

# AFRICA METHODIST COUNCIL HEADS OF CHURCHES AND COORDINATING SECRETARIES SUMMIT

Venue: Methodist Resort & Conference Centre,

Keynote Address: by the World Methodist Council General Secretary -

Bishop Ivan Abrahams

Topic: "A United Africa for Missionary Opportunities"

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## 1. Introduction

It is a singular honour joy and privilege to be invited to this Summit and reflect with you on, "A United Africa for Missionary Opportunities". I bring to you the greetings and best wishes of the World Methodist Council (WMC), the body that holds together the global Wesleyan family of 82 million members in 134 countries around the world.

THE theme of the Summit resonates with the WMC theme for the next five years, namely 'ONE' which intends to communicate and celebrate unity in the midst of diversity. The member churches of the Council are "one" not because they are uniform, they are "one" because they united. Methodism does not require or even expect of its members uniformity in opinions or modes of worship, but only a desire to do no harm, do good and love God with all our heart and serve the best interest of God's people.

It is my hope and prayer that this Summit will allow us to consider how we in the Wesleyan family on this continent live out our shared mission of love, or as John Wesley writes, "to provoke one another to love, holy tempers, and good works."

In December I had an opportunity to share in a wonderful conference with Methodist Youth and Young Adults meeting under the theme; **Holistic Transformation of Methodist Youths for the transformation of Africa**" in Johannesburg where I examined THREE critical events that coincided with the General Assembly that spoke loudly to the theme.

The first was Emancipation Day where slaves were freed in the Cape on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1834 ([www.sahistory.or.za](http://www.sahistory.or.za)) making it 183 years.

The second international event was World Aids Day that is celebrated on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December each year.

The third was the first human heart transplant in the world that changed heart surgery in the world at Groote Schuur hospital in Cape Town 50 years ago.

It is important that we listen and build synergy with the young people's hopes, dreams and aspirations because they form the majority on this continent. Africa is the Millennium continent with 60 percent of our population under the age of 30. We cannot make any plans without our young people and hence I believe it necessary to share some of the insights from the Youth Assembly.

Five years before John Wesley's death in 1791, he expressed one of his fears. He writes:

*I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having*

*the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”* (Works of John Wesley 13, Thoughts upon Methodism, August 4, 1786).

Although Methodism was rife among the poor in Britain, Wesley could not imagine the movement reaching Africa just a few years after his death. This is the only reason he does not mention the African continent in his fears.

## **2. Our Young people clearly understood that there would be no change without Holistic Transformation**

The word transform in the Greek (*metamorphous*) means to change into another form. To transform, is to allow ourselves to be changed. Transformation is not something we can do ourselves, rather it is the work of the Holy Spirit. By grace we are saved through faith. There is nothing we can do to transform ourselves.

Metamorphosis is what a caterpillar undergoes when it becomes a butterfly. The change is so complete, that once it is finished, the butterfly can no longer return to being a caterpillar. Once we have encountered Christ, if he has really changed us, we should not be able to return to our former lifestyle. The former things have been completely removed from our lives so that they are no longer a part of us. This is what Paul regards as a new creation (II Corinthians 5:17)

Transformation brings renewal. As I travel around I see the passion and commitment of our young people, Passion is the engine room of our hopes, dreams and visions. Our young people stand at the forefront of the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial revolution which has the potential to close the gap between rich and poor. They have the potential to unleash Africa’s strength, tackle our challenges, mobilise and leverage resources to secure our future.

The purpose of salvation is transformation of all creation, including humankind, to the glory of God. Mission is the task of bringing the whole of life under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It begins with the confession that Jesus is Lord of all and attempts to live out that Lordship in the whole of life.

In African cosmology there is no separation of the sacred and secular. Jesus is Lord of all life. When I said “yes” to Jesus he introduced me to his friends, those on the septic friends; the desolate, homeless, bruised, wounded.....I am often amused when people sing the song, “turn your eyes upon Jesus and the things of this world will grow strangely dim”. What theological drivel. When I turned my eyes upon Jesus the things of this world became clearer.,

I repeat what I have said on a number of occasions: Although South Sudan is the youngest African nation, the continent needs a second liberation; political liberation is not enough- it has to be accompanied by spiritual and moral transformation, a revolution of the heart and soul. If this does not happen then the festering wounds of poverty, disease, crime corruption and inequality will continue to bleed the life out of our beautiful continent.

Ben Okri, Nigerian poet and Booker Prize winner says;

*“Nations and people are largely stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies, if they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they free their histories for future flowerings”*

What is your story as you gather here in Kenya? What are your hopes and dreams for yourself, your church and this continent? How do we participate in God's mission?

I am sick and tired of the dominate narrative of Africa in print and digital pages. All they can report about is genocide, xenophobia, rigged elections, starvation, malnutrition, human trafficking, struggling Africans fleeing the continent to end up in a watery death as they try to cross the Mediterranean Sea to seek a better life in Europe, frightened refugees being sold as slaves in Libya and so the list continues.

**Yes**, we have our challenges, **No** we do not live in perennial poverty, **yes** – the past affects the present and **yes**, I am an eternal optimist who want to believe that the Methodist Church can and is changing the narrative – Africa is rising, Africa's time is now. Nelson Mandela echoes the words of American writer James Baldwin when he claims: "History is not the past. We carry our history with us. We are our history. The future is in our hands."

Sometimes we need reminding that our continent has a greater land mass than the United States and Europe combined. We have rich mineral and human resources, cultural diversity, an ancient history and the last great wilderness areas on the planet. Archaeologists and palaeontologists agree that it is the birthplace of humanity, our primordial home.

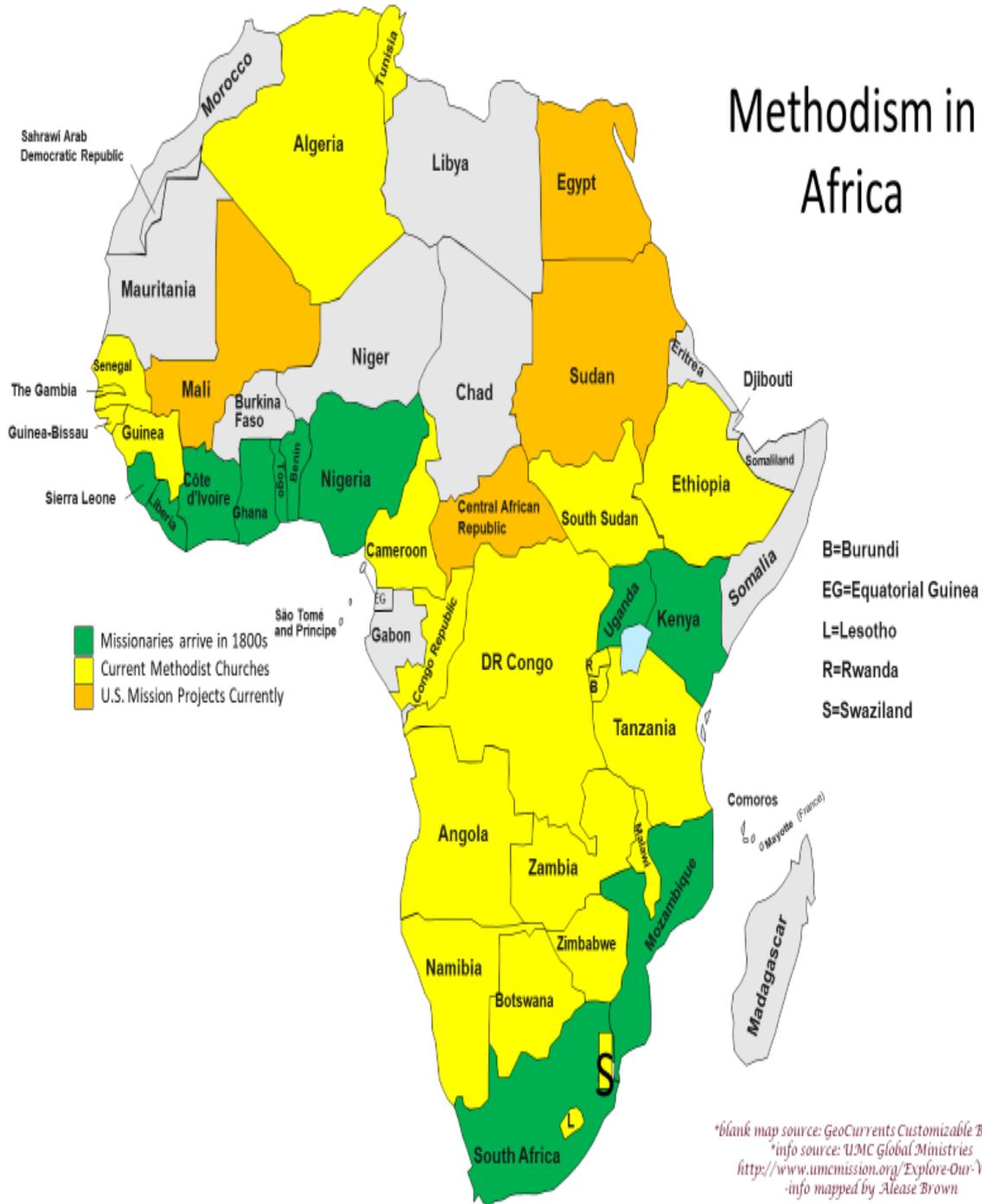
One of the martyrs of the apartheid struggle Steven Bantu Biko once said; "The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the greatest gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more human face". On his tombstone is inscribed these words "It is better to die for an ideal that will live than for an ideal that will die'. Dare I ask; does the flame of the gospel burn within your belly and marrow of your bones in the same way it did for Paul and Silas and some of the early Christian martyrs and missionaries?

### **3. History of Methodist missionary activity in Africa**

This section includes a table listing, a map, and issues that might be relevant to ongoing mission activity in light of this information. The table lists the early Methodist missionary arrivals in Africa. The record of local men and women who assisted in spreading the gospel is sparse and in many cases, they have been written out of history. A major challenge is writing history to honour our forebears. The map shows these early contacts between Methodism and Africa, current Methodism presence, and areas where there is work by U.S. Methodist missionaries occurring but no official Methodist churches.

TABLE

<u>Country</u>	<u>Date of Methodist Arrival(s)</u>	<u>Person(s) Who arrived</u>
Sierra Leone	1792	Group of freed Methodist slaves arrive
	1811	Missionary George Warren arrives
South Africa	1806	Methodists arrive with British garrison
	1816	Missionary Bartholomew Shaw
Liberia	1822	Black American Methodists arrive
	1833	Missionary Melvin B. Cox arrives
Uganda	1835	
Ghana	1835	Missionary Joseph Dunwell arrives
Zimbabwe	1841	Missionaries Owen Watkins and Isaac Shimmin arrive
Benin	1843	Missionary Thomas Burch Freeman arrives
Togo	1843	Missionary Thomas Burch Freeman arrives
Nigeria	1842	Methodists arrive
	1845	Missionary Thomas Burch Freeman
Kenya	1862	
Cote d'Ivoire	1890	Settlers
	1895	First building erected by Methodists
	1924	Missionary John Platt arrives
Mozambique	1890	
Algeria	1906	
Zambia	1914	



There has been seismic shifts in the global Christian landscape, these have been referred to by mission scholars, Dr. Lamin Sanneh and Rev Wesley Granberg-Michaelson as “The post Western Christian awakening.” (I encourage you to read *From Time Square to Timbuktu: The post Christian West Meets the Non-Western Church*). Methodists should ask the compelling question: “How do we engage in “mission” especially where the centre of gravity

of Christianity has moved to the global south.

Dr. Wesley Ariarajah, a missiologist and Methodist minister from Sri Lanka argues that mission means different things for different people especially for those in Latin America, Asia and Africa where “Christian missions got mixed up with conquest (and) was affected by the unholy alliance of Evangelization, Colonization and Westernization.” He encourages us to search for alternative mission paradigms. He presents Four Thesis.

**Thesis One;** We need to move away from an understanding of mission that divides and recover the biblical message that God intends to bring the whole creation unto Godself.

**Thesis Two;** We need to move away from the traditional anthropology that has given rise to the doctrinal formulations that underpin the traditional concepts of mission and re-imagine the reason and goal of mission, discipleship to new values of the Reign of God.

**Thesis Three;** we need to move away from mission that targets other religious communities for conversion. This does not mean that all religions are the same, but other religions are not our enemies.

**Thesis Four;** Christian mission relates to the values that Jesus stood for; those that embrace the values of the Reign of God. Therefore, we can collaborate with all groups, including religious groups and those with no religious labels, in promoting the life-centred values of the Reign of God. (Lecture delivered at Drew University, New Jersey, *Mission Impossible? Reimagining a credible Mission for Today* see also *Your God, My God, Our God-Rethinking Christian Theology for Religious Plurality* – WCC publications, 2012).

These four theses resonate with the core values and vision of the WMC. The Council through its structures and understanding of mission is strategically placed to build bridges across the chasm in the world to: share the good news of Christ, call people to faithful discipleship, work alongside the poor and marginalized to transform society, strengthen the ecumenical movement, care for creation and build relationships with people of faith and no faith.

#### **4. What are the Missionary Opportunities?**

##### **4.1 To minister effectively we need to read “the signs of the times,” build partnerships to promote good governance, ethical leadership and enhance the dignity of our people.**

In the introduction to the Foresight Africa report, President of the African Union, Paul Kagame says,

*“Despite the myriad challenges we still face, over the past two generations our world has become more prosperous and equitable, and also safer. Cooperation among nations has been a foundation of that progress, as well as the best mechanism for sustaining it. This is nowhere truer than in Africa. At independence, our continent and our individual countries*

*were profoundly divided and unable to capitalize on our own wealth.”* (Foresight Africa 2018)

To paraphrase Karl Marx, he says the challenge is not so much to understand the world but to change it. How can we change it if we do not know the heartbeat and pulse of our continent? I therefore present a snapshot of some of the issues and analysis in the Foresight Africa Report.

## **FORESIGHT AFRICA SLIDES PRESENTATION (Appendix 1)**

### **4.2 Dimensions of African missionary activities**

There are three geographical dimensions to modern African missionary activity, namely:

- missionary outreach within national borders;
- cross-border mission within the African continent (some of these were covered in the SLIDES)
- what has sometimes been called reverse flow mission, mission by Africans to Western and other countries that have traditionally sent missionaries to Africa (Kalu, 2007).

### **4.3 Cooking Theology in African pots**

I use the metaphor of “cooking theology in African pots” for two reasons; firstly because what passes for African theology is often nothing more than western theology in African guise, and secondly authentic African food is mostly cooked by women while men cook in restaurants to please the western palate.

John Mbiti (1986) and Byang Kato (1980) are some of the early African theologians who took the Gospel and culture seriously. They called for the Christian message to be fully expressed in the local African culture through indigenisation and contextualisation but Lamin Sanneh (2009) and Kwame Bediako (1995) both felt that these concepts did not go far enough, instead they saw translatability as a way to speak to people in their mother tongue which will authenticate not just the Bible but also the cultural setting of believers. Sanneh argues that culture is not static and that translatability leaves room for cultural change. He declares; “When one translates, it is like pulling the trigger of a loaded gun; the translator cannot recall the hurting bullet. Translation thus activates a process that will supercede the original intention of the translator.” (Sanneh 2009:60)

The most dominant African theologians are still mostly male. Will a more authentic African theology emerge when we breach the gulf between seminary, sanctuary and the streets and appreciate the contribution of our mothers and sisters in the “cooking” process?

The slides showed that the Church needs to ensure the security of girls and women. “With an average remaining gender gap of 32%, the Sub-Saharan Africa region scores in the lower middle range of the Global Gender Gap Index, ahead of South Asia and behind Eastern Europe and Central Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. It displays a wider range of gender gap outcomes than practically any other region. Rwanda ranks in the top 10 globally. Two countries, Namibia and South Africa, score in the top 20 and have closed 78% to 76% of their gender gaps; and the region features many of the lowest-ranked countries in the Index, such as Mali and Chad, which have not yet closed 60% of

their overall gender gap. This high variance can be explained by high diversity on the Educational Attainment sub-index—much higher than for any other region—as well as uneven Health and Survival outcomes. No country from the region has fully closed both its Educational Attainment and Health and Survival gender gaps. Botswana and Lesotho have fully closed their Educational Attainment gender gaps and seven others—Namibia, Swaziland, South Africa, Mauritius, Rwanda, Kenya and Burundi—have fully closed their Health and Survival gender gaps.”

[http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2017.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2017.pdf).

#### **4.4 The Challenge of Religious Pluralism and Islam**

Christianity in Africa has co-existed with Islam for many years. While Christianity in the West operated in a largely homogeneous environment, in Africa Christianity existed in a pluralistic and mostly non-adversarial environment making dialogue with other faiths possible. Unfortunately radical Islam has challenged much of the goodwill and offer serious challenges. In some areas Christianity is simply not welcomed.

#### **4.5 The disjuncture between faith and ethics in public life**

How do we reconcile the phenomenal growth of Christianity on the continent with some of the some of the pathologies we saw in the slides and which I raised in the introduction of this presentation. There seem to be a contradiction in the profession of faith and the cut and thrust of daily life.

How do we reconcile the fact that in African cosmology we claim that there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular yet our daily reality reflects differently? How do we respond to the proliferation of prosperity cults?

Methodists need to be reminded of John Wesley’s firm conviction that, “Religion must not go from the greatest to the least, or the power would appear of men.” (Journal May 21, 1764, Works21:466). We need to stand in solidarity with the poor and oppressed and expose the contradictions in society embracing hope and working towards a world more like God’s plan for it. We “were raised up, to spread Scriptural holiness throughout our land(s)” and share in the momentous task of being agents of transformation.

We need to draw on our heritage and again link faith and works, pietism and social action, spirituality and political engagements.....this is what social holiness looks like building a world where justice and peace becomes a reality.

#### **4.6 Migration**

Rev. Fadahunsi’s paper on Migration spell out some of the reasons for migration and the missional challenges, I only wish to debunk the myth created by the images of African migrants drowning while attempting to cross the Mediterranean, that Africa is a crumbling continent from which the young and strong are prepared to risk their lives in trying to escape.

What is important to note is that migration from Africa is low by global standards and most of the migration except for North Africa takes place within the continent. Evidence suggest that it is often those better educated with skills mainly from richer countries who migrate to countries outside Africa.

A major challenge is for churches to co-operate and to offer hospitality and hope for those intra-african migrants as well as those in the **diaspora**.

Let us remember that the greatest gift that we can bestow upon this and the future generations is to wrestle together with the challenges of our time to build a more human and prosperous society.

### Questions about Methodist Missions in the 21st Century:

- 2021 marks 229 years of Methodist mission in Africa. How has this been good news for Africans? In what ways has it been bad news? **What is the “good news” today, and why is it good news?**
- Over 200 years ago people sought after Methodist missionary assistance. **Who is seeking our help today? What help is needed?**
  - There is gospel penetration at all levels of society; what is the missionary task when there is popular Christian confession, but common deficit of character?
- In 1848 Communism offered a new way of thinking about how money, work and the rights of workers. The mission in Africa, however, aligned itself with resource extraction and benefit to owners, and not to workers. **Is it possible for the people called Methodists to re-imagine the church’s alignment more with workers (the majority of our members) than capital?**
- Pentecostalism is a growing phenomenon in Africa, and is very often connected to ideas of wealth accumulation/prosperity. Often the growth of the church is related to the growth and development of cities, as well as to political influence. **How might Methodists mission activity respond to Pentecostalism?**

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