



The Methodist Church of Southern Africa

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Message to the Methodist People

The 130th Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa did not come together in the usual fashion. The hugs, handshakes and exuberant greetings, all hallmarks of joyful reunions for leaders from across the southern tip of Africa, were not to be this year.

Instead, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the smaller Connexional Executive met in a blended virtual and physical gathering over three days (1-3 October 2020), grateful to “see each other’s faces”, and to do the essential business of the Conference. Conscious of new challenges, new opportunities and the needs in our communities and the world at large, the CE met under the theme: “Guided by God’s mission: Reimagining Healing and Transformation.”

These are unusual times, but the life and mission of the Church continue and are even more vital now than they might have seemed in ordinary times.

The water flows ... away from the Temple (re-imagining)

The Presiding Bishop Purity Malinga chose Ezekiel 47:1-12 as the foundational Scripture for her opening address. It was a poignantly fitting and timely Word for us as a Church as we deal with the disarray brought about by the pandemic as it touches every facet of daily life, infects, affects and bereaves our church family, our neighbours, our friends, ourselves.

Yet, in the true spirit of a resurrected and beloved people of God, the Presiding Bishop also commended the Church for its new, creative responses and innovative ways of ministering. We are called to see God at work healing and transforming the world.

Bishop Malinga highlighted how Covid-19 has shone a light on the multiple pandemics destroying the world—one of the most destructive being the scourge of corruption in our countries—evident in the actions of governments, in the private sector and even in church circles.

The Presiding Bishop took us to Ezekiel in exile, receiving a vision in which God says to him, “you will not see what I am doing if you remain in the Temple.” Ezekiel sees life-giving water flowing from the Temple, renewing everything it touches, discovering that ‘... everything will live where the river goes.’ (Ezekiel 47:9)

God re-imagines God’s mission, and through Ezekiel’s vision we discover that re-imagining is seeing beyond the here and now and actively listening to the Holy Spirit. Re-imagining brings us closer to the poor, to the vulnerable and to the places where we are needed most. It strengthens our connection with communities.

A Christ-healed Africa for the Healing of Nations

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Re-imagining the church, Bishop Malinga tells us, needs to include true listening, hearing the marginalised, and seeking justice. Deep, spirit-led reflection on Ezekiel 47:1-12 raises urgent questions for us all.

Re-imagining is learning to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. The ways in which the Church has offered creative responses and innovative ministry during such difficult times is something of the music of the Lord's song!

We must remember whose we are, and who we are. We are sent by Jesus to be partners with God in God's mission.

And so, as the water flows, we ask...

- ✿ ***How does God's statement challenge us in our everyday church life and activity: "you will not see what I am doing if you remain in the Temple."***
- ✿ ***Where is God present in our communities, but the church, absent? What is your challenge?***
- ✿ ***What of the Covid-19 creative responses should become part of our new ways in the church?***

The water flows... to the sea of stagnant waters (places of death)

In the reports on work done in the Connexion, and in the opening address of the Presiding Bishop Purity Malinga, we saw and recognised the places of death, the 'stagnant waters', of our exile from God and all creation.

Covid-19 has exposed the vulnerability of the Church: the Church as an institution and the Church as the people of God. This was made real in reports received, and in the difficult conversations around finance and sustainability.

Covid-19 has also shone a light on the multiple pandemics destroying the world: racism, gender-based violence, poverty, corruption, the vulnerability of women and children. As a Church, we are also infected and affected by these pandemics. We spent several weeks on a Connexional campaign against GBV but continued in this gathering to use language for God which is almost exclusively male and masculine. We speak of the importance of the 40/40/20 rule, but the shocking reality is that the youth representation at this meeting is 0%; yet we continue with business as usual.

In hearing the report on matters of discipline, the CE noted the pain and deep distress on many levels which members and Ministers experience. We have failed God and one another, and have not heard the voice of the victim. We have not held the integrity of restorative justice, and have deeply damaged the witness of the Gospel.

We hear the challenge as an 'old Church' to embrace 'new spaces'. In re-imagining the participation of the Church in the mission of God, we were reminded that 'The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning.' The next part of the quote from Emil Brunner reads: 'Where there is no mission, there is no Church...' – a timely warning indeed!

And so, as the water flows, we ask...

- ✿ ***How do we re-imagine our continued vitality with smaller budgets for organisational activity in Synods?***



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- ✿ **How can Circuits and Societies engage constructively with young people to facilitate discipleship growth and greater involvement in the life of the Church?**
- ✿ **How are we to be an active part of God's grace in the world?**
- ✿ **What in our processes, structures, practices and traditions in the church and its organisations needs re-imagining? What is it in our practices that wastes God's time?**

The water flows ... and everything will live

Instead of being a “gathering church”—slavishly focused on all the events that drive us—we are reminded of the essence of our calling: to become a “scattered church”: ministering where the need is. A theologically grounded re-imagining holds the gap between what was, what is and what will be, so that we may become God's life- giving water flowing from the Temple and out to where the people are.

We are called to see God at work healing and transforming the world.

Where do we go from here? We are to be guided by God: the river flows under God's guidance. The river is God's to direct, not ours. We are called to discern the movement of God's Spirit for re-imagining the life and work of the Church for healing and transformation. As instruments of Gods healing and transformation we need to speak to and act upon the issues of:

- **Sustainability** – training of all agents (Presbyters, Deacons, Evangelists and Bible Women. We note the austerity measures already implemented, and hear the fundamental challenge to re-imagine the administrative ways in which stationing is done.
- **Intentional shaping and resourcing** of work around children and youth;
- **Exploring different funding models** to sustain agency and mission – noting the establishment of a team to plan strategically for recovery and growth.

And so, as the water flows, we ask...

- ***What do our members and organisations need to learn or re-learn in order to become the “Scattered church”?***
- ***What would change in our Circuits if our energy was focussed on children, as first priority?***
- ***What should we stop, or leave behind, to be able to re-imagine?***

The river flows, and we are sent!

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Because God continues to work in the world through people, the Connexional Executive received 17 Ordinands into full Connexion and regional ordinations will follow.

We are in a God-given gap, a place of re-imagining, of disruptive hope and the possibility of beginning afresh. God is speaking to us, calling us to grow in our understanding of God's mission.

We are challenged to listen with fresh ears and open hearts to discover our own participation in GBV, corruption, racism, sexism, xenophobia and the marginalisation of the voices of children and young people.

We are sent – to follow the life-giving water and immerse ourselves in it, that we may allow God to re-imagine us, to redeem us, to re-shape us as partners in God's mission.

May we see, as Ezekiel saw, a new vision! May the flowing river of God's imagination and re-imagination continually call, renew and re-direct us. May we embrace its power and by God's grace, may we strive to be God's passionate partners in bringing a re-imagined church and world to fruition.