



THE UNITING
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
IN SOUTHERN
AFRICA

Wednesday, May 15, 2019

From the Moderator's Desk

Dear Friends

In congregations across the UPCSA, Easter is a busy season. From Palm Sunday, through Holy Week and then into the Triduum of Good Friday, Easter Saturday and Easter Sunday, communities in townships, suburbs and rural areas gather to remember, and give thanks for, the life, passion, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. I trust that your Easter was memorable and that the wonder of Easter lives in and with you during the weeks and months that lie ahead.

Here in the Southern part of Africa, it seems that we just come through one crisis, only to be hit by another. Last month I dedicated this letter to our people Zimbabwe who were hit by Cyclone Idai. No sooner had we processed the devastation and loss of life caused by that storm than we received the news that people in KwaZulu Natal and the Eastern Cape had been hit by torrential rain, flooding, landslides and enormous losses of property and lives. On a weekend where we were celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus, almost 100 people lost their lives and so many others lost their homes, their possessions and were left destitute. As a Church we are reminded that we should mourn with those who mourn and so our hearts go out to those who lost loved ones and possessions in these devastating storms. At times like this, we feel helpless. It feels like we are at the mercy of the forces of nature which are way too powerful for us to try and hold back or control in any way. It is no wonder that the ancients identified the forces of nature with chaos and evil. As a Church, we are collecting items to send to those communities that have been devastated by these floods and we continue to lift in prayer our members whose lives have been so affected by these storms.

Election fever has been in the air in South Africa over the last months. The results are now final, although contested by smaller parties who didn't do as well as they expected. President Ramaphosa must now weigh carefully whom to appoint to his cabinet. There is great pressure to substantially reduce the size (and the cost) associated with the cabinet. One also wonders if those who have been tainted by corruption and who have managed, through political opportunism, to hang onto their positions will continue to do so or be shown the door. Corruption costs us dearly and all three countries in which the UPCSA is operative have been rocked by corruption scandals, yet there seems to be very little being done to hold those who have been tainted by corruption accountable for their inappropriate and illegal actions in stealing from the poor. One can only hope that in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia there is the political will and the courage to put an end to the corruption and the exploitation of the poor and marginalized in our communities.

The General Secretary, the Clerk of Assembly, the Convenor of the Ministry Committee and I travelled to the Presbytery of Lekoa in May to discuss with them the future of that Presbytery. I was impressed by the caliber of leaders that we have in that Presbytery and by their willingness to think about some innovative ways in which to deal with the challenges which they face as a Presbytery. While I am very concerned about the state of our Presbyteries and the lack of capacity that seems to prevent many of our Presbyteries from operating at their optimal capacity, we have good and strong leadership in our Presbyteries that will help to guide and shape our discussions as we seek to address this vital aspect of our life together.

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PBO 18/11/13/1612

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Clerk of Assembly: The Rev WV Mkhungo DipTh
General Treasurer: Mr R Johnson MCom (UP) MIRMSA

We are gearing up for the Executive Commission, the unification of the Associations and the twentieth anniversary celebrations of the UPCSA to be held in Port Elizabeth from the 22nd – 29th September. The team that runs the Assembly will be visiting Port Elizabeth next week to speak with the LOC and to get a report on the state of readiness. In a year in which we in SA have seen so many people in stadiums all over the country support their political parties, I sincerely hope that we will be able to fill the stadium in Port Elizabeth with members of the UPCSA from all over Southern Africa. All our Presbyteries are busy planning, or have already held, their own event to mark the twentieth anniversary of the UPCSA.

While some are asking whether there is any reason to celebrate, we must affirm that, "So far, the Lord has been good to us." Our union has been tested at times over the last twenty years, there have been moments when we might have wondered if our union was going to hold and we have faced some very challenging financial struggles. However, as we look back over the history of our union, we see a developing understanding of what it means to be missional; we are consciously trying to be more aware of our trans-national character; we are well served by our staff at Tiyo Soga House and we have capable leadership in many of our Presbyteries and Assembly Committees. That is not to say that we don't have challenges: the Associations issues has threatened to tear us apart; we have hurt our brothers and sisters in Zambia and Zimbabwe many times through our insensitivity and arrogance; we have taken our staff in our central office for granted or subjected them to abuse; some of our Assembly Committees fail to fulfill the mandate given to them by the Assembly and our biggest concern remains the lack of capacity at a Presbytery level.

While we talk about the possibility of centralizing stipends and how this could be handled at a Presbytery level, the concern is the capacity of Presbyteries to handle a task as big as this. This is especially the case when one considers that even the items that Presbyteries should already be dealing with don't receive the correct attention: returns to remits; information required to be sent to the Assembly office; care for ministers and congregations and basic oversight fall through the cracks and often leave congregations to battle away on their own with little or no support from their Presbytery. As with all matters in our polity, however, this problem is not "out there", it is our problem and it is within our hands to fix it. When Presbyteries do try and exercise their role, they often meet with resistance and even hostility from congregations, Sessions, ministers and elders; Presbytery office bearers are subject to abuse; Assembly and Presbytery rulings are ignored and flouted, and the provisions of the Manual are disobeyed. The sad process of the same culprits coming to the AARP time and time again over the same issue at enormous cost to the Assembly in time, energy and money does not reflect well on us. The General Secretary, Clerk of Assembly and Moderator are, more often than not, seen either as fire fighters or enforcers instead of fellow servants of God.

As we gear up for the Executive Commission, the unification and the celebration, we should all reflect on what we can do to make our Presbyteries function more effectively. Let's also remember the people in the Presbytery of eThekweni and the JH Soga Memorial Synod whose members were affected by the storms of last month. Let's all take some time in our congregations and Presbyteries to celebrate the goodness of God to us over these last twenty years and let us commit the years that lie ahead into the hands of our loving God. As you prepare to celebrate Ascension and Pentecost, reflect on what it means to have a High Priest who is interceding for us and welcome the presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of your life together as a Christian community.

Your partner in the gospel



Peter

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