



Friday, June 11, 2021

Dear Friends

This is my last letter to you as Moderator of the General Assembly after three years and, as I mentioned last month, I am using the opportunity to share with you some thoughts I have around the challenges facing the UPCSAs as we move into the future. Although these reflections are included in my report to General Assembly, I thought I would share some of those thoughts in my final two letters to you all.

Congregations

The COVID-19 crisis has caused all of us to have to adapt to ministry in new ways, but it has also had a devastating effect on congregations, particularly in Zimbabwe and South Africa. One of the issues was how to conduct worship and celebrate the sacraments when we were not permitted to meet together. It was amazing to see how ministers, elders and members in congregations rose to the challenge of worshipping remotely, found ways in which to share the sacrament and, probably most important of all, continued the work of feeding the hungry and taking care of the poor. Whether suburban, inner city, or rural, congregations continued to express their life together and meet the needs of their communities when, often, our governments were unable to do so or were simply overwhelmed. I want to commend ministers, elders, and members of UPCSAs congregations who have continued to function, sometimes under the most restrictive and difficult circumstances imaginable. In rural, township and suburban congregations in Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, the UPCSAs faithful have managed to adapt to this new reality. From online services on Facebook, WhatsApp, or YouTube; to feeding schemes looking after the hungry and desperate people in our communities; to those who are working in the front lines; to those who do various acts of kindness, it is touching to see the efforts of so many of our people to help others. We don't know how long before we will be able to have normal services again or when we will be able to travel freely, but in these days, I want to encourage you to continue in your love, care, and compassion for others. Dwindling congregational incomes, creeping despair and health challenges make it extremely difficult for us to keep our heads above water. Remember that, when it feels as if we are drowning in the needs of the people around us and we have so little to offer, Jesus reminds us that even a cup of water given to a thirsty person counts in the economy of the kingdom.

Day of Prayer and Fasting

In the midst of the second wave of the COVID-19 crisis, we saw this disease take a terrible toll on our ministers and members. A number of our ministers succumbed to this disease and many families have been touched by the tentacles of this global pandemic. The Rev Melanie Cook suggested that I call the UPCSAs to a Day of Prayer and Fasting and I thought a spectacularly good idea. Accordingly, I called the denomination to prayer and fast on Monday 11th January for an end to the Corona virus pandemic, particularly in the countries in which the UPCSAs has a presence: Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. It was interesting to note that the rate of infections, hospitalizations and deaths reduced dramatically towards the end of January 2021, and I am convinced that our commitment to pray and fast had a role in turning the tide of the second wave of this disease.

Vaccines

During 2021 various vaccines began to be rolled out. Ministers and elders have a crucial role to play in advocating for the vaccine and in getting people to agree to receive the vaccine. We need to be saying, publicly and prominently that we support the vaccine and when our people see us leading the way, they

will surely follow and public trust in the vaccine will grow. Ministers and elders in local congregations should volunteer to have the vaccine as early as possible and make it clear that they have done so in public and on social media.

Finance

Being in lockdown meant that many congregations could not meet, and, in many of those congregations, funding from tithing and offerings has all but dried up. Assessment payments, pension fund contributions and medical aid contributions have not been made and, as a consequence, the General Assembly's financial position is even worse than it was before the pandemic affected us.

There is no doubt that we are on a financial precipice; we are facing a financial crisis of enormous proportions. The Finance Committee is reflecting a massive loss for the last financial year and this year is going to be even worse. We are burning through our meagre reserves at a rate that will leave us virtually bankrupt within a year or so. The number of congregations paying something in assessments is slightly up, but the majority of congregations are not even paying the minimum.

We must be very clear: this is a financial problem with a spiritual root. We have a spiritual problem in the UPCS: we are an undisciplined and willful people, we do not like to take direction, we do not respect the God-ordained authority structures of our Church and we do what is right in our own eyes. When the Clerk or the General Secretary send letters asking for responses, they get ignored; when the General Assembly instructs us to do something, we ignore it; when we should be sending returns from our congregations to Presbytery or Presbytery to Assembly, we fail to do so. Unless we address this issue, we will not survive into the future.

But, if that all sounds a little negative, may I suggest to you that the solution is to follow the way of Christ and for every one of us to be prepared to serve others. In this vein, Stephen Rowley, one of our members, wrote the following song to commemorate the 60th Anniversary of our congregation and I commend it to you in closing:

THE PHILIPPIANS 2 HYMN (Steve Rowley - Pentecost 23 May 2021)

(To the tune Quam Dilecta, 66.66, "I Love the place Oh Lord Wherein Thy Glory Dwells)

*V1 Lord Jesus You came down
And left Your throne above
You lived among us all
In humble trust and love*

*V3 Your exaltation Lord
A name above all names
Where every knee would bow
On earth, in heaven with fame*

*V2 You did the Father's will
And gave Yourself to death
The cross of shame you bore
To free us from sin's breath*

*V4 All tongues in heaven and earth
Will say that you are Lord
And show to all the world
The glory of God's word*

My very best wishes and prayers are with Sipho as he takes office of Moderator of the General Assembly that starts at the end of the month and my sincerest hope is that we will emerge from the crisis of 2020/2021 stronger than we were before.

Your partner in the gospel



Peter