

**CAPE OF GOOD HOPE DISTRICT – 193rd SYNOD
BISHOP’S SYNOD ADDRESS
25 May 2023**

THEME : Remaining in the Love of Christ

INTRODUCTION

Henry H Knight III and Douglas Powe Jnr, in their book, *Transforming Community: The Wesleyan Way to Missional Congregations*, write, “... it is communities of love that actively participate in God’s mission in the world.” Our gift to the world at this time as those called to **Remain in the Love of Christ** is to be a community of love, touching the world with His love. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, calls his hearers to “*a more excellent way.*” (1Cor 12:31). I am calling this District to walk in this more excellent way of Christ’s Love.

I have directed my thinking towards the Conversation on the Work of God which we will engage in together as a District as directed by the Message to the People of God in our Connexional platform of work.

CONVERSATION ON THE WORK OF GOD IN THE DISTRICT

No conversation on the work of God in our District can happen without acknowledging the ministry that has taken place since our last gathering as a Synod. Our Blue Book Reports have given us a brief snapshot of many faithful people who, with great tenacity, humility and faithfulness, have served this church and shared in its vision of healing and hope in the world around us. In every corner of this District, from the beautiful daisies of Namaqualand, the fertile fruit farms of the Breede River, the lush vineyards of the Boland, the spray of the ocean along the West Coast, Strand and Overberg, the majestic mountains of the Helderberg, the business hubs of the wider Peninsula, the densely populated Cape Flats, the pulsating suburbs of False Bay, Bongani, Blue Downs, the hustle and bustle of the Inner City, in Circuits, Societies, Organizations, programmes and projects, there is evidence of God at work using hearts, hands and feet of the beautiful people of this District. There are many life-giving ministries to celebrate – Early Childhood Centers and a Childrens Home offering places of safety, learning and growth to vulnerable children, Homes for the Aged offering dignity to those who are in their golden years, many who have been neglected and forgotten by the world around them, Organizations offering bursaries or uniforms to learners and equipping Circuits for sustainability gardens, Societies gathering to worship, growing each other in love through Class Meetings and small groups and pouring out their hearts out in intercessory prayer, to name just a few. (*Ndiyabulela kakhulu. Baie dankie. Ndinokutendai, thank you.*) I wish to express a particular word of thanks to all who heard and responded to the Macedonian Call to come alongside the work and ministry amongst the people of Namaqualand. Let us continue to share together in this work in whichever way possible. Please read you Blue Book again not merely as a report, but as a testimony of the faithfulness of God amongst us. We cannot deny that there are gaps, and moments where we could all have done better, but that even those are gathered up into the greater purpose of God’s love. Behind every report and story, there are human hearts burning with God’s love, feet that dare to journey into the unknown, and hands folded in prayer, busy in service and reaching in pockets to give generously and sacrificially to the work of God through the Church. I am reminded of the words of late Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, “*Do your little bit*

of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world." Never underestimate the value of good when it is offered with love of Christ.

CONTEXT IN WHICH HOLD OUR CONVERSATION ON THE WORK OF GOD

We turn to the context in which we hold our Conversation of the work of God. In an address to the Anglican Bishop's Conference in March 2023, former Deputy Minister of Finance and member of the National Assembly, Mr Mcebese Jonas, described the mood of South Africa at this time as follows, *"South Africans are generally feeling under siege.... We have been in survival mode too long, and everyday conditions in the country get worse. Food prices, electricity availability, government dysfunction, water scarcity, the state of our cities and towns, political instability and endless corruption scandals have led to a sense of hopelessness ... Gender based violence has become an acronym and is easily brushed aside in the headlong rush for a seat at the table with the largest plates. We have long lost our capacity to be shocked by the depravity of our compatriots. Whatever sense of nationhood existed is diminished and there is general acceptance that South Africa is in a death spiral."* I think his sentiments describe what many experience currently.

In our Conversation we should consider some of the most pertinent challenges of our present context, particularly in the Western Cape and Namaqualand region where we serve. I shall name just 5 of these acknowledging as source material 2023 Statistics South Africa and police reports published on the Western Cape Government website. Even with their limitations, they paint a grim picture.

1. Unemployment

South Africa's unemployment rate stands at 32.9% which equals approx. 7.933 million people. The youth unemployment rate, which measures job-seekers between 15 and 24 years old, is reported to be 62.1%

2. Poverty

South Africa is regarded as one of the most unequal countries in the world, with Cape Town topping that list. The extreme wealth of a few exists side by side with the abject poverty of the many, a testimony of the legacy of Colonialism and Apartheid with its deliberate spatial development plan which has resulted in Black people bearing the biggest portion of poverty in this Province. Stats 2023 pegs base-line poverty, i.e. people living on less than R1 227 a month, at 25% in the Western Cape and Namaqualand in the Northern Cape at 22.1%. Considering that the total number of people living in the Western Cape in 2022 is reported to be 7 212 142 this means statistically, 1.5 million people live in extreme poverty, 31 000 in Namaqualand as part of the Northern Cape. We must remember that baseline poverty only measures economic factors, but when one takes into account what is known as multidimensional poverty there are many other aspects to consider - as poverty reveals itself in people's health, level of education, the dwelling they live in, how they cook their food, the water they drink. When one adds the reality of the effects of climate change – higher temperatures, natural disasters, water scarcity or floods, migration, food scarcity which has the greatest impact on the poor, we have a true humanitarian disaster. The horror of this cannot be underestimated. For many, it is literally a matter of just surviving every day.

3. Violence and Crime

The top 3 crimes reported at police stations in the Western Cape and in the Namaqualand regions are murder, gender based violence and robbery. Between Oct-Dec 2022, there were 1 198 murders reported in the Western Cape, with gang violence accounting for 19% of these. Crime syndicates operate freely in the City and townships, especially in the area of business and construction. This impacts the health sector too, with trauma wards overflowing on weekends with victims of violence, alcohol addiction, and assault. Nearly 50% of spinal cord injuries reported in the Western Cape Rehabilitation Centre were due to interpersonal gang violence – gunshot wounds, stabbings and deliberate attempts made not to kill but to cripple one’s enemy by inserting a sharp wire between the lower regions of the spine. Delft is deemed as the murder capital of the world. The other 9 top precincts for reported crimes are Mfuleni, Mitchells Plain, Nyanga, Harare, Kraaifontein, Khayelitsha, Gugulethu, Worcester and Kleinvlei.

Violence has become a norm – even among children. Scripture Union specializing in children’s ministry throughs holiday clubs and school programmes reports that a 13-year-old, known as ‘the hitman’ from a gang in Port Elizabeth, brought his gun for self-protection to a holiday club. There was also a gun drawn at a club on the Cape Flats. A few years ago, at a Holiday Club run by this Circuit at Hanover Park, a minister and adult leaders were threatened by a young boy, after he was asked to leave the premises due to his continuous unruly behaviour and roughing up some of the other children. He said he would bring his gang leading brother to shoot them, if they didn’t allow him back in. The desperate plea amongst our Children’s Ministry Practitioners in this District has been for skills in counselling as they deal more often with issues of violence and abuse in children’s homes, mental illness, stress and even suicide amongst the children and young people they lead.

4. Gender Based Violence

Police data shows that in South Africa 1 101 women were murdered in Gender Based Violence between October and December 2022, with 319 children killed in the same period. This translates into roughly 12 women and 3 children murdered daily in South Africa over a 90-day period. Another 21,434 children and women suffered attempted murder or grievous bodily harm. The statistics of Gender Based violence in the Western Cape shows a similar trend, which peaks over weekends with women between the ages of 26 and 35 most likely to be victims. In over 70% of reported cases, GBV victims were in a close relationship with or knew the perpetrator and more than half of the reported incidents took place in the victim or perpetrator's home. Opinion polls show that most women generally feel unsafe, more from gender based violence than any other kind of violence. One woman glumly states, “All you do is to put your girl children on the taxi to school and cross your fingers that she will come home untouched.” There is also a growing, and often unspoken or unreported trend in sexual violence being perpetrated against members of the LGTBQI community with a number of death and assaults over the past year.

This is being displayed amongst our young people too. At the teen camp run in this District last year, our youth coordinator reported how children’s ministry practitioners had to step in when there was threatening and abusive behavior displayed towards female campers and leaders by some of the male attendees.

5. Education

According to the international PERLS Report, which measures children’s ability to read with comprehension, as well as study group of one of the Universities in the

Cape, 80% of children in grade 3 & 4 in our poorest school cannot read with comprehension. In Namaqualand 17.4% of the population older than 15 years have not completed grade 7 and are reported as not functionally literate. Educators report high stress levels and daily threats to their life from children with little support from parents and the community at large. Going to school in the many gang-riddled suburbs in the Cape has become a war zone, with many children opting to drop out, who become easy targets for gang recruiting, substance abuse and prostitution. Many are abandoning the education profession simply because of the growing trend of ill discipline amongst children, and the potential threat in classrooms, and lack of support from parents or community members.

THE WORLD OUR PARISH

I am sure that I could unpack many more areas of concern, some of which are more prominent in one area than another. Please notice that I have deliberately steered away from giving an analysis of church itself, not because church life itself is unimportant. We are called to be disciples in the world. John Wesley bequeathed us with a greater vision – “the world is my parish.” His vision was to reform a nation by touching as many as possible with the Gospel of Christ. I find myself asking the question, “How big is our parish?” A critical moment for Wesley’s own transformation came when he realized that his preaching would not be limited to the Church building, but that Scriptural Holiness should be spread throughout the land. I wonder if we should in fact be remembering 2 April 1739 which is when he embraced what he called the “more vile way” of outdoor preaching, as much as we remember Aldersgate of his warmed heart experience. I constantly hear the refrain – “we must work for the **recovery** of our churches, our circuits, our organizations, which is usually a reference to finances and people in the pews. Our lament or “why are people not coming back to church?” should become “Why aren’t we going to people an seeing where God is already at work in the world around us.” With due respect to the Societies celebrating special Anniversaries this year, is our desire really to celebrate that we are over 100 years old, that our numbers of people in our pews have risen, that we can pay our assessments, that we have raised a million in Rhona, or that we should be transformed by the love of Christ and become a transforming influence in society? Too many of our churches and organizations have gone into survival mode. Henry Knight & Douglas Powe (pg.100) write, “*When we focus on survival, then we are focusing on what we can or cannot do, instead of continuing to live out our daily work of loving God and neighbour. A Wesleyan missional approach focuses on yearning for transformed hearts ... it does not settle for anything less.*” Let us not settle for anything less. Let our conversations not be on survival but revival of the Spirit of Christ’s love.

CONNEXIONAL CONVERSATION ON THE WORK OF GOD

Given this context, how might we engage in the questions before us on the Conversation on the work of God? I would like to suggest just one area of focus under each of the questions:

1. What evidence is there of our intimate connection with Christ in all aspects of our life and witness in the world?

The truth is that we cannot possibly live in the way of love and transform our world through our own efforts and power. Transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit. Our Presiding Bishop is correct when she says that key to this transforming grace is prayer. Prayer is the foundation of our love for Christ. We can strategise all we want,

if we are not a praying people, we will not be a loving people, or a transformed people. Prayer enables the love of God to flow into the deep crevices of our hearts and out into a deep love for neighbour, and leads us into the spaces of justice, mercy and prophetic living. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, *“Prayer is not an occasion just for pious little children on their way to bed. Prayer is not simply for neurotic people who are excessively and sadly too religious. It is rather the core gesture by which we stay in faith, by which we hope for the world, by which we keep justice as the issue before God and ourselves. To ‘pray always’ means to hope always for justice, to nag always the judge, to trust always in the power of God.”*
I call on the Cape of Good Hope District to be a praying people.

2. How have the lives of the poor have been changed through our life and witness as those who seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God?

I think this question insists that we take our call to justice and mercy very seriously. Justice should not be seen as a project that we can tick off on a box or on a schedule, but as a way of life for every disciple of Jesus. The issues of justice are complex and needful of information, discernment and wisdom. Most times what it needs is the courage to show up, to ask the difficult questions, to listen with humility, to act with compassion, to make mistakes, to lament, to speak up, to go on. The words of Wesley in his Rules of a Helper come to mind – *“Therefore, you will need all the grace and all the sense you have and to have all your wits about you.”*

We cannot have this conversation and answer this question by ourselves or our small corners. Polarity and division are rampant in our nation and is mirrored in our Church life too. Geographic Circuits were an intentional strategy to bridge divisions, share resources and do ministry together. Yet many of our Circuits appear to be more separate than before, whether in our Stationing profiles, leading of services, engaging in mission, and sharing of resources. One of the most important values of this District is Celebrating our Differences. As part of our theological conversations during our Presbyter session, we engaged with some of the hard conversations on Unity in Diversity as our prophetic witness to the world. We had to face our own demons of division amongst us as clergy. We must have the uncomfortable and courageous conversations of privilege, colonization, racism, tribalism and all other forms of prejudice and division amongst us. The same must happen amongst our laity and between us as laity and clergy, which we sometimes treat as separate streams of ministry. I am greatly encouraged by the work of our Lay Leader and EMMU in training and equipping our lay people on issues of Church governance, and practical leadership but I believe this must be extended even further into the critical areas of justice, reconciliation and peace making. The late Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu in a speech to laity in 2004 entitled, *God has a dream: A vision of hope for our time*, said “... we are (all) the agents of transformation that God uses to transfigure His world. ... remember you are a moral agent, capable of creating a particular kind of moral climate that is impatient with injustice and cruelty and indifference and lies and immorality.”

Justice is the work of us all!

It is a conversation that must include our young people and children too. It has often been said that we are just one generation away from extinction. According to the Stats SA, 57% of population are aged 35 or under. How many are part of the church? How seriously are we taking our young people in the church and more

importantly, beyond the walls of our church? Our ministry seems to indicate that young people do not feel very welcome in our churches. While we want them to serve in leadership and other areas of church, we want them on “terms and conditions” which normally means fitting into adult expectations and traditions. We have numerous institutions of Higher Learning, Colleges and Schools around us, yet we have placed few economic and human resources into this work. I believe this is where we need to move most beyond our walls because I honestly don’t see our young people ever crowding our pews. The issues facing our younger generation are enormous, and we have failed them in so many ways, not least of which is to leave them with a planet that is slowly dying. This is so much more than having youth preach in September which we “youth month” – we have to be in ministry together, mentoring, challenging, engaging with issues of justice in the way of love where young people find themselves.

We have to do this ecumenically with other denominations, in interfaith dialogue and partnerships with civil society too. God’s Kingdom is greater than our divisions, and the work of justice is wider than any one denomination, one faith-based group or religious institution. The courageous invitation to Dr Imtiaz Sooliman, founder of Gift of the Givers, to address transformational leaders at our Seth Mokotimi Seminary for the Peter Storey Memorial lecture, was a lesson to us all as we work for the collective good of our nation. Our foundational call is to Social Holiness in community with others as we learn to be a community of love. We lose nothing and have everything to gain when we walk together, as we seek to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.

I call on the Cape of Good Hope District to be people of justice.

3. How are the fruits of the Spirit evident in our Churches and the lives of our people?

The fruits of the Spirit are evidence of becoming more like Jesus and of God’s grace at work in us. Steve Dougerty, in his book *Spiritual Leadership in a time of Crisis*, says that is most needed from Christian leaders today is Integrity. While the Latin word, “*integritas*” indicates completeness and purity in the sense of moral uprightness, the Hebrew word “*tummah*” means wholeness as directed by Yahweh. The Psalmist names it as “living with an undivided heart.” (Psalm 86:11) Integrity is living truthfully and uncompromisingly as those who are shaped by the perfect love of Christ. It is living in complete congruency with who we are in Christ and not being one person on a Sunday and another on Monday, one person when we preach and pray and another when we do business.

The cry from many sectors of our country is for moral regeneration led by leaders of integrity. This may be our most important role in civil society yet. The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe says: “*One of the truest tests of integrity is its blunt refusal to be compromised.*” As disciples of Jesus we cannot allow ourselves to be compromised in any way by the values and actions of the world around us. In his essay, *Mobilizing the Church in Africa in African Public Theology*, Canon Alfred Segahene from the Anglican Diocese of Tanzania states, “*If we call for the competent, professional rule-and merit-based public institutions then the church must model such an institution. The church must be a community of character and model for other institutions its value-based mode of governance that prioritizes integrity honesty, diligence, faithfulness and stewardship.*” (pg 387)

The key question we must ask ourselves is this: "Can we be trusted?" Will we speak the Truth consistently and live with this Truth for ourselves? Do people look at us and see consistency with the Gospel of love, or do they merely see a mirror of all that is wrong in the world? We have the privilege of being able to reach into every community in our country and despite our many scandals and disappointments, many still see the church as one of the most trusted institutions that there are. Will we live up to that trust?

I call on the Cape of Good Hope District to be people of integrity.

CONCLUSION

It is not easy to be hopeful or loving in the spiral of death. It is not easy to love when our own hearts are empty and our eyes swollen from the tears of suffering and lament. Yet we are called to the way holy love because we remain in the love of Christ. There is a report in our Blue Book which epitomizes in a small practical way this hopeful ministry of love, viz. the New Life Center which celebrates 25 years of ministry this year. Not only has it saved the lives of 765 babies to date, but transformed the lives of all their mothers. The vast majority of the women who have been welcomed to the Center, and its extended counseling programme have been raped or abused. By touching them, one wonders how many other lives have been saved and transformed by the love of Christ. Earlier this year on their 25th Anniversary, I was asked to plant a fruit tree at the Center, symbolically pointing to the new life that is born in that place. I called it the "Tree of Love."

This is the more excellent Way of love to which I call the people of the Cape of Good Hope District. May the tree of God's love be born in each of us and rise up to give shade and life to all it encounters in the world around us.

I close with a prayer from Australian poet Michael Leunig, in his compilation of prayers called *The Prayer Tree* :

Love is born
With a dark and troubled face
When hope is dead
And in the most unlikely place
Love is born:
Love is always born.