

Presiding Bishop's Address
Synod Online
08 September 2021

Dear friends

I greet you all in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Thanks to our most unusual global circumstances, we are participants in REACH-SA's first ever online Synod.

This has not been an easy process and our admin team have been working hard behind the scenes for many weeks to make this meeting possible. Much work has gone into preparing the meeting as well as ensuring that as many as possible are able to attend online.

Even with all this preparation I am aware that we may still have setbacks and difficulties with this type of meeting. It's very clear that an online Synod is a temporary substitute and not a permanent replacement for an in person gathering. I am sure we are all longing for a return to gathered fellowship and an opportunity to sit and talk as brothers and sisters together in one place. I believe we won't take physical gatherings for granted in the future.

At the time of writing, I am aware that we are hovering around the 50% voting strength required for a quorum and I'm trusting that on the day we will see a greater increase in registrations. Given that we are voting on several important motions, I am hoping that we will have sufficient members present so as to have a true reflection of the mind of our denomination.

COVID19

We are now about 18 months into the pandemic and many experts feel we could well be seeing another 18 months of restrictions in one form or another. I would even expect that some sort of significant lifestyle adjustment will become part of daily life from now on.

It has been said that never in the history of our world has a global crisis affected all people in this way. That may be true, but we must be aware that plagues and epidemics have been a part of life in a fallen world since Bible times. History has many records of massive plagues that wiped out many people.

Although this pandemic is global, medical science and technology has helped reduce the impact of the COVID-19 virus. The 1918 'Spanish Flu' (H1N1 virus) killed around 30 million people, and that in a world with a much lower world population.¹ So far, global statistics for COVID-19 deaths are at about 4,5m. In South Africa we are at just over 82 000 deaths and rank no.27 in the world for infections.² In our own REACH-SA family we have certainly felt the effects. Many (if not most) of our clergy and workers have been infected and every one of our local churches have had members falling ill, some very seriously and some have passed away.

From verbal email reports, we estimate that we are about 250 deaths among REACH members and adherents, plus hundreds more in extended family circles.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_flu

² <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

Ministry in a Pandemic

Looking back it's clear that lockdown regulations affected what was essentially our core function, the gathering of God's people for worship around the Word of God. We are grateful for the providential availability of technology which enabled us to go online in various ways, from WhatsApp church to Zoom and YouTube streaming. Many of you showed great innovation in finding ways to connect to others within the ever-changing lockdown regulations. I have also been so encouraged by reports of gospel breakthroughs. We have reports of the most unexpected people joining an online outreach or finding one of our services online and subsequently coming to faith in Christ. Malibongwe! Syabonga eNkhosi.

Of course, there are two sides to the online world. I realize that in this internet age we are overwhelmed with massive volumes of conflicting information. Some people have bought into various conspiracy theories of one sort or another and there have been many incidences of conflict, even among God's people. Sadly, this has added to an already anxious and divided population. Fear is a powerful factor in insecure communities, and we must pray that our God will show His hand of peace in our communities and unity upon His church.

One of the most notable ministry adjustments has been the move from large to small group gatherings. This has shown to us the critical importance of lay ministry training and the need for pastors to be entrusting Word ministry to reliable small group leaders (2 Tim.2:2). This COVID crisis has therefore shown us the importance of understanding and applying the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

We have also seen a massive shift to online ministry across the globe. South Africa has a relatively good network infrastructure, but data costs are a huge factor for many of our population. Even so we have seen the benefits of online ministry in a socially distant age. This Synod is also testimony to the internet's benefits.

COVID-19 impact

That saddest impact of COVID-19 is obviously the many families who are mourning lost loved ones over this pandemic. At one stage, some of our clergy were presiding over COVID related funerals on a weekly basis. Clearly there has been an impact beyond a normal seasonal flu epidemic.

The next greatest impact is most certainly economic. Developing nations are the most hard hit and sadly, response from more developed nations has not always been selfless.³

South Africa's unemployment rate has risen dramatically, and this has put tremendous strain on households across the country.

Our churches have obviously also been impacted and those in the poorest areas are once again faring the worst. This is not just a REACH-SA problem, but is a challenge across all communities.

It's with this in mind that I'm grateful for the response to last year's Relief Fund appeal which enabled us to distribute about R1m to our most needy church workers. We continue to hold this fund open and hope to distribute a further amount to the regions before the end of this financial year.

³ <https://www.un.org/ohrlls/news/developed-nations-spring-back-life-worlds-most-vulnerable-struggle-sideline>

Over this lockdown time I engaged with other church leaders and various legal structures in order to continually bring our requests and concerns to government. I can report that, for the most part, our leaders were receptive to our requests. Although there is much frustration with our circumstances, and sometimes the laws seem inconsistent, the majority of South African church leaders understand that we are in the midst of a pandemic and not a persecution. Therefore, we see no reason to defy government regulations but rather to do our best to work within the channels provided to seek to use all the resources at our disposal to create the best possible operating conditions for gospel ministry.

When South Africa threatened to descend into chaos during the recent protests and looting, I can say that I felt at the point of absolute despair. When things were already at breaking point, it seemed this was one crisis too many. Yet what an encouragement it was to see so many of God's people respond to the call to prayer. I attended prayer meetings along with hundreds of others online. Many small groups formed online and in venues across the country. God heard our prayers and peace was restored. In the aftermath we also saw many of our local churches join hands and send urgently needed supplies to those in need. Truckloads of essentials crossed the country and even some of our own members and clergy participated in the transport and distribution of supplies. How we thank and praise our God for this Spirit driven other-person-centredness. God's people displayed something of the mercy, unity and generosity of the Body in the midst of a self-consumed and divided world. Re a leboga Modimo.

TRANSFORMATION

In many ways, 2020 could have been the year of the perfect storm. Not only was there a global viral outbreak, but also a global wave of outrage over ongoing simmering racial tensions, most particularly in the USA, but finding expression across the world. It's clear that much of global society is going through a sea change that extends beyond racial issues. The influence of an increasingly 'post Christian' West is eroding many of the old social certainties that were once considered normal. There is, however, a complexity here, not all change is bad, some of it is needed (the increased awareness and reaction against epidemic levels of gender violence, for example).

In the light of these multiple winds of change, what is required of us is not to close up shop, but to engage our world with considered and careful theological thinking. The Scriptures must always drive our thinking - and *thinking* there must be.

I've said this in previous charges, the church has historically failed in her witness to Christ by either embracing the mood of the day or completely removing herself from it. The former produces liberals, the latter, cults.

Historically, all too often, professing believers bought into their social context and put a church stamp on issues such as anti-Semitism, slavery and apartheid, and all because their economy, culture or prevailing world view, shouted louder than Scripture. Now we face that same danger with the gender agenda, racial politics, social justice movements etc. But here is where we must tread carefully. There is no more dangerous heresy than a party true one.

The reality is we as a denomination did fail to live out the gospel through effectively pursuing the unity of all believers (across all races) in Christ. We cannot pretend that we were innocent

bystanders in the history of our country's sad apartheid record. We have historical records of failure that must be acknowledged and repented of. Steps of repentance and reconciliation have happened in our denomination at various times and in various ways. Much of it has been relational and unseen. Some of it is publicly documented, most memorably, for me, in 2000, at my first Synod and clergy retreat and the resultant Cyara apology document.

In 2020 most of our black clergy and ministry workers met for discussions and produced regional documents that have shown there is more work to be done. This is an ongoing process and there will still be much careful listening, Biblical reflection and prayerful self-examination ahead of us.

Its my prayer that this journey will result in heart changes that are seen in ever more effective gospel growth reaching all peoples in our land.

I want to add one caution as we continue in this process. I ask all my brothers and sisters to beware of joining various "camps" or "parties". This was one of the great problems in the Corinthian church (1 Cor.1:10f). Some may call me naïve, but my appeal to us all is to let our discussions and decisions be driven not by a 'whiteness' or a 'blackness' agenda, but rather by a Christlikeness agenda. This does not negate or denigrate our God designed differences but rather embraces and celebrates them. We have the gospel of justification by faith alone, which proclaims reconciliation with God *and* each other (Eph.2) There should be no greater reflection of Christ's peace, justice and unity in our world than in the Body of Christ united across all tongue, tribe and nation. I'm sure we are all convinced that there is no other way for these goals to be truly achieved outside of Christ. History shows us that no political or religious system has attained this. The Scriptures make it very plain why. (Jer.17:9) (See also: Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21)

Lastly, on this point, I want to affirm that I serve as Presiding Bishop, conscious that God ultimately has entrusted me with the responsibility of guarding the gospel of Christ (2 Tim.1:14). It is for this trust that every minister of the gospel must ultimately give account to his Master (Heb.13:17). It is with this context in mind that I remind you all of my priorities. I am not here to defend past failures in our history nor cover up any sins or scandals. We, like all earthly organizations, are flawed and guilty of many errors. My prayer is that repentance and forgiveness (on all sides) will be the fruit of our progress. I am committed to REACH-SA as a family of believers entrusted with the task of making disciples of all nations. As we call them to salvation in Christ alone (Acts 4:12), it must follow that we take that gospel into our world practicing and proclaiming reconciliation with God and each other in Christ. May the Lord empower our steps.

Women in Ministry

You will note a motion to implement recognition of women as Deacons in REACH-SA. This is certainly a momentous event in our history, and it has been on the table from as far back as I can remember. I want to remind everyone that we are seeking to implement this decision not because society demands it, but because we are convinced of it from careful Scriptural consideration. There have been many hours spent in prayerful conversation with our best theological thinkers at the college and in our churches.

We now need to work diligently to implement these changes. If we hold to our complementarian theology, we need to be very clear in affirming the role of women in Word ministry and assign proper roles. This includes, for example, equal salary and recognition for years of service that would be attributed to men in those same positions.

CESA Constitution

You will all have noted a motion to review the constitution in this year's agenda, technically this will only be necessary once the changes are tabled but it is important for us all to be aware of this process. We must bear in mind that our constitution was written in 1938, it was in a very different context to where we are today. It is true that over the years many revisions were made, but we have consulted a constitutional lawyer who has recommended several important changes that are necessary in order to bring our constitution more into line with the current South African legislation. Our newly nominated Chancellor has specialised in the field of constitutional law and will be an excellent help in taking this forward. The task will be to draft these changes without any compromise to our Reformed Evangelical Anglican foundations. We hope to bring a revised document to the area councils and ultimately to Synod. Bear in mind that the process will take time.

Please also note that our Handbook of Procedures is in the process of revision and we are aware that the constitutional edit may affect this in some way. We will engage further on this with our elected Chancellor and other senior leadership. I note a motion in relation to the Handbook in this year's motions and can confirm that this request is already supposed to be the practice of our denomination, but it's clear there were some oversights through the years. Once we have completed the revision, we will bring the handbook to Synod for approval.

One other aspect that we are grappling with is the need to provide online access to our documents without the risk of them being altered or corrupted. We are engaging with IT specialists in this regard.

Going Forward

I'm mindful of the motions we are going to discuss and am also conscious of many realities that we face at this time. Decreased income, rising unemployment and social upheaval all places increased strain on us to fund and grow gospel ministry in our communities.

In the light of our transformation and restructuring discussions, I want to remind you of our goal and challenges (as shared across the country this past year).

What do we want to achieve?

A Biblically grounded REACH-SA structure that promotes equity, partnership and progress in Gospel ministry. Reaching all people of South Africa and beyond.

This is our goal. I realise there are many channels of discussion that emanate from this and I hope we will have platforms and spaces to continue to do so in the coming months.

At this time, we have an overwhelming load of changes to consider and all at a time when progress has been hampered by COVID regulations and restrictions.

It's clear that going forward we will need to strengthen our Admin office in order to more effectively manage the growing need for more efficient processing and implementation of increasing Synod motions, policies, legal changes etc. This is already happening to some extent, but our National Executive and Trustees will need to oversee this process in an even more hands on way in the coming months.

We also need to ensure that all our regions have properly constituted and functional Area Executive and Finance Committees. Remember that the Central Trustees primary role is to oversee national financial matters and related interests. The Area Councils are entrusted with the task of regional strategy, budgets, grants etc. If we are going to build for growth it will be important to have healthy area leadership and transparent structures in place. Yes, we are concerned about growing the vine, but there must be some trellis in place if it is going to grow effectively. Perhaps in the past we have been so concerned about the vine that we have ignored or minimised the trellis, which has a background but nevertheless important role to play in helping grow the vine.

Levy

I note and fully understand the motion calling for an increase in the levy to 12%. We do need to find ways to get more funds to where they are most needed for gospel growth.

Over the last year, the Trustees did much work on this and most of us have been involved in salary audits, surveys etc. There have also been several presentations by Trustees at various regional meetings.

One unavoidable reality that we need to come to terms with is the increasing financial difficulties in the current economy. There is a real need to think outside the box as we consider the most effective way to raise funds and distribute resources to where they are most needed.

REALITY CHECKS

FINANCIAL DISPARITY

147 churches, stations, plants

80 churches pay levies

12 churches = 57% of REACH-SA income

50% of levy income from WC

It's clear that we need future 'think tanks' and network groups in order to look at ways we can build sustainable gospel ministry in the poorest communities of our country. There will not be a simple solution to this challenge, but certainly we should start on our knees, seeking the Lord's wisdom and provision.

Successor

One (almost) final point that I want Synod to be aware of. It is not actually that long before my tenure as Presiding Bishop will be done. I am giving much of my thinking toward future succession and the need for me to ensure that I hand over a denomination that has weathered the storm and is united in going forward with the gospel. We must be much in prayer for the next generation of leaders to be raised up – and to be intentionally mentoring the ones we have.

Lastly

I'm very conscious of the strain these last two years have placed on all of us. Many of us are functioning below par, feeling overwhelmed, anxious and weary.

I thank my God for all of you and for persevering in the task of gospel ministry in these days of great trial. Various reports from around the world are saying that pastors are leaving the ministry in record numbers. I'm not sure how substantiated many of these online claims are, but I think we have all experienced the strain and temptation to give up at various times.

It's at these moments that we must look to our God and hear His word.

(and share that word with each other)

“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” (Galatians 6:9)

³⁶You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. ³⁷For, “In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay.”

³⁸And, “But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back.”

³⁹But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved. (Hebrews 10:36-39)

My brothers and sisters in Christ, we only have one way to go in the Lord and that is forward with the Gospel.

May the Lord be with us as we proclaim His salvation to Africa and the nations.

iAfrika mayibuyele ku Jesu.

Amen