



THE METHODIST CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA
A Christ Healed Africa for the Healing of Nations

132nd Annual Conference

Presiding Bishop's Address

*Re-imagining
Social*

HOLINESS
SUSTAINING HOPE & HEALING



Mokala-Montle Synod



The Methodist Church of Southern Africa

132nd Annual Conference
Mokala-Montle Synod, Kimberley
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Presiding Bishop's Address: Rev Purity Malinga

Theme: Re-imagining Social Holiness: Sustaining Hope and Healing.

Scripture Readings: 1 Peter 1:3-16 and Matthew 25: 31 - 40

Introduction

The Lay President, the Past Presiding Bishop, the General Secretary, Bishops, Lay Leaders, Conference delegates- Methodist people gathered physically and virtually- I greet you all in the wonderful name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome to this service, which marks the opening of the 132nd Annual Conference of our church.

We meet in Kimberley- a diamond mining centre in South Africa. Those here physically might be lucky to see what this precious stone looks like. Diamonds were discovered in 1869 in this area and so what started as a mining camp became a town in 1878 and was incorporated into the Cape Colony in 1880. By 1912 Kimberley had been granted city status because Kimberly Mine (now known as The Big Hole) had become the richest diamond producing mine in the world. The mine was closed in 1914 and like all the mines in South Africa, the Black miners and their families, were left poorer than they were before. Conference for us Methodists is not just a formal meeting of people with shared interests but it is an instituted means of grace. Even though we have had to cut down the number of days and are meeting hybridly, it is my hope and prayer that this will be a time of conversation on the work of God; obtaining God's blessing for each of us and re-imagining together, the future of the church.

What troubles have we seen!

The last 18 months have been a different, strange and difficult time for the world, for all the nations of our Connexion and for families and individuals. To say that we live in troubled times is an understatement! The effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic are known and experienced by all. Lives have been lost! Livelihoods have been affected, jobs have been cut or lost- salaries and stipends have been cut or gone unpaid disrupting people's lives in an unspeakable way. We have seen the corruption and dishonesty of our leaders in government that dehumanizes those for whom resources are meant.

We are surrounded by uncertainty and unpredictability every day. We truly live under "Lockdown!" The Covid-19 pandemic continues to threaten life as we knew it. This virus mutates into different variants and scientists have confirmed that we are in this situation for the long haul. For now, we are encouraged to vaccinate so as to help our bodies fight the coronavirus and avoid serious illness, hospitalization and death. At this point, I would like to encourage all adult Methodists (18 years and above) to get their jabs. Let us participate in protecting ourselves, each other and our families to ensure that our nation reaches herd immunity.

In the midst of lockdown, we have experienced all kinds of conflict and political instability in the region and in the world. The ongoing political conflict in the Kingdom of Eswatini

has left many people, young and old, dead. Insurgency in the Cabo Delgado Province in Mozambique has left many dead and countless displaced. Unrest and looting in KZN and Gauteng (South Africa) that left more than 300 people dead and many without jobs and businesses. We see what conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia is doing to the lives of people, conflict in Afghanistan, Syria etc. These conflicts reveal the failure of the political leadership to care for the people they lead. Their self-centred, unconscionable collusion with exploitative businesses, hunger for power and greed result into these endless conflicts that exacerbate the plight of the poor, especially women and children.

Many across the world are hurting and Africa is bleeding! In times of trouble such as these, it is natural to feel crushed, devastated, overwhelmed and hopeless. The question that arises for the church is; "How do we sustain hope and healing? It does help to appeal to the Scriptures and to our heritage and remind ourselves who we are and our reason for being.

The State of the Church

Our church in all its structures has not been immune from the challenges of the time. The on and off regulations on Church gatherings has distanced us from each other and from our normal source of strength- which is communal worship. The loss of lives and livelihoods has impacted mission and ministry in a number of societies and circuits. We have lost countless members to the Covid-19 Pandemic. At this point it is necessary to express gratitude to many of our ministers who risk their lives- conducting the many funerals and giving hope to bereaved families. We appreciate those families and lay leadership, who support ministers and make their loads easier. Covid-19 has taken a toll on all, including clergy and their families! Gratitude goes to my colleagues, the Synod Bishops who have been there to pastor to the clergy families in their time of need. Many got sick and recovered- others succumbed to it. Since October last year - we have lost 42 ministers! That is great loss to their families and to the church!

We have seen a number of Stations being closed as Circuits struggle to afford stipends and assessments. It has been hard to hear of the many clergy who have gone without stipends month after month! That has surely put a strain on their families!

Despite all these difficult circumstances there are clergy and lay people who were able to find creative ways of continuing with God's mission in society. Some of our churches offered their space for testing, for isolation and for Covid-19 vaccination. Food parcels were distributed to many who were without food due to lockdown and loss of livelihoods. We can be grateful to God for the vision of the former leadership of this church i.e. Rev Dr Mvume Dandala. Through the Millennium Mission Resource Fund, the MCSA was able to reach out and meet the Covid related needs of the poor. Credit must also go to the Synod leadership- the Mission Secretaries in particular, who worked tirelessly encouraging Circuits to apply for funding and help those in need. We therefore can say that through God's grace we continue to participate in God's mission.

In line with the MCSA's commitment to the leadership of women, we celebrate the nomination as Synod Bishops of the following ministers: The Revs. Mamsi Mothupi, Sondlile Nkwanyana and Mpithi Sibidla. While there continues to be discomfort and the deliberate undermining of women leadership among us, the wheels of transformation are turning. We know that were it not for our resolution it would not have happened-but still I congratulate the sisters and salute those Methodist members who voted for them. The days are coming when Methodist people will not need a legislation to acknowledge women as full human beings capable of leadership.

On behalf of the MCSA- I want to thank Mrs Thini Ngonyama – for her contribution as the General Treasurer of the church. She resigned from this office at the end of October 2020. Her contribution as the first black woman to carry out this great responsibility will remain in the history books of this church! We wish her well in her future endeavours! Our gratitude goes to the Finance Unit Staff, under the oversight of the General Secretary, who held the fort until the 1st July when the new General Treasurer, Mr Rannoi Sedumo joined the MCO. He has had to hit the ground running! We welcome him and are looking forward to his contribution.

Text: 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”.***

There is a general acceptance that 1 Peter was written by or influenced by Simon Peter, who was a disciple of Christ. The context of the letter points to the time of Emperor Nero who persecuted Christians. The believers, who were expecting the return of the Lord, were in danger of losing their faith and their way due to the persecution they were experiencing. They were tortured, they watched their fellow Christians being tortured and killed. Peter himself was in prison in Rome. He wrote this letter to different churches in various towns and cities-testifying to the grace of God in which Christians stand and encouraging them to stand firm in their faith. For these early Christians, it was important that their hope is sustained for without hope life is empty and meaningless.

Peter begins his encouragement by praising God, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!” We learn from the apostles to praise God in all circumstances. He then reminds them of the great mercy or grace of God on which Christians stand. This grace was revealed or made known in Jesus Christ who through his death and resurrection has become a living hope for them. Through Christ, a living hope, the One, they love even though they have not seen, the One they believe in even though they do not see; they are able to be filled with an inexplicable and glorious joy”. Because they know that in Christ, the past is forgiven, the present is protected and the future is assured. To the question of trials and suffering, Peter's response is that it tests the seriousness of the discipleship and therefore is part of the journey of faith.

Having reminded his readers of the foundation of the living hope they stand on, he encourages them to live out their faith and hope. He writes: ***“Therefore, for this reason,***

prepare your minds for action and be self-controlled. Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do.”

Eugene Peterson in The Message translation puts it better: **“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.”**

In other words their hope in Christ- the Living Hope was to become the source of their renewed energy. It was to energize them to live and witness to Jesus Christ.

Theme: Re-imagining Social Holiness: Sustaining Hope and Healing

The call of God to holiness is central to our Wesleyan heritage. It is central to the doctrine of salvation as bequeathed to Methodists by John Wesley. Wesley understood the reason for being for the Methodist Movement as *‘to spread Scriptural holiness throughout the land.’* The doctrine of holiness or Christian perfection or sanctification is considered to be the most important gift that Wesley contributed to evangelical theology.

It has been pointed out by Wesleyan Theologians that this doctrine of holiness or Christian Perfection has been found to be difficult. In the words of Rev Prof. Peter Story, we as Methodists seek to avoid this doctrine because,

“It refuses to remain a doctrine and insists on becoming a discipline. It demands that we be not only believers but behavers. It requires that holiness become, not just a pious hope of the soul but a daily habit of the heart.”(P14- Rediscovering Wesley for Africa)

For Wesley, holiness is God's primary attribute or characteristic which God desires and commands for all God's people. For the Israelites (Lev 19:2) and to Christians (1 Pet 1: 15-16) this view is termed “holiness from above”. It is a view that understands holiness as the very nature of God. Holiness is who God is. It is the very name of God! It is God then, who made holiness attainable for humanity through the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is God through the Holy Spirit who sets apart that which is holy.

“God alone is the primary analogate of all holiness. Persons in this world can be ascribed as holy only in so far as they remain in relation or close proximity to the source of all holiness-God”. (Nikolaj Zunic : 2014)

This is one of our continuing transformation calls to deepen our spirituality. Deepening our spirituality is the way to ensure closeness to the Holy God who alone can grow us in holiness. It is a known fact fellow Methodists that we cannot share with the world what we do not have. The call of God to God's church remains *“Be holy in all you do just as he who calls you is holy”*. This call demands our continuing individual and collective repentance from sin and commitment to live Christ-like lives. It demands us to live lives of prayer and closeness to God. God's holiness does not make Him unapproachable and actually God chooses to live with those who approach Him. Here what Isaiah tells us:

“This is what the high and exalted One says- he who lives forever, whose name is holy, “I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite” (Isaiah 57:15)

Now, the term ‘social holiness’ is well known to all Methodists as they desire to be more authentic to the Wesleyan tradition. It comes from Wesley’s words written in the preface to the 1739 Hymns and Sacred Poems,

“the gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness. Faith working by love is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian Perfection. This commandment have we from Christ, that he who loves God, love his brother also: and that we manifest our love by doing good unto all men (people): especially to them that are of the household of faith. And in truth whosoever loveth his brethren, not in word only but as Christ loved him, cannot but be zealous of good works. He (she) feels in his soul a burning, restless desire of spending and being spent for them.”

While the term was used to reject any attempt to become holy in isolation from other Christians, it has been interpreted and understood in line with the Wesleyan practice of faith. For Wesley, “social holiness” is about the practice of radical inclusivity, relationship and participation with a God who in Christ lives with people and the planet. He believed that growth in holiness should be cultivated in disciplined fellowship and mutual accountability. These expressions were to be found in Class Meetings. The Class Meetings became radical communities which cut across boundaries- wherein those in different class, political and economic landscape sat, learnt and discovered together and from each other what it would mean to love God and love neighbor. So for us Wesleyans, holiness is social in that it grows in an environment of a believing community- but it is grown for the whole society- the world. It is therefore as we grow each other and together in holiness that we become agents of social holiness.

Since last year, we are engaged in the process of re-imagination. Having been thrown in the time of shifts and transition, we agreed that we will not stay behind closed doors like the disciples after the Crucifixion- but we will re-think and review our actions, practices and traditions, to ensure authenticity to who we are. We agreed that our re-imagining is to be grounded on theological reflections and conversation. In this call to re-imagine “social holiness” one seeks to encourage and strengthen our resolve to be involved in and with the communities where we live. Our practices as agents of social holiness must get closer to the realities of the poor and the marginalized, if we are to incarnate God who hears the cries of people and responds. In the parable we read, Jesus clearly advocates for the need for his followers to seek out, care for, include and restore into community the marginalized within human society. Jesus meets us in the very persons whom our human systems exclude. The call we make therefore is to encourage us all to live lives that seek out those in the margins and proclaim hope and healing to the communities where we are. The call is to encourage us all to reclaim our being the church that embraces the marginalized and neglected and sustains their faith and hope in God and in goodness.

Can you imagine the contribution we would make into society if we were to be true to the DNA of our existence- form boundary crossing groups that genuinely seek to grow in loving God and neighbor? Call it whatever you like- but together learn from one another what it means to follow Christ- across race, gender, class, sexual identities or age? These small groups of love and accountability are the hallmark of Methodism! It is in these groups that we can get to know, love and build each other towards practicing faith. It is in these groups that we can grow in the practice of "holy habits" or works of piety like prayer, searching scriptures etc. The dearth or misuse of small groups in our Societies has resulted in individualistic Christians whose faith is meant to benefit them and them only. That is contrary to the gospel and to Methodism. The practice of social holiness is to spill out of our small groups, class meetings, organisations and church buildings into society! Covid-19 has indeed challenged us to get out of buildings and cultivate hope and healing in partnerships with other partners e.g. ecumenical, NGO's, business etc.

What if we were to re-imagine what was envisaged through the Geographic Circuits/ Integrating Circuits- by working on relationships of love and respect across social and racial boundaries? Instead of being stuck on who has money and who does not- we could be intentional with programs that help in sharing knowledge, understanding and growth in mutual love and respect. In the sermon; "On visiting the sick" Wesley decries lack of relationship between Methodists;

"One reason why the rich, in general have so little sympathy for the poor, is because they so seldom visit them. Hence it is that, according to the common observation, one part of the world does not know what the other suffers. Many of them do not care to know: they keep out of the way of knowing it: and then plead their voluntary ignorance an excuse for their hardness of heart". (Wesley: 98)

As a collection of Societies, Circuits and Synods we form a Connexion and by its nature this is a system of radical love- that can mirror or demonstrate to the world, humanity that lives across the boundaries of cultures, ethnic groups, languages, nationalities. It has been pointed out that our divisions and failure to live out the love that we proclaim makes a mockery of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In a fractured and divided world, the church of Christ is called to model the value of reconciliation, unity and love.

Poverty and Food Security

What is social holiness in the context of the poverty and food insecurity that our continent and region is experiencing? According to the World Bank Report of 2021 on Poverty, the following are the statistics given:

South Africa stands at 55.5%, Mozambique at 46.1%; Namibia at 17.4%; Botswana at 19.3 %; Lesotho at 49.7 and the Kingdom of Eswatini 58.9 %. One in three children in Sub-Saharan Africa experiences stunted growth because they are not getting the nourishment that they need in their food. The levels of poverty, hunger and desperation have been intensified by Covid-19 Lockdowns. The recent unrest, looting and destruction experienced in the two Provinces of South Africa indicated the anger and desperation of the marginalized poor citizens who are excluded from the economy of the country. Our

engagement with poverty therefore, has to be holistic i.e. looking at the immediate physical needs of providing food, clothes, shelter etc. It has to include creating opportunities or partnering with others in ensuring food security and creating job opportunities for the poor. It also has to include our re-imagining of the church systems that expect and depend on contributions from members. We have appointed a person to head up the MCSA Property Company that seeks to create income from the property portfolio of the church. He will be addressing us at this Conference. Our poverty eradication initiatives also have to address the systemic causes of poverty. Covid-19 has shown us that the social, political and economic systems of our world are violent, exclusionary oppressive and structured to widen the gap between the rich and the poor. Our engagement with poverty calls us to refuse settling for easy answers. While it is all well and good that some of us can enjoy services on-line-, meet on-line, and even have online communion, we must find ways and invest in methods that include the poor in this new normal. Our engagement with poverty cannot not be limited to temporal solutions which tip- toe around the real issues of sharing and re-distribution of resources. It demands prophetic living on our part as well as raising our voices to challenge the systems. We must be a church that is fully present with the poor and cognizant of their realities.

Education

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic to the education of the children of the poor are devastating and it will have life- long implications. They are the most disadvantaged as they lack the on-line resources of this time. One of the contributions of Methodism to the world was and has been offering social holiness through education. For Wesley, education was central to Christian Perfection. He believed that "*the purpose of learning was to repair the ruin of humanity's sinful fall from grace*" and saw education as a vitally important channel of God's grace. The Methodist church has become known for her good schools- most of which were built for the children of the poor who could not afford public education. It is worrying to see the present trend, where the Methodist schools have become the most expensive, elite and exclusive schools. I however believe that as the MCSA we can do something for the children of the poor. My heart bleeds when I see children in the streets of our townships and informal settlements- vulnerable to dangers like rape and trafficking. They are on their own as the parents are out there trying to eke out a living. Is there nothing we can do to help especially at this time when most of our church buildings stand empty? I want to appeal to all retired teachers in the MCSA; yours is not just a profession but a calling! What can you do where you are, on your own or together with others- to offer hope and healing to the children who otherwise will remain excluded from the full life offered to all by Jesus Christ? I see education as a necessary mission outreach for the MCSA at this time.

On Gender-based Violence and Femicide

We cannot turn a blind eye to the scourge of gender- based violence in our midst and in society. In the past year, together with our ecumenical partners we have declared GBV a sin against God and humanity as created in God's image. As agents of social holiness- re-imagining an alternative society where all human beings enjoy their God-given dignity- we are to be that model community. To do this, we, together as disciples of Christ-

women, men, young and old- are to focus on behavioral change within the church first and then will have a living message to the world. Re-imagining a different world demands willingness to listen and be transformed by those different from us. Re-imagining an alternative community demands willingness to expose gender discrimination, the abuse of power and dehumanizing patriarchal attitudes and practices in our midst. We are not doing well at the moment! Stories of women, young people and children abuse in our church spaces that are meant to be safe persist and can no longer be tolerated or swept under the carpet. Synods were asked to appoint people who will co-ordinate Gender Justice Desks. Some did others did not. We must be intentional and have focused programs to deal with this scourge of GBVF and to work towards gender equality.

The vision and hope I continue to hold for the MCSA is that which Prof Letty Russel expressed;

“that every church could be a sanctuary, a place of safety for all who enter, and especially for those who are most marginal, weak and despised of any community...that it could become a place where there is an intent to heal and live out God's justice rather than to harm and to promote the privilege of the few”. (A Feminist Interpretation of the Church)

Conclusion

Jesus Christ, the Risen Lord- our Living hope, continues to implore His church, “Just as the Father has sent me, so I am sending you”. We are sent into the world to spread social holiness. We are indeed faced with complex and constraining realities in the nations that make up our Connexion, but we are not without hope. We know who holds the future and so we do not lose hope! I call upon all the people called Methodists to be re-energized by the presence of Jesus Christ our Living Hope in our lives. Let us be inspired by our Wesleyan heritage of “social holiness” and communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ for hope and healing of our communities. The church of Christ is called to remain sustainers of hope in times of hopelessness. May we insist on being that church!

Re-imagining