



The Methodist Church of Southern Africa

Conference 2021

Message to the Methodist People

The 132nd Annual Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa gathered for the first time in our history under the leadership of a trailblazing woman, Presiding Bishop Purity Malinga. We gathered in a hybrid manner stretched across the length and breadth of the Connexion in six member countries, giving expression to imagining a new way of meeting as a Conference. Our collective context was shaped by the recent violent struggles in South Africa and Eswatini and the ongoing violent conflict in Mozambique.

All delegates were welcomed by the Mokala Montle Synod, rich in its cultural heritage and diversity, with its boundaries stretching across 4 provinces of the Republic of South Africa. The physical gathering took place at St James Methodist Church in Galeshewe, Kimberley, a historic city known for its diamond and tourist industry, yet left with a legacy of largely Black mining communities whose children are poorer than they were before.

The wider context in which we met is the reality of a worldwide Covid pandemic which continues to devastate lives and livelihoods. The impact of this pandemic has, among many other implications, severely restricted our gathered numbers, communal worship, fellowship, and ministry. Grief, loss and trauma are daily realities, haunting our collective spirit as we mourned the passing over 10 000 members of the MCSA, including 42 ministers, since we last met. The paradoxical gift of the pandemic, however, is that it has prompted us, through active listening to the Holy Spirit, to re-imagine God's mission of healing and transformation in our changing world.

THEOLOGICAL INVITATION TO RE-IMAGINE SOCIAL HOLINESS

Our 2021 Conference theme encourages us to re-imagine Social Holiness, Hope and Healing. Reflecting on the key text from 1 Peter 1: 15 -16: *"But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do. For it is written: Be holy because I am holy,"* our Presiding Bishop, called us into a deeper theological re-imagining of our Wesleyan heritage of Social Holiness. From the Biblical perspective, holiness is God's primary attribute which God desires for all God's covenant people. Holiness calls for a consistent, intimate, growing relationship with the Triune God who calls us to holy living, with one another and with all creation. It is the

practice of radical inclusivity, relationship and participation with the whole of the created order. In the early Methodist movement, social holiness was built in community through Class Meetings which fostered the formation of relationships of integrity and accountability, cutting across boundaries of class, race, politics and economics, intentionally embracing those who were marginalized and neglected, and cultivating holy habits which flowed through transformed lives spreading Scriptural holiness throughout the land. We have been challenged anew to embrace holiness of life, rooted in personal relationship with God who loves us and the world, nurtured through the spiritual disciplines, and flowing into the world. We are called to embody and reflect the hope and healing presence of Jesus as an alternative community of faith centered in Christ.

In the light of the Theological invitation, where are we now in our journey?

Conference reports and conversations reflected some of the MCSA's cautious journey of re-imagining over the past year. We celebrate that, with intentional re-imagination, for the first time we achieved 49% representation of Women and 21% of Youth in Conference delegates, the election of 3 new female Bishops in the Connexion and increasing numbers of young leaders in Synod Leadership teams. Conference 2021 has been intentional in including all the countries which make up our Connexion in the conversations, formulation of committees and the business of our gathering. Re-imagination has been reflected in a number of other ways:

- creative children's worship,
- preaching and ministerial training,
- higher education at SMMS with integrated learning methods,
- new methods of communication in a technologically driven context,
- new HR practices with remote working opportunities,
- consideration of new ministry and assessment models,
- dreams of developing our properties for income generation and mission,
- organizations committed to engaging with the reality of Gender Based Violence,
- mission and theological reflection that engages in critical areas of conflict, prophetic action, sustainable living practices and ecumenical engagements.

We acknowledge that our visible expression of Holiness, Hope and Healing is marred in the many instances of complacency and the lack of true Connexionality, failure to use and share resources equitably, evidence of selfish individualism and silo mentality, failure to practice inclusivity and integration at all levels and the ongoing practices of patriarchy, misogynistic utterances and Gender Based violence present even in some of our Methodist manses. In the storm of our present context, many parts of our Connexional "boat" are worn through, leaky and broken, while others are safe, luxurious and comfortable, little realising that all will sink together unless we intentionally embrace a new way of being and living.

Embracing the theme of Re-Imagining Social Holiness invites us to a new understanding of our Connexionality and Ecumenical relationships across the continent of Africa, with a population of 1.3 billion people of whom 60% are below the age of 25. Our ecumenical relationships are foundational to our DNA as part of the Body of Christ remembering that we are members of the household of God before we are Methodists.

The next steps on the journey - Practicing Hope and working for Healing

1 Peter 1:16 challenges us: *“So roll up your sleeves as obedient children; let yourselves be pulled into a way of life shaped by God’s life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness.”* (The Message Translation)

The Presiding Bishop reminded us that our present suffering, limitations and brokenness are part of the journey of faith, but that we serve the living Christ in whom our hope is founded, and in whom the future is to be envisaged. We are challenged to be the people God calls us to be, blazing with holiness and ready to work.

As a Methodist people,

We Resolve that:

All Societies, Circuits, Synods, Organisations and Units embrace and realign their programmes to the Conference theme: Re-imagining Social Holiness – Sustaining Hope and Healing as our collective platform of work for 2022.

We Affirm that:

This collective platform of work will engage the following key focus areas as identified in the Presiding Bishop’s Address and Conference conversations :

- * Poverty and food security
- * Education
- * Gender Based Violence and Femicide
- * Active participation in Covid-19 vaccination programmes
- * Ecumenism

We are committed to:

Identifying key areas of work on which we will focus for 2022 in every local Society, Circuit, Synod, Connexional context.

Deciding what needs to be done, what resources are needed, who will do the work and what the projected timeline is.

Doing the work shaped by the needs of our contexts; held in the Connexional of our relationships and engagement with our ecumenical partners.

Being Accountable to Conference 2022 through Circuit, Synod and Connexional Mission Unit structures.

Conclusion – A Living Hope

Our Presiding Bishop reminds us, ‘When one believes, it is possible to praise even when there seems no reason to praise.’ Our Conference logo identifying a colourful dove, symbolises the presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit, who working through the diversity of our Connexional Methodist family, sends us out, energizes and empowers us to spread Scriptural holiness throughout the land. We enthusiastically commit ourselves to Re-imagining Social Holiness, Sustaining Hope and Healing as the People of God.