



THE METHODIST CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

CAPE OF GOOD HOPE SYNOD OFFICE

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Bishop Yvette Moses

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To all Members and Friends of the Cape of Good Hope Synod

I write to you in the confidence of our risen Christ whose presence brings hope and peace amidst the uncertainty and challenges of the Global COVID -19 pandemic.

This would have been the week of our gathering as a Synod, so this letter serves to update you on many practical matters as we as a Synod have attempted to navigate our way in understanding and practicing our ministry and mission at this time, as well as dealing with governance matters for our required meetings.

1. WORSHIP AND MISSION DURING COVID-19

I applaud the many wonderfully innovative ways in which Church Leaders Meetings, ministers and organisations have attempted to connect and minister to members through worship, teaching, prayer and practical service. While this is far removed from what we used to know as Church, we are indeed learning new way of “being” the Church while we cannot “be” physically together. It is encouraging to note the many ways in which all have responded to the practical needs of human suffering in this time. All Circuits through their various Societies or Organisations, have engaged in some form of feeding and food parcel ministry to the most vulnerable people on the ground. With the guidance of the Synod Crisis Task Team, many have been able to source contacts, food parcels and other forms of assistance. It is best that Societies, Circuits and Organisations liaise with this Task Team that has been doing a wonderful job of co-ordinating our response to the challenges of the COVID-19. I commend their work which has focussed particularly on the areas of education and information in order to eradicate stigmatization and fear, dealing with practical matters of food relief, focus on mental health and family matters with regular panel discussions on the Capemethodist Facebook page, as well a mask-making initiative. Societies are asked to continue their good work by co-ordinating with their Community in Action Networks (CANS) and Ecumenical (LEAN) groupings as we try to sustain our practical ministry in the long months ahead. *(A separate document was sent out outlining the work of the Crisis Team. Please contact Rev Ralph Afghan, our Crisis Team co-ordinator, for more information if needed, ralph@coronationmethodist.co.za or 082 494 9971)*

2. BROADER CONVERSATIONS

It is worth noting that the MCSA through our Presiding Bishop and General Secretary, as part of the South African Council of Churches, is in weekly discussions with the National Government the role and status of religious bodies in the present lockdown situation. While that happens at a National level, in the Western Cape, faith-based leaders, including myself, are working closely with the relevant Government Departments i.e. Cultural Affairs, Agriculture and Social Development, in order to seek clarity on the various regulations and apply them appropriately. This allows us to access information, dialogue on matters that is of concern, and opportunities to partner where needed, particularly on the issues of food relief. A major area of conversation is that of funerals, with some relaxing of regulations but tightening up of protocols to be followed, especially with the expected spike in COVID 19 infections and fatalities in the Western Cape in the coming months. We recognise that Critical Solidarity and

Prophetic Action require a fine balancing act, but dialogue and engagement seem prudent at present as we seek to address COVID-19 collectively as a nation.

3. PRACTICAL MATTERS OF OUR SYNOD

As you are aware, this would have been the week in which we were to gather in our 191st Synod, which obviously cannot happen in the usual manner. After considerable consultations at various levels, I advise you of the following way forward:

3.1. ANNUAL SYNOD

The Cape Synod “gathering” is now set for Sat 20 June and will take place on a virtual platform. The practicalities of hosting such a Synod are complicated and will be worked out as best as possible with Superintendents, Organisations and Departments, as we consider the capacity of delegates to connect in this way. Only critical Agenda items will be dealt with and much of the work will be sent beforehand for reporting. These include Stationing matters, EMMU business, finance, resolutions and appointments. The Synod Blue Book is being processed as per usual, and will be sent out electronically, together with all necessary documents for decision making. All other Synod business and activities, including the various services, will not take place at this time but possibly offered in a different way once we are permitted to do so. All Supernumeraries, if not attending, are asked to send their dispensation requests as per usual with answering of the discipline questions, and all active ministers, including seconded ministers, will be asked to submit these questions of discipline and accountability to the Synod Bishop, together with a newly designed Ministry Review as a theological reflection on ministry during the COVID-19 crisis. *(Further details will be communicated on this to ministers.)*

3.2. CIRCUIT QUARTERLY MEETINGS

Superintendents have agreed to manage CQM’s in practical ways that can be accommodated on virtual or email platforms with smaller extended Executives if needed. Only critical Agenda items will be discussed, including Stationing matters, finance, resolutions referred to by Conference and Reflection on the Circuits response to the Covid-19 crisis. Minutes will be kept and documented in the normal way by each Circuit.

3.3. ORGANISATIONS

Connexional Presidents have been consulted and have communicated with Synod Executives regarding arrangements regarding organisations. These include the cancellation of all Conventions, Tri-annual, Bi-annual or other Connexional Meetings. Possibly Extended Executives could meet on a virtual platform to conduct critical business such as recognition of and handovers to elected office bearers. All new elections are postponed to 2021, with all present Executive office bearers to continue until that time. Organisations were asked to take cognizance of the present economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis and to rethink planning of future events and meetings. On Synod level, Organisations were asked to consider repurposing Joint Project Money and other already-collected funds to the Synod Covid-19 Mission fund, as well as to support Circuits in their increasing financial constraints. I want to commend the organisations that have already done so, as well as the wonderful work being done in supporting Circuits in their efforts to reach their most vulnerable members through the constituencies of the organisations on the ground.

3.4. FINANCE

The economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis has been felt across the globe, with no person or institution untouched. The Covid-19 restrictions both in terms of our inability to gather and receive our members offerings, the reluctance or inability of some to use other forms of giving, as well as the economic circumstances of all our members have already placed tremendous strain on the

finances of our Circuits. Our Synod treasurer held consultations with our Circuit treasurers who will continue to dialogue in order to assist each other in seeking ways to manage each situation which may differ from Circuit to Circuit. I am happy to report that the MCO Finance Unit and MCO has just released a letter addressing some of the relief measures to be offered to Circuits in this difficult time. These include a 15% reduction of Circuit Assessments for an 8-month period, cushioning of Insurance premiums, and use of Stipend augmentation fund to assist in basic unpaid stipends. *(These details have been sent to Superintendents and treasurers who will expand on these in Circuits.)* What is clear is that at every level of our Church - Organisations Societies, Circuits, Synod and MCO - sensitive and serious conversations will need to be held, budgets revised, and difficult decisions made. I would plead that this matter be treated with integrity and with sensitive engagement, both with ministers, Bible women, evangelists, office staff, caretakers etc. Circuits are advised that they can approach the Government UIF relief fund as they consider their contracted office and church staff. Our treasurer will continue to consult and assist us as on these matters, and we bring a revised Synod budget to our gathering in June.

3.5. EMMU

Our Synod Supervisor of Studies has all EMMU matters in hand concerning the ongoing training, examinations and preparation of candidates, probationers, using the guidelines sent to us by our Connexional EMMU Department. Much of the required examinations and reporting will happen in virtual meetings and we will attempt to share some of the testimonies and witness moments as widely as we are able to. All work will be reported into Synod and the appropriate Synod questions will be engaged. We commend our Synod EMMU on their work as well as all our probationers, ordinands and candidates in this most unusual time and manner of preparation. Part of the work of EMMU is to encourage ongoing theological training and reflection, and I would commend the DEWCOM theological discussions that take every Wednesday afternoon on MCSA Facebook page as well as the documents on the MCSA webpage.

4. OTHER PRACTICAL MATTERS

Please note that the present Level 4 lockdown regulations ease only some of the restrictions, which still calls for responsible action from all citizens in the attempt to work from home, practice social distancing and important hygiene practices which is all aimed at reducing the rate of spread of the virus. Our action as a Christian Community is a witness and example for others to follow, so I implore you to act responsibly in all the matters I refer to in the following paragraphs. It is crucial to understand that Churches are not designated as Essential Services, so we cannot take any privileges that do not belong to us. When in doubt on acting on a regulation, I would advise that you err on the side of caution, rather than regret a lapse in judgement that could have devastating consequences for yourself, your Church and the people you serve.

4.1. FUNERALS

The regulations have shifted a little and I have advised ministers that Churches can consider allowing funerals to take place in Church buildings, under a very strict conditions that must be adhered to in all situations. Ministers have been advised to apply for a Certification Letter (not permits) from my office, which must be checked with a local police station, and that these cannot be issued to any lay person who wish to conduct a funeral. Churches should consider this prayerfully and carefully and be consistent in their pastoral approach to families and situations. Since the capacity and practicalities in each Church and Circuit differs, the decision rests with the Minister in consultation with Circuit Superintendent and local Society Church Council, accepting the liability and responsibility that comes with it. *(A detailed document has been sent to ministers on this matter.)*

4.2. WORSHIP SERVICES, PASTORAL CARE, OFFICES AND MEETINGS

All public gatherings and religious services are not allowed as per the Lockdown regulations. Since we are not Essential Services, we cannot issue the required Permits, and our Church Offices are not registered as businesses, and should therefore not be opened in this phase. Instead, by now, plans should have been made on assisting those needed for admin or other functions, to work remotely. The Synod Office will continue to operate remotely, and I remind you that both Arlene and Laetitia can be contacted by email or cellphone during normal office hours. (Arlene 068 524 7856 accounts@capemethodist.org.za or Laetitia 067 029 8806 office@campemethodist.org.za) While some Churches are operating feeding schemes, essential service Permits can only be issued by the necessary police or registered NGO's, so please pursue this in the necessary way. Unless a minister resides in a manse on the church property, no services should be recorded on Church premises even if members are not attending these, and no stewards should be present on church premises or church offices in order to receive member's money. No gatherings are allowed under any circumstances which includes church meetings, Bible studies, and other church activities. While this is painful sacrifice, we are still of the mind that we do not engage in Virtual Holy Communion or Love Feasts, even while our DEWCOM committee has been tasked to help us think through this in a doctrinal and practical manner. Pastoral work should be engaged in through creative ways other than physical visiting, such as phone calls, letters, WhatsApp etc. and partnerships explored with Counseling and other agencies to assist in referral. I have engaged with our Synod Mental Health co-ordinator (Rev Dr Leon Klein) and other ministers who have pastoral counselling centers to help with some practical equipping of congregations on these matters.

4.3. MINSTERS AND LEAVE

At the start of the total lockdown phase, all ministers were asked to remain in their stations and on duty as part of their call and responsibility to the Church and members. With the extension of the restrictions, Superintendents and Circuits may grant days off and leave in the normal consultative way, depending on the circumstances of the Circuit, whilst using the relevant leave forms. However, such leave can only be granted with the understanding that the minister remains in the Synod, since inter-Provincial travel is not permitted. Please note that no leave may be granted over the Synod meeting time.

CONCLUSION

These are indeed trying times, calling for creative, courageous and compassionate leadership. As Methodists, we have prided ourselves on due consultation and discernment at all levels, but recognise that decisive leadership must also be given, particularly in extraordinary circumstances such as those that we find ourselves in at present. Our Synod Management, Superintendents and I have attempted to be transparent in all matters I plead that you would offer your understanding and co-operation where decisions have had to be made. We recognise that the present situation is fluid and that sudden changes may have to be made with little notice, but I assure you that I will endeavour to communicate any necessary changes as openly and timeously as possible.

Please uphold our Presiding Bishop, General Secretary, Unit Leaders and Bishops in your prayers, as we are often called on to make critical decisions which hold legal and other consequences for our Church as a whole. I commend the Connexional Prayer Diary which is posted daily on Facebook and sent to all ministers, our PB's Fasting and Prayer initiative on Thursdays at 12 noon, as well as a number of other wonderful prayer initiatives from our various churches. I am aware of the many sacrifices that many of you are making in this time. I remain in prayer for our Synod and all its members on a daily basis as I seek to lead you prayerfully, pastorally, and practically over this challenging season. I have been pondering on the thought that following the "in-between" time of Resurrection and Pentecost, a new movement was born, imagining and shaping a world as never before. I am convinced that we cannot, and should not, long for

things to go “back to normal,” but that the painful lessons we learn in this challenging COVID-19 crisis, together with our commitment to walk humbly with our God and to be more faithful to Christ’s Way of Life, would lead to something new and beautiful for the sake of the whole of creation and every living creature.

Yours in Christ’s Service

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Yvette Moses". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Yvette" being more prominent than the last name "Moses".

Rev Yvette Moses
Synod Bishop