



THE UNITING
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
IN SOUTHERN
AFRICA

Wednesday, September 18, 2019

From the Moderator's Desk

Dear Friends

Within less than a week we shall gather in Port Elizabeth for the Executive Commission 2019, the unification of the Associations and the 20th Anniversary celebrations of the UPCSA.

That's quite a lot to get done in a week, but what a week it is going to be.

The Executive Commission is a much smaller body than the General Assembly, and, this year, is a day shorter than normal. Most of the reports in the papers are progress and due-diligence reports that detail the work that is being done by various Committees and groups in the UPCSA. We need to give thanks for the hard-working men and women who serve as members and conveners of the General Assembly Committees, ministers, elders and lay persons in our congregations, Presbyteries, Synods and Assembly who do so much to advance the cause of the Kingdom of God.

We will complete the work of the Executive Commission by lunchtime on Thursday and then, after lunch, we move into what is perhaps the most highly anticipated event of this momentous week. On Thursday afternoon, we will constitute the eight Associations and, after that, they will go to eight different venues to wind up their business, which will be completed by Thursday suppertime. On Friday morning, we meet to formally dissolve the eight Associations and, immediately thereafter, to constitute the four new Fellowships, as successors to the Associations. The eight Associations will hand over various symbols as a way of signifying the end of an era and the four Fellowships will receive new symbols that will signal the start of a brand-new chapter in the history of the UPCSA. The four new Fellowships will then go to four different venues to have their first meetings and to do their initial business until lunch on Friday.

Then we move into phase three: our anniversary celebrations. The traditional gift for the 20th anniversary is china, and what a reminder this is of how fragile our unity has been at certain points over our twenty-year journey. However, like a precious china tea set that a family only brings out on special occasions, our beautiful unity is something that we can admire and about which we can be extremely proud. Our unity has held and has actually strengthened over the years. We have not always agreed with one another, we have sometimes used language that has caused hurt or pain to others, but, by the grace of God, we have managed to forgive and be forgiven, and we have been a living witness to others. We still have enormous challenges ahead, but, for this week, we will not focus on the challenges ahead, but the opportunities.

My moderatorial theme is "Live your Legacy", a call to each one of us to give thought to the Church we want to leave to our children and grandchildren and to start living that way now. We have a large number of congregations that are vacant, we have an aging ministry and aging membership, but all these present us with great opportunities. Vacant congregations give us opportunities to try and experiment with new types of ministries; an aging ministry means we can both explore new forms of ministry as well as have the opportunity to encourage younger people to enter our ministry and an ageing membership creates space to older persons to mentor and help younger ones to grow into their faith. The church continues to be one of the few spaces left in our society where people gather across the generations and, when we help both young and old to appreciate the value of inter-generational friendships, we could actually help both younger and older persons to learn from one another.

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Within the overall theme for this two-year period, I have been giving a great deal of thought to the theme for this Executive Commission and, as I have been planning and thinking about it, I was drawn to two particular resources that will guide our thinking, worshipping, celebrating and planning for next week and for what lies ahead.

The first is that great passage from Romans, Romans Chapter 8. When Douglas Crawford, one of my mentors, preached his final sermon at Linden Presbyterian Church before retirement, he preached on 1 Corinthians 13, which he termed, "the greatest chapter in the Bible." When I reflected on that sermon, I often wondered what I would regard the greatest chapter in the Bible. After much thinking and reading I decided Romans 8 was, for me, the greatest chapter. Accordingly, we shall be guided by Romans 8 right through next week.

The other resource was a small book written by Henri Nouwen to a Jewish friend of his who had all but given up on faith and wanted Nouwen to help him navigate his way back again. The book that he wrote in response to this request is called "The Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World". Nouwen speaks about how he came to write this book for this group of people: "As I gradually came to know Fred's friends and got a feel for their interests and concerns, I better understood Fred's remarks about the need for a spirituality that speaks to men and women in a secularized society. Much of my thinking and writing presupposed a familiarity with concepts and images that for many centuries had nourished the spiritual life of Christians and Jews, but for many people these concepts and images had lost their power to bring them into touch with their spiritual center."

Nouwen identifies four movements as being crucial in our search for a spirituality that connects with modern people, people who consider themselves agnostic or atheist, people who have all but given up on the church, people who consider themselves "spiritual but not religious" and who think that the Christian faith has nothing to help them find their way in a bewildering world. These movements are the four movements from the Communion service: taken, blessed, broken, and given. In the Eucharistic celebration, we take bread and wine, bless the God who gave these elements to us, break them apart and give them to people. In the same way, we are taken in the hand of the Holy Father, blessed by the Holy Spirit, broken with the Holy Son and given to the world as a gift.

With Romans 8 as our guiding text, these four movements will shape our Executive Commission, the unification process, and the celebrations. Whether you are able to be there or not, I would suggest that you read the book and spend some time re-reading Romans 8. Take time to think and reflect on what it means for you to be taken in the hands of the Father who loves you; what it means to be blessed by the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit in your life; what it means for you to be crucified with Christ and what it means for you to be given as a gift to the world.

We thank the Central Cape Presbytery, the Local Organizing Committee, Greenacres Presbyterian Church, the Tiyo Soga House staff and all the other people who will work so hard to make next week and all that comes with it the success it is going to be. Please work hard, remain awed at the grace of God, celebrate well and return home again filled with the Holy Spirit to go and do the work God has called you to do.

Your partner in the gospel



Peter