



The Methodist Church of  
Southern Africa

*The*  
Address  
of the  
*Presiding*  
*Bishop*

1 October 2020

**GUIDED BY GOD'S MISSION**

**REIMAGINING**

**Healing & Transformation**

## THEME: GUIDED BY GOD'S MISSION: REIMAGINING HEALING AND TRANSFORMATION

**Preacher:** Bishop Purity Malinga  
**Date:** 1 October 2020  
**Venue:** Bedfordview Methodist Church & Zoom  
**Readings:** Ezekiel 47:1-10  
John 20:19-21

### Introduction

The Lay President, the Past Presiding Bishop, the General Secretary, Bishops and Lay Leaders of Synods, Unit Leaders, Members of the Connexional Executive; Methodist people wherever you are following this service from, I greet you in the precious name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

I welcome you all to this service which marks the official opening of the 2020 Connexional Executive Meeting. This year, as we know, has been filled with unprecedented events. We had a plan to hold the CE and Conference in Kimberly- in the Mokala Montle Synod. That plan was disrupted, Conference had to be suspended and so we meet over the next two days as a CE mandated to deal with the essential business of Conference as per our Book of Order (Laws and Discipline) paragraph 5.12.1 & 2.

Today is day 189 of Lockdown in South Africa. It is proper therefore, as we begin, to acknowledge that Covid-19 has touched all of us in different ways. Some of us have been infected by the virus and know exactly what it does to the body; then there are those of us whose loved ones are currently in hospital fighting for their lives. Others among us have lost their loved ones to the virus. As a church we have lost members and clergy to it. But as worshipers of the God of all comfort – in the words of St Paul, “*we comfort each other with the comfort that we ourselves receive from God*”. And so even though we meet virtually- we meet as Wesleyans, so we can say in Charles Wesley's words;

*And are we yet alive -and see each other's face.  
Glory and praise to Jesus give -For His redeeming grace.*

*What troubles have we seen- What conflicts have we passed,  
Fighting's without and fears within-Since we assembled last*

### The Context

Year 2020 started well for the Connexion, with the Inauguration of three new Synods- Namibia, Molopo and Camdeboo. We had plans to celebrate the semi- centenary (50 year) anniversaries of some Synods. We also had plans to celebrate 200 years since the arrival of Rev William Shaw in the Eastern Cape! While we were looking forward to these events, then came the Covid-19 Pandemic and disrupted all of our plans. The corona virus has thrown the whole world into crisis and turmoil. The global community, the continent and our Connexion are facing myriad challenges in the wake of the socio-economic damage caused by this pandemic. The Church- like all sectors of society- has been hugely disrupted. Since March- as a Connexion- we have lived under various regulations that limit gatherings and which disrupted our worship life and ministry as we know it. While these regulations are being relaxed as governments seek to re-open economies- the virus remains among us and as dangerous as always. According to scientists, it may take approximately between 2-3 years to develop a viable vaccine! It therefore remains everybody's responsibility to prevent the spread of the virus and to ensure that lives are

saved! As churches re-open, I must emphasize that strict adherence to covid-19 protocols and regulations of social distancing and sanitising must be adhered to!

At this point, I must thank all MCSA clergy and laity in the leadership of Societies, Circuits and Organisations at all levels. In spite of the restrictions on gathering to worship, you creatively found ways to minister and share the Gospel with our members. Through Zoom, Facebook, WhatsApp, email you shared daily devotions, sermons, services and announcements. These innovative ways of ministering to our people have kept us together in spirit as people called Methodist. We are also grateful to ecumenical bodies for keeping us together, guiding and supporting the churches in the different countries of our Connexion. At a Connexional level, I must thank our Communications Director- Bongji, who has relayed information and kept us in touch with what has been happening throughout our Connexion. While we are doing our best, we need to acknowledge that, like the whole world, Covid-19 has put us as a church in a state of shift and transformation.

### **The Theme**

When I was given an opportunity to address Conference last year, I declared that the MCSA does not need a new Vision or Mission Statement. I affirmed last year's theme that called us to sharpen our effectiveness as a church, '*as we walk humbly with God*'. I was then, and am even now, convinced that our vision of a *Christ-healed Africa for the healing of nations* is still relevant.

Covid -19 has been a light bearer, shining an illuminating beam onto the multiple, parallel pandemics destroying the world, in particular the continent of Africa. To highlight a few: daily we see and experience the pandemic of racism; the #metoo and #AmINext movements have spotlighted a global cry from women against gender-based violence and femicide; the degradation and abuse of the earth and depletion of natural resources; the violence unleashed on children and young people through unequal education systems and the physical and sexual abuse they endure. We see wars and conflicts that displace people and turn them into aliens- unwanted refugees and asylum seekers; the dehumanisation of the members of the LGBTIQ community; the unequal access to health care facilities and medicine and the unequal access to basic human needs like shelter, water and food.

The glaring realities that we see is that of self- serving and corrupt governments and politicians; rising levels of poverty, hunger and unemployment as the socio- economic divide widens even further! Suffering and pain abounds in the world and is a festering wound in Africa! While we have, for a long time, been proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ for healing and transformation, the vision of a Christ-healed Africa is far from being realized.

However, as a Church and individual Christians we cannot lose hope or be discouraged by what we see. While it is natural to be disoriented and stay behind locked doors like the disciples after the Crucifixion, we cannot forget who we are! "*As the Father has sent me, I am sending you!*" -says the Risen Lord. As Christ's church we are the sent ones, sent to partner with God in God's mission; the mission to redeem and transform all of creation. As a Church we committed to "*a resolve to be guided by God's mission*". Even at this time, when sands are shifting and the world is shrouded by anxiety, physical & mental sickness, death and grief- we dare not let anything guide us but God's mission!

There is no doubt that God is at work, healing and transforming the world even in the midst of the suffering we see. While guided by God's mission, I hear God calling us to a creative place of re-imagining. I heard this call as I read the familiar story of Ezekiel's vision

of fresh and life giving water that flows from the temple. Ezekiel is a prophet who served in the temple as a priest dedicated to the inside of the temple, until he was exiled when Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem and displaced the Jews to Babylon. It was when in exile that God called Ezekiel to speak on God's behalf. Through messages and visions that Ezekiel received, he brought hope to his fellow exiles, who at the time were discouraged and depressed at having to live in a foreign land. We know the words of their lament "*How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?*" Ezekiel was called for that time to speak on behalf of God.

In this vision Ezekiel is brought to the entrance of the temple- which of course was outside of the temple- as though God was saying to Ezekiel, "*you will not see what I am doing if you remain in the temple.*" He is shown life-giving water flowing from the temple. As it flows, it becomes deeper and deeper until it becomes a river that no one could cross. He is then led to the bank of this river to see the great number of trees on both sides of the river, with fruit to eat and leaves for medicine. He sees the river pouring into the Arabah- the Dead Sea- diluting the salty water until it becomes fresh water where fish multiply and provide food for fishermen!

What an image of hope for the exiled! The message to them was: *Don't give up on God!* Out of God's throne flows life-giving water and when God intervenes there will be abundance! So even for us as people of faith today, prisoners and agents of hope, we are called to continue re-imagining and re-envisioning our Africa and her communities being healed and transformed. Through faith in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit we must stay committed to God's mission of restoring Africa and the world.

## **Re-imagining**

What do we mean by "re-imagining"?

In her book "*Chasing Social Justice*" Laurie Sherman defines re-imagining as:

*a theological concept that stems from the belief that the world is fallen and that the mission of God through Christ is to reconcile humanity and the whole creation to Godself. This work of God of reconciling all creation flows through the followers of Christ- the church into the world. Re-imagining for the church then means allowing the picture of the reconciled world to propel their actions" (Sherman 2020: 61)*

As in Ezekiel's vision, God's life- giving water coming from the temple comes through actions and words that become embodied in our life together and in the interaction with the world around us. Re-imagining is the ability to see beyond the here and now, through active listening to the Holy Spirit; being open to the changing times and to what God is saying to the changing world.

The definition of the word as expounded by the Merriam- Webster dictionary is: "*to imagine again or anew; to form a new conception; to re-think or re-define*". Re-imagining implies change, evaluating and shifting parameters of concepts and perceptions, and even completely renaming outcomes. To re-imagine healing and transformation therefore calls upon us to look again at what it means for us to proclaim the Gospel for healing and transformation. It means we join the '*re-imagining*' tradition of the prophets and become an active part of God's grace in the world. We join the movement of God's long arc of justice- not the God of personal piety- divorced from the pain of the world- instead the God who listens to the cries of the oppressed and acts to release them. '*re-imagining*' standing in the tradition of Methodism, calls us to our vocation or sacred work, which is

conscious action, grounded in the experience of God's grace that has us as the priesthood of all believers- pointing and participating in Christ's redemptive actions of grace in the world.

Re-imagining therefore, calls us to be humble enough to admit that now and then our processes, structures, methods, traditions and practices need re-thinking and review as it is easy for any church to slip into the entrapments and addictions of the "empire".

At this time of transition, fellow Methodists, this God given gap between 'what was' and 'what will be', let us engage in re-imagination for our churches and communities to continue witnessing to God in a new world and a new context. I believe that re-imagining for us has to be grounded in theology. There is need for theological reflections and conversations that will influence our systems of thought and influence our actions. I commend the work that Dewcom has started to do, of opening platforms for theological and doctrinal conversations. These are meant to keep us relevant and confident to practice our faith. Allow me to quote one African theologian- L Matthew who says:

*The work of reimagining is the work of decolonizing our theology and reading of scripture. It is about redeeming the relationship we have with creation; it critiques and reshapes how we build the economy away from the practice that is profit centred to one that safeguards life: human life and the life of the earth. This reimagining work is the cry of Steve Bantu Biko to the oppressed peoples of South Africa- it is taking back of our imagination, the reclaiming of our minds, the telling of our stories, "for the greatest weapon in the hand of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed".<sup>1</sup>*

From our theology we must be able to re-think our practices, delineate what is essential from what is not. Our practices must get closer to the realities of the poor if indeed we are to incarnate God who sides with the poor. The task of theologians and clergy is to lead and guide these conversations in the societies, circuits and within the organisations. As a church that exists for society, we shall be able to strengthen our involvement with communities and our prophetic voice and practice shall be heard at all levels.

All our groupings in the MCSA need to ask the question, which of our practices is life giving and which ones should be discarded. For example, in the midst of Covid-19 we need to think about how we re-shape our gatherings and our events. How should we organise our funeral services, Easter services, our conventions, robing services etc. Having been an events driven church we need to remember that at this time, gathering people together in big numbers is dangerous and potentially deadly. We dare not become a killing church! Instead of being a church that gathers people- it is time for us to go to the people.

Because of the dire impact of Covid-19 on global economies many people have lost jobs and livelihoods. Poverty is at an all-time high and there is a need to imagine different ways of maintaining ministries and mission over and above member giving. The practices of excluding and embarrassing poor members- threatening them with not burying them when they cannot give or pay membership fees is not of God and has to be discarded. While those with the ability to give are encouraged to do so, for mission and ministry to continue, it should not be so expensive to belong to the MCSA that it excludes the poor.

Over these past 6 months many circuits have struggled to meet assessments as a result of lockdown and things might take time to improve. Some circuits have closed stations due

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<sup>1</sup> (L. Matthew, 29/09/2020)

to the unaffordability of ministry. The need to re-imagine another financing model has long been raised and the committee working on this is called upon to accelerate the pace. As a church we are brought back again to re-imagine models of ministry that are mission focused and relevant to our context.

### **Issues of Justice**

Our commitment to healing and transformation demands that we take seriously all issues of justice. Re-imagining a better world for all, calls on us to become a listening church- listening to the voices of the marginalised; listening to understand and not to reply; listening in order to amplify the voices of the unheard. In the words of Dr Martin Luther King Jr, *"the moral arc of the universe is long and it bends toward justice"*.

Re-imagining demands that we re-look at all our structures and organisations and evaluate our participation in the marginalisation of some people through our traditions, policies, usages and practices- recalibrate and champion justice for all. To repeat what I said during the Seven Weeks Campaign Against GBV- a church that is able to re-imagine a different world free of injustice- GBV in particular, is a church that openly condemns it in the strongest terms and declares it for what it is.

I call on all Methodists throughout the Connexion, at all levels to declare in word and deed- that GBV is a sin that violates the image of God in both the perpetrator and the victim and cannot be tolerated. Let our churches become life giving and healing spaces that model alternative communities where women and men, girls and boys have their dignity respected.

### **Children and Youth**

Prioritizing youth and children is critical for the life and future of the Church. We should encourage them to take up positions of responsibility and leadership within the church. The Church should also be more serious about giving them the space to be who they are and allow them to be innovative and breathe new life into the church. If we do not do this, I am afraid the work of reimagining will not even begin.

I agree with Alvin Toffler when he says;

*"The secret message communicated to most young people today by the society around them is that they are not needed, that the society will run itself quite nicely until they - at some distant point in the future - will take over the reins. Yet the fact is that the society is not running itself nicely... because the rest of us need all the energy, brains, imagination and talent that only young people can bring to bear down on our difficulties. For society to attempt to solve its desperate problems without the full participation of even very young people is imbecile."*<sup>2</sup>

Young people and children have a lot to offer. We need to encourage them to fully become who and what God has created them to be- i.e. agents of change, and it is through the church that their full potential can be realized.

### **Disruption of Education during Lockdown**

The disruption of education during lockdown has caused anxiety amongst learners and their parents. We go into every New Year with resolutions, goals and expectations. Education has already been a challenge in a society that has so many inequalities along racial, gender and economic lines. While some were able to continue their studies through online learning, many, in fact millions were left behind. As a church, we need to ask ourselves how we can be of assistance to children who do not have access to the

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<sup>2</sup> Quote by Alvin Toffler in ["goodreads.com/quotes/tag/young-people"](https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/young-people)

necessary resources - whether it be through after-school or weekend programs. In addition, how can we empower parents to play a greater role in the education of their children?

Many children experienced abuse of all kinds during lockdown. The solitude and safety of school were snatched from them. We now, more than ever before, need to extend ourselves into becoming a place of safety for these children. We need to be intentional about providing emotional and psycho-social support because many times children who grow up in abusive contexts end up becoming abusers or victims of abuse because it is what they know to be normal. A Christ healed church – must prioritise ministry to and with children and youth, for the healing of the world.

### **The Pandemic of Corruption**

The levels of unemployment in the countries of our Connexion are astronomical and COVID 19 has compounded this. The main victims of this state of affairs are young people. The unbridled corruption that we see in government circles, the private sector and in CHURCH circles is exacerbating this problem!

We call on all the leaders of the governments of the 6 countries of our Connexion to reject and fight corruption in their countries, for the sake of the people of God they lead. We call on them to open up opportunities in government and the private sector for the employment of young people and to help create a better, sustainable future. We are seeing the recruitment of young people by insurgents – as in Cabo Delgado, and used to destabilise communities, plunder, rape and kill. This continent has enough resources to sustain its people- only if her leaders would reject being used against their own people by neo-colonial powers. Above all else though, we call upon all those who call themselves Christian to repent from their corrupt ways and to represent Christ in their places of work, business and in church. We call upon all people of faith to repent from the evil ways of corruption. We call upon all people with conscience, all people who hate suffering to desist from corrupt ways.

### **Conclusion**

And so dear Methodists, may we always experience the presence of Christ in and among us. May our resolve and faith be renewed in our journey with Christ who sends us; may we use the time we have been given to reimagine relevant, just and graceful ways of participating in God's mission. We cannot do it in our own strength! Our strength comes from always remembering who we are and whose we are. We are the children of the God whose love for all creation spans all ages, all times, all situations, to eternity. In Jesus' Name - Amen.