus forced the disciples to think the unthinkable! He turned their very beliefs about children upside down.

This teaching tells us that the youth and children are not a para-church but are to be at the centre of everything that is church. The care of children cannot just be relegated to the work of the Youth Unit, but should be the work of the whole church. Today, children are precious to every family irrespective of circumstances which sometimes militate against such appreciation. Parents sacrifice a lot to ensure that their children have a stake in what the world economies have to offer. Is there evidence at the local church, of us leaving no stone unturned in the pursuance of the goal of ensuring that we take seriously the undertakings we make at baptism when asked:

“Members of the Body of Christ, who in *Christ’s* name to receive this child, will you so maintain the common life of worship and service that this child and all the children among you may grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord?” And the Congregation responds; “**With God’s help we will.**” (The Methodist Service Book 1975, A8-A9).

I ask that we take seriously this pledge to be living examples for our children. Verse 6 is a warning that the followers must not **cause** the little ones to sin. Sin is defined as ‘missing the mark/ target; deviating from the goal or taking a wrong road from God’s will. The word ‘to cause’ in the Greek text is “skandalizo” which means ‘to cause to sin’. It is therefore a scandal for the church to allow conditions that lead to children missing the mark.

Furthermore, when Jesus says in Matthew 19:14, “Let the children come to me and do not **hinder** them,” What do we understand this to mean? Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem. This was serious business and caused a lot of anxiety in the disciples as they imagined the implications of this journey to the future. So they jumped in to act as body guards in order to protect Jesus from distraction by the children. It wasn’t the time for such insignificant, childish games –at least that seems to be the impression we are given. In our time, a barbed-wire fence would be erected to keep the children away in order not to disturb Jesus. Scripture says Jesus was very displeased at the indifference of the disciples.

What are the imaginary/ invisible barbed wire fences we put around the church to keep the children in our churches at bay and from distracting us from our programmes? It is the command of the Lord that doors be opened for children. It is the command that we knock down any barriers between the church and the little ones. In this way the church can play a significant role in shaping tomorrow- today!

Children in the Church:

There must be continuous reflection, action, evaluation of the meaning and implications of baptismal vows. This must take place in each and every society in the Connexion.

This must be followed by taking seriously the Conference call of 1978 that children be allowed to partake in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Forty years on and there are still congregations that struggle with this decision. We must reflect on these things at every opportunity including the Presbyters' Convocations.

There are also many challenges when it comes to raising children. Parents are sometimes overwhelmed with work demands, unemployment, and poverty and strained parenting skills. We have to expand parenting skills programmes where they exist, initiate them where they don't –and work together with agencies that provide these across congregations, circuit boundaries and even denominations. Young parents, married or unmarried are yearning for help. Research has shown that only about 38% of children live with both a mother and father. Furthermore, research has found that boys growing up with absentee fathers are more likely to display hyper- masculine behaviour, including different forms of aggression, involvement in unhealthy relationships, crime and addiction whereas, girls with absent fathers are likely to grow up with low-self-esteem, leading to increased possibilities of high risk sexual behavior, teenage pregnancy or unhealthy relationships with the opposite sex. It's also been estimated that 63 percent of youth suicides are also from fatherless homes¹. Southern Africa has the highest number of orphans due to HIV and AIDS which has led to the growth of the phenomenon known as child-headed homes.

This is the context of our mission field, to which we are called to be responsive. What is our response?

We have to invest in children and youth ministry. Financial statements are a theological reflection of our priorities. They tell the story of our mission strategy. What percentage of local congregation/circuit income goes to children's ministry? What does that percentage say about our commitment to shaping the future now?

Previous Conferences have made calls for the formation of after care centres, strengthening of Sunday schools, vibrant youth groups etc. Now we need to see visible expressions of what we believe and say. Can we now say that our churches are abuzz with youth and children? I believe this can happen and there are several examples from which we can learn. It is not enough for the church to just pass a plate or parcel of food "out of the back door, but to set a place for these little ones at a family feast." Thomas Long page 219.

Having had an opportunity and privilege to interact with young people in different fora, I have been exposed to brilliant thinking and imagination. It is that imagination, fresh questioning and engagement that we must tap into. It serves two purposes – listening together whilst at the same time passing the baton and shaping values based leadership. God has given us these gifts that we must harness. Young people must also commit to picking up the mantle of leadership and we should make the environment conducive for such to happen. We have to model new dispositions and habits as we

¹ HuffPost South Africa. 2018. *Almost Half Of South Africa's Children Are Growing Up Without Their Fathers -- And It's Having A Bad Impact*. [ONLINE] Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.co.za/rebone-masemola/almost-half-of-south-africas-children-are-growing-up-without-th_a_23058644/. [Accessed 29 August 2018].

imagine and offer ourselves as a church committed to transforming discipleship and obediently participate in shaping the future today, not only for ourselves but for generations to come.

Urgency of the Gospel mandate

The evidence is before us. The Holy Spirit is whispering. Are we listening? The '*Ending Violence in Childhood*'² speaks of the exponentially growing "number of stories of children who are not enjoying a carefree childhood, but instead endure brutal abuse and fast-track transitions to adulthood." How can we be silent when young girls are made wives before they become women?

We cannot tolerate the abusive and violent environment in which most children grow. The church must be at the forefront of fighting the scourge of abuse and violence especially against women and children.

These conversations must take place in the church as we strive to shape tomorrow today. We have to find a way of assisting all members of the church to listen to stories of bullying in schools which crushes the confidence of children and dampens their spirit to continue with education.

As Long (1997)³ says "The church is the leaven of mercy in the loaf of the world's misery," We are the solution to what ails the world and proactive action on our part can enable us to create a better future for all.

Some of the suggested opportunities to fight the scourge of abuse are:

1. To break the silence and create safe, supportive and stimulating spaces for children.
2. Build capacity, provide life skills and take comprehensive sex education seriously.
3. Participate in the education of children.
4. Tackle gender inequality, social norms that legitimize violence especially against women and children.

The Future is Present

The fourth Industrial Revolution is upon us. New technologies are already changing the systems we take for granted. In Zimbabwe for example, because of the shortage of cash, people use what is called eco-cash. They buy goods and pay for services using

² Resource Centre. 2018. *Ending Violence in Childhood: Global Report 2017* | Resource Centre. [ONLINE] Available at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/12380/pdf/global_report_2017_ending_violence_in_childhood.pdf. [Accessed 29 August 2018].

³ Thomas Long in Matthew, 1997:202.

cell phones and this has not become the domain of the elite but is used by the general public. Mobile technology has changed how the market place functions there.

Technology is changing the world as we know it very quickly and it will not help to bury our heads in the sand and hope that this will not at some point affect us. It comes with great advantages and some dangers. Some fear that it may lead to jobless growth, especially the loss of low-skilled routine jobs, or non-inclusive growth with far reaching consequences. There is a range of powerful, emerging technologies that will usher in a radical shift in the way we live. These include what is called 'artificial intelligence' or AI as it is commonly called, which includes the development of self-thinking, autonomous weapons. All these issues need to be engaged with and I believe that we are adequately resourced to be led in this exercise. We cannot afford to be left behind nor can we be bystanders. Let us find those who can assist us to become better informed and equipped to embrace the inevitable changes coming our way.

The United Nations adopted a treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons and there is a call to have at least 15 nations ratify this. Amongst the things that have to happen is the need to popularize the treaty and conscientise the public about its importance as well as mobilise governments to ratify it and take the necessary measures to implement it. The Director of Ecumenical Affairs will put together a task team to lead us in this matter.

The continent cannot continue to create or live in ways that generate and enhance the pockets/islands of poverty that hinder access life opportunities. The children of this continent cannot be perpetual consumers of knowledge from the global North or East. They should be positioned to be generators of knowledge towards the vision of 'A Christ Healed Africa for the Healing of Nations.' We have to give effect and impetus to this God given vision. Our mission strategy has to show a clear focus on youth and children. This was the call of the 2004 Mission Congress Charter.

The Connexion heeded the call to reclaim our role in Education, but there is still room for more work in this area. In South Africa – Stats SA reported that in 2017 one black child compared to 6 white children make it through university and have access to quality comprehensive education. During Apartheid it was 1 is to 1.2. Why this regression?

Shaping for mission

Over many years the church has been on a journey. The church we are a part of today is very different from what we received in 1883 and since the Journey to a new Land Convocation and the dawn of the new millennium later on, the church has been engaged in exciting conversation. The conversation that was brought into sharp focus at the 2015 Conference was that of shaping for mission. The conversation was triggered by the number of resolutions to and from the structures committee. The current status of that conversation will be presented in a report to this conference. The aim is to ensure effective, agile witness across the traditional boundaries that seem to "scandalize" the mission strategy. The calls made by this Conference can and must be effected as we imagine the shaping of the future now. We have a rich heritage in the midst of a painful past. Now is the time for us to use it towards a different future which God is ready to deliver as God calls us to be obedient and transforming disciples.

CS Lewis (in Tutu (1999)⁴, writes '*We are made for another world*'. A church united in purpose and prayer is able to imagine a reality which is beyond the logic of the world.

“I see clearly that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. We are a hospital for sinners. Wounds healed inside. A broken world needs a place to bring its spiritual injuries. We need an emergency room more than a courtroom. We want healing more than judgement. The confessional is not a torture chamber, but a place in which the Lord’s mercy motivates us to be better. I dream of a church that is a mother and a shepherdess. The church’s ministers must be merciful.” (Pope Francis⁵.)

Of course having children at the centre does not exclude discipline.

Therefore how do we visibly express commitment to healing the wounds of the future of young people both present and still to be born? These are wounds of exclusion in participating in the socio-political and economic space; exclusion in the church; wounds of trafficking and abuse and wounds that come from dysfunctional families.

The church as is nuanced by Pope Francis should be the hospital for wounded souls – a place always reimagining what can be; an all-embracing home that propagates and nurtures the giftings in all of us including children and young people.

We have to be followers of the Lord to make this happen. That we do with our words, because words have a power to create, but we do not end there; we commit to actions and investments that shape the future in a positive way. The way has been opened by God and as disciples of a transforming discipleship movement we have to walk the talk.

In Conclusion

A story that is accorded to Walt Disney is told and it goes as follows:

Advice from Walt Disney

An eight-year-old boy approached an old man in front of a wishing well, looked up into his eyes, and asked:

“I understand you’re a very wise man. I’d like to know the secret of life.”

⁴ Tutu, 1999, No Future Without Forgiveness

⁵ Lenten Meditation: What the Church Needs Most today is the Ability to Heal Wounds and to Warm the Hearts – Mill Hill Missionaries. 2018. *Lenten Meditation: What the Church Needs Most today is the Ability to Heal Wounds and to Warm the Hearts – Mill Hill Missionaries*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.millhillmissionaries.co.uk/lenten-meditation-what-the-church-needs-most-today-is-the-ability-to-heal-wounds-and-to-warm-the-hearts/>. [Accessed 29 August 2018].

The old man looked down at the youngster and replied:

“I’ve thought a lot in my lifetime, and the secret can be summed up in four words

The first is **think**. Think about the values you wish to live your life by.

The second is **believe**. Believe in yourself based on the thinking you’ve done about the values you’re going to live your life by.

The third is **dream**. Dream about the things that can be, based on your belief in yourself and the values you’re going to live by.

The last is **dare**. Dare to make your dreams become reality, based on your belief in yourself and your values. ”

And with that, Walter E. Disney said to the little boy,

“Think, Believe, Dream, and Dare.”

Source: unknown.

Let us grant space for children to be children. Allow the youth to participate in the search for better ways of being church at all levels so that we can benefit from what God has placed and continues to place in all of us. As John Wesley put it, “The best is yet to be.” *AMEN*.