

# DOCTRINE, ETHICS AND WORSHIP COMMITTEE

## REPORT TO CONFERENCE 2020

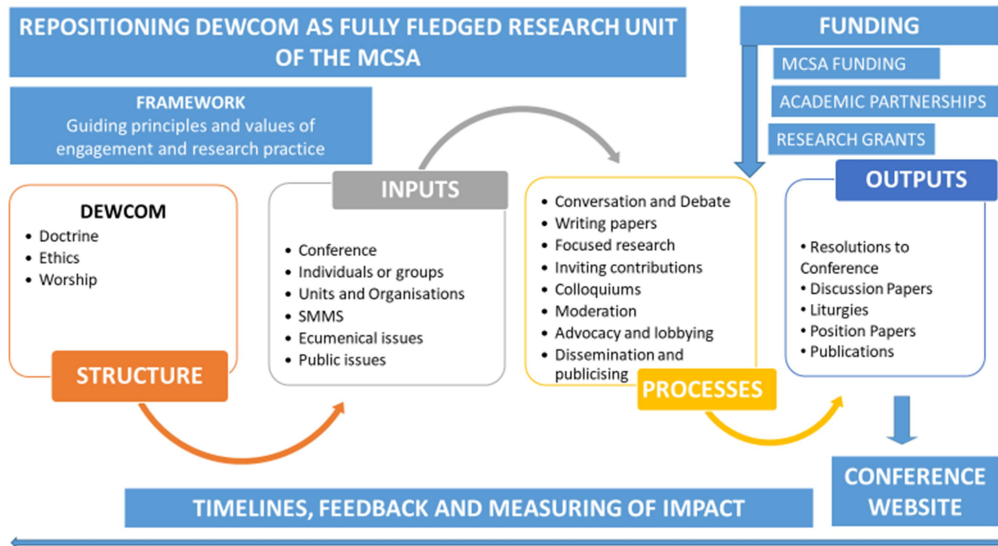
Rev Sidwell Mokgothu

### 1. Introduction

DEWCOM continues to be at the service of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in leading and facilitating the theological discourse that seek to refine our Methodist Theology – doctrine, ethics and worship in order to nurture our faith and deepen our spirituality. It is the Committee’s commitment to demystify and make theology participatory and inclusive of all God’s People.

### 2. Repositioning DEWCOM

The February Meeting of DEWCOM took a moment to reflect on the mandate of DEWCOM, discern its current ministry and reposition it for the future. [See the flow chart below]. The Committee agreed that it is important that the image of DEWCOM be transformed from that of a perceived elitist and exclusive group that operates in the obscure to that of a popular and activist team that operates in the public by inviting all Methodist people to participate. ff



Flow Chart Diagram

There is an intention to upgrade DEWCOM’s research and publication capacity fully. The focus of the Committee remains Doctrine, Ethics and Worship with the public theology and witness needing serious attention. The agenda of DEWCOM remains directives of Conference, Connexional Executive and Bishops and requests from different organs of the Church like Units, Organisations and other groups. DEWCOM will also be responsive to contextual public issues. DEWCOM will process its work through commissioned research,

public conversations and individual papers. An activist DEWCOM will lobby and advocate for adopted MCSA positions through learning events and dissemination of information. It will produce formal resolutions and position papers that must first be adopted by Conference. It will further produce discussion papers and publications with disclaimers to protect the integrity of the MCSA.

DEWCOM will seek to collaborate with other entities of the MCSA, Ecumenical partners and academic institutions. It is the Committee's hope that its work will be better funded and will also apply for research grants where projects are to be undertaken. The new DEWCOM website [www.mcsadewcom.org](http://www.mcsadewcom.org) has been developed and will be improved continually.

### **3. COVID-19 Webinar Series**

The unexpected novel virus COVID-19 disrupted the entire world and the life of the Church in general. This led to the uncertainty of how to do church, ministry and mission. True to its mandate and commitment to repositioning its way of working, DEWCOM responded with a series of webinars that were hosted on Zoom with an invited panel of presenters and participants and liver streamed on the MCSA Facebook page. The number of those who visited the page averaged 30 000 whilst those who watched every episode to the full has been around 8 000.

The main topic, by popular request from the Circuits and directed by the Presiding Bishop, was the discussion on Online Communion. The conversation was undertaken in two sessions and attracted inputs and participation from a diverse group of people. The output of this was a draft resolution that DEWCOM submitted to the Presiding Bishop titled: **Sacramental Life in a Time of Pandemic**. [See Addendum 1]

The other focus areas, which attracted inputs from academics, clergy, laity and theological students were:

- Gender and Theology
- African Spirituality
- Economics and COVID-19
- Youth and COVID-19
- Health Issues During COVID-19

DEWCOM took a decision to halt the series and take a break in support of the Connexional **Freedom From Fear**: Methodist Against GBV Campaign. The Committee has planned to next engage on a series on African Spirituality, as per the popular request by participants in the Zoom series and also other public issues.

### **4. Marriage and Family Life**

The 2019 Conference directed, through resolution 5, DEWCOM to develop a discussion document on MCSA position and Theology of Marriage. DEWCOM has established a sub-committee to trace a timeline and previous work that has been done on this. The elements of this include:

- Historical development of Marriage and LGBTIAQ+ conversations and resolutions
- Marriage and Family Life Conference in 2015
- The DEWCOM Report to Conference 2017
- DEWCOM Resolutions to on Civil Unions
- DEWCOM Submission to Conference 2019

Noting that that this work has to be a collaboration with the Marriage and Family Life Standing Committee and the LGBTIAQ+ Committee that are only being strengthened and established, DEWCOM is proposing that the work be postponed for submission to the 2021 Conference and to be chaired by the Bishop responsible for the Marriage and Family Life Standing Committee.

### **5. Name Change of District to Synod**

Resolution 16 of the 2019 Conference reads; “Conference noting the confusion regarding the ecclesiastical interpretation of the word “Synod”, tasks DEWCOM to develop theological input to guide the reflections of Synods and Circuits.” (2020 Yearbook, p.98.)

DEWCOM’s input is contained in the document: **Input from DEWCOM on the Name Change of “District” to “Synod”**. (See Addendum 2) This traces the historical and theological understanding of concepts and suggest three options of remedies.

### **6. Threefold Pattern of Deacons, Presbyters and Bishops**

Conference, after rescinding the 2003 definition of the Threefold Pattern of Ministry of Deacons, Presbyters and Bishops, directed DEWCOM through Resolution 12 “to make appropriate doctrinal amendments as part of the discussion document to Conference 2020.”

DEWCOM has submitted the statement titled: **Re-affirmation of the Twofold Pattern of Ordained Ministry within the MCSA**. [See Addendum 3]

### **7. Conclusion**

DEWCOM urges the Methodist Church of Southern Africa to desist from making changes to its polity without prior theological reflection. There have been several instances where changes were made and positions made with the theological reflection only following after.

DEWCOM noted the proliferation of strange theologies and shallow spiritualities and invites all Methodist People to take seriously Methodist Theology and Spirituality as part of refining our doctrine, ethics and worship.

We together have the responsibility to transform theology and doctrine from being dead fossils but bring it alive to nurture and transform our faith for daily living.

### **8. Nomination of Committee Members for 2021**

Rev Sidwell Mokgothu (Convenor and Chairperson); Rev Luvuyo Sifo (Secretary); Rev Tim Attwell; Rev Lauren Matthew; Rev Raymond Keet; Rev Dinis Matsolo; Rev Pierre Naude; Rev Jenny Samdaan; Rev Dr Roger Scholtz; Rev Pumla Mtshiselwa; Mr Peter Frow; Mr Anele

Siswana; Rev Sondlile Nkwanyana; Rev Juliet Windvogel; Rev Dr Martin Mostert; Rev Nozipho Mcineka; Rev Brenda Timmer.

## APPENDIX 1

### SACRAMENTAL LIFE IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

#### 1. Background

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), like other Churches around the world, finds itself shuttered by the extraordinary and unprecedented circumstances precipitated by the global Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. Among other economic and social effects, the pandemic has resulted in local church congregations being prevented from gathering in corporate worship and, as a consequence, receiving Holy Communion.

While the Methodist Book of Order (para. 1.15 – 1.35) provides the polity, and theological and liturgical foundations for the regular celebration of Holy Communion, no particular provisions are made for practice in times of a pandemic. The incidence of Covid-19 has spurred the MCSA to explore how we can respond creatively within this unique situation while still abiding with the principles and provisions of our polity. Where context and the Spirit of God demands, we need to adjust our practices in ways that will help the lived faith of the church to adapt and flourish.

In April 2020, the Office of the Presiding Bishop mandated the Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee (DEWCOM) to facilitate a theological discussion on Holy Communion in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. This discussion elicited numerous contributions from Methodist clergy and laity, and addressed various issues on Eucharistic theology in relation to our liturgical practice, sacramental living and the socio-economic inequalities that characterise our Connexion. (A summary of this discussion is attached.) Key to this discussion was the question whether 'online' Holy Communion could be practiced in a way that is consistent with our stated theological understanding of Holy Communion. While diverse responses to this question were articulated, the preponderance of theological opinion concluded that 'online' Holy Communion, within this context, could indeed be practiced with theological integrity, subject to a number of conditions.

In the light of the above DEWCOM therefore offers the following recommendations and guidelines, in the form of a resolution:

#### 2. Resolution

2.1. Noting that:

2.1.1. The extraordinary and unprecedented circumstances precipitated by the global Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in local church congregations being prevented from gathering in corporate worship for the past few months.

2.1.2. Notwithstanding the announcement of the resumption of limited public worship services under strict conditions in some of the countries within the Connexion, the nature and likely trajectory of this pandemic is such that many churches and certainly many church members, especially those most vulnerable to infection, will be unable to gather in corporate worship for the foreseeable future.

2.1.3. The extreme material hardship, emotional trauma, social strain and spiritual isolation that many are enduring in this moment makes the sacramental presence of the church and the extension of the means of grace into people's lived experience all the more crucial and urgent.

2.1.4. The sacrament of Holy Communion is a foundational resource for the life of faith, an imperative of our Lord, and one of the key ways in which our belonging within the body of Christ is affirmed. It also plays a pivotal part in shaping the church's mission and witness in the world, by calling members of the body of Christ to the daily practice of sacramental living.

2.2. Therefore, the MCSA resolves that:

2.2.1. Every Circuit and Society, within the constraints imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic and in keeping with our Methodist discipline, should exercise a sacramental presence in life-giving ways that will reach people where they are and meet them in their places of need.

2.2.2. The Presiding Bishop permits the use of 'online' Holy Communion for a limited time, while the necessity not to gather for public worship in order to avoid the spread of Covid-19 infection endures. For the sake of clarity, 'online' Holy Communion refers to the following:

2.2.2.1. A communion service that forms part of a clearly defined and intentional worship gathering of a church community meeting remotely, typically each in their own home, yet connected through the use of some form of digital technology.

2.2.2.2. The celebrant of such a communion service would be an ordained minister or probationer with dispensation who would lead the communion liturgy in the usual way, as per our Methodist practice.

2.2.2.3. This communion liturgy would be shared with the gathered worshipping community through some digital channel, typically a video or audio recording or live feed.

2.2.2.4. Each participating home would have the physical elements of bread and wine present – duly consecrated through the words and actions of the celebrant in the communion liturgy, the active participation in faith of the members of the body of Christ, and the agency of the Holy Spirit – which the communicants would share among themselves when invited by the celebrant to do so.

2.2.3. The Presiding Bishop grants ordained Methodist ministers special dispensation to celebrate such 'online' Holy Communion services. Such dispensation will be regarded as temporary and can be revoked by the Presiding Bishop at any time. It will be in force only for as long as public worship services remain inhibited due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.2.4. In light of the reality that 'online' Holy Communion is accessible only to people who have the privilege of access to the necessary technology and data to participate in such services of Holy Communion, and that many people are excluded by their material and social circumstances from participation in such Holy Communion services:

2.2.4.1. People participating in 'online' Holy Communion services are made mindful of those who are excluded from 'online' Holy Communion services and express their solidarity with the needs of all people so excluded.

2.2.4.2. People participating in 'online' Holy Communion services are urged to contribute actively and materially to the relief of the needs of the poor as part of their act of worship.

2.2.4.3. Prayers of intercession be said before the Passing of the Peace and the Eucharistic Prayer ('The Thanksgiving') for those who are poor, marginalised or excluded for whatever reason from Holy Communion, specifically mentioning those individuals and communities who are nearest to the congregation.

2.3. DEWCOM, together with the Ecumenical Affairs Unit, informs the Church Unity Commission and other ecumenical partners of this resolution and engage with them on the theological and practical implications for celebrating 'online' Holy Communion during moments of crisis like Covid-19.

## APPENDIX 2

### INPUT FROM DEWCOM ON THE NAME CHANGE OF “DISTRICT” TO “SYNOD”

Resolution 16 of the 2019 Conference reads as follows:

“Conference noting the confusion regarding the ecclesiastical interpretation of the word “Synod”, tasks DEWCOM to develop theological input to guide the reflections of Synods and Circuits. (2020 Yearbook, p.98.)

The following notes are offered by DEWCOM in response to this directive.

#### 2. Background

2.1. In the General Secretary’s report to Conference 2017, the idea was first mooted that the MCSA give consideration to changing its use of the term “District” to “Synod”. The motivation for this change centered on the difficulty that arises when one of the nations within the MCSA is referred to as a District. This difficulty was especially acute in the case of the Mozambique District, although a similar concern applied to the Districts of which the nations of Namibia, Lesotho and Swaziland are a part. The relevant extract of the General Secretary’s report reads as follows:

“Our Connexion is made up of six nations. Dealing with a government, from a Methodist office in South Africa, causes diplomatic and relational challenges. Consideration should be given to countries who are able to form Districts. Furthermore, the question is asked whether we should be continuing to use the term, District, or rather consider using the term “synod” instead, in order for us not to say a nation is a District of a church in another country. (2018 Yearbook, p.23.)

2.2. At the following Conference in 2018, a resolution was passed in which this proposed change of name was formally adopted. Resolution 34 of the 2018 Conference reads as follows:

“The term, District, has been in use for many years by Methodist Connexions. However, the word in its definition refers to a geographic portion of a country. In the case of the MCSA, what we refer to as Districts, includes whole countries, and the term suggests that one country is a District of another, which is not what the church means or wishes to communicate.”

Secondly, as the Church understands that its mission relates to areas of mission to be served by the church, delineated by missional possibilities and not geographic borders or boundaries, Conference resolves to replace the word District in the Laws and Discipline and move to the term Synod.” (2019 Yearbook, p.90.)

2.3. The adoption of this name change immediately introduced an element of confusion as to what exactly was being referenced by the term “Synod”, as well as a measure of practical and theological awkwardness in its usage. This led to the resolution of the 2019 Conference requesting input from DEWCOM that would help to guide further reflections of the church on this matter.



### 3. Observations

3.1. It is noted, with concern, that this seems to be an example of the MCSA making a decision without first considering the theological basis for doing so. That DEWCOM has now been asked to offer theological guidelines after the fact of the adoption of this name change speaks volumes about the processes and prioritization of theological reflection within the MCSA. Going forward, DEWCOM would urge a far greater vigilance in ensuring that any changes in the structures, practices, policies and usages of the MCSA receive proper theological scrutiny before being adopted and implemented.

3.2. A name change of Districts is no small matter. It has all kinds of implications and ramifications – financial, in terms of changing signage, letterheads, etc.; legal, requiring wholesale modifications to the Book of Order; theological, not least of which concerns our sense of corporate identity.

3.3. The primary motivation for this name change had to do with the inadequacies of the term “District” when applied to entire nations within the MCSA. This was stated in a single sentence in a report by the General Secretary, and then repeated in the resolution itself. This raises questions as to how serious and significant this difficulty really is, how widespread was the cry for a change, and whether this problem rises to the level where such a drastic and far-reaching remedy was required. It also needs to be noted that a premise in the resolution that “the term suggests that one country is a District of another” is flawed, in that the MCSA is the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, and not of any one nation.

3.4. While the main thrust of the resolution focused on the inadequacies of the term “District”, it would seem that little consideration was given to whether the proposed substitute – “Synod” – was indeed an appropriate and suitable alternative, especially with regards to its usual ecclesiastical usage and meaning.

### 4. Definitions, meaning and historical usage of the term “Synod”

4.1. The term “synod” is derived from the Greek *synodos* – meaning “meeting” or “assembly”. This Greek word is a combination of two further words, *syn* – meaning “together”, “with” or “in the company of”; and *hodos* → meaning “road”, “path” or “journey”. The literal meaning of *synodos*, therefore, is “the coming together of roads” or “the joining of paths”.

4.2. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary offers the following definition of “synod”:

“An assembly of the clergy of a particular church, nation, province, or diocese (sometimes with representatives of the laity) duly convened for discussing and deciding ecclesiastical affairs. In early use frequently applied to general councils.”

4.3. The Concise Oxford Dictionary offers this definition:

“synod n. ecclesiastical council attended by delegated clergy and sometimes laity.”

4.4. From the above definitions, and considering the ways in which the term has historically been used within the Church, a “synod” refers to an ecclesiastical meeting, assembly or council that is transitory (i.e. of limited duration), typically convened to decide issues of church doctrine, discipline, administration or application. This is consistent with the way in which the MCSA has always used the term – most commonly to refer to the annual gathering of clergy and lay leaders within a District, but also to refer to other transitory meetings, for example, Youth Synod or Education Synod (see the Highveld and Swaziland District Report, 2019 Yearbook, p.67).

## **5. Current usage of the term “Synod” in the MCSA**

The recent change of name of “District” to “Synod” within the MCSA has had the effect of replacing two distinct and differentiated terms (District and Synod), with one term (Synod), introducing an ambiguity in its meaning in the process. The context may well indicate whether the term is being used to refer to the geographic / missional area of a particular association of local Circuits under the oversight of a bishop, or to the annual gathering of clergy and certain laity within that geographic / missional area, but this is far from certain. The current usage introduces anomalies that could be the basis of confusion or even legal disputation. Consider the following examples:

- “While all Synod members are Synod members, not all Synod members are Synod members.”
- “When an election is to be held for a Presiding Bishop, the Synods shall all meet on the same day, as determined by the General Secretary. At a time set by the General Secretary the Synods shall vote by ballot, without nomination, for a Presiding Bishop.” (The Methodist Book of Order, Appendix 10, p.202.)

The example cited above from the Book of Order makes it clear that simply “[replacing] the word District in the Laws and Discipline (sic) and [moving] to the term Synod”, as envisaged by the 2018 Conference resolution, is not as simple and straightforward as it appears. At the very least, some method of distinguishing between the annual gathering and the geographic / missional area will be needed.

## **6. Comment**

The manner in which the MCSA has expanded the use of the term “Synod” to refer to what used to be called Districts represents a clear departure from the original meaning of the term and the manner in which it has always been used within an ecclesiastical context. While it is recognized that words and language do change and shift over time, it is questionable whether this change – effectively untethering the word “Synod” from its historical moorings – is really necessary or wise. This is even more pointed given that the MCSA is part of a mainline denomination and an ecumenical partner that seeks to honour the rich ecclesiastical traditions of which it is a part.

The above point, however, should not be overstated, and new meanings for established terminology can be countenanced, should it be deemed necessary. But careful consideration should be given to the merits and demerits of such changes. In the current

instance, the loss of a dedicated term to refer to the transitory, decision-making gatherings of the church, as well as the ambiguities in meaning introduced, suggest that the 2018 Conference decision to change the name of Districts to Synods should be revisited.

## **7. Possible Remedies**

The following suggestions are offered, in order of recommendation, as possible remedies for the problems mentioned above around the current ambiguous usage of the term “Synod”. Whichever option is preferred, it is essential to find a way of distinguishing between the geographic / missional area and the annual gathering within it.

### **7.1. Option 1: Rescind and revert to the former usage of Synod and District**

This would clarify the distinction between the annual gathering (Synod) and the geographic / missional area (District), but fails to remedy the difficulty whereby entire nations are referred to as Districts.

### **7.2. Option 2: Revert to the former usage of Synod and find a new term for District**

In other parts of the church, different terms are used to refer to what the MCSA has always called Districts. In the Episcopal tradition – “diocese”. In the Presbyterian tradition – “presbytery”. In the United Methodist Church – “Conference”. Two particular suggestions are offered that are worthy of consideration for the MCSA:

#### **7.2.1. Connexion.**

This term (with the original English spelling) has a rich Methodist heritage that speaks to the sense of community that is at the heart of our common life and shared witness. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary offers this definition: “A body, or circle of persons, connected together, or with whom one is connected by political, religious or commercial ties.”

The term “Connexion” is currently used to refer to the entire body of the MCSA. Should it be enlisted as the new name for District, the wider Connexion of the MCSA as a whole could then be referred to as the General Connexion. So, for example, one could say that the Limpopo Connexion is part of the General Connexion of the MCSA.

#### **7.2.2. Diocese**

This is a term familiar to the Episcopal / Anglican tradition. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary offers this definition: “The district under the pastoral care of a bishop; the sphere of jurisdiction of a bishop.”

Should either of the above suggestions be seriously considered, it is essential that more detailed theological reflection (which is beyond the scope of this paper) be undertaken of the implications of such a change, before being adopted.

### **7.3. Option 3: Retain the current usage of “Synod” to refer to the geographic / missional area, and use a modified term to refer to the annual gathering**

Possibilities for a modified term to refer to the annual gathering would include the following:

### 7.3.1. Annual Synod

So, for example, one could speak of the Annual Synod of the Limpopo Synod.

### 7.3.2. Synod Annual Meeting

Synods would therefore hold a Synod Annual Meeting, analogous to Circuits holding a Circuit Quarterly Meeting or Societies holding an Annual Society Meeting.

## **8. Conclusion**

DEWCOM is of the view that the 2018 Conference resolution regarding the change of name of District to Synod needs to be revisited, so as to deal with the anomalies and ambiguities that it has unwittingly introduced.

The remedies mentioned above have been presented in order of priority of DEWCOM's recommendation. Options 1 and 2 have the distinct advantage of retaining the historical, focused meaning of the term "Synod" that refers to a transitory meeting or assembly.

Option 3 has the advantage of making a relatively small adjustment, without the hassle (and financial expense) of having to backtrack on the implementation of this resolution that has already begun; but at the expense (and embarrassment) of using an established ecclesiastical term erroneously.

### APPENDIX 3

#### RE-AFFIRMATION OF THE TWOFOLD PATTERN OF ORDAINED MINISTRY WITHIN THE MCSA

DEWCOM receives with appreciation the 2019 Conference Resolution 12 on the Threefold Pattern of Ministry of Deacons, Presbyters, and Bishops, with the rescinding of the 2003 definition. The resolution reads;

“Conference acknowledges that the Theology of Ministry which was adopted in 2003 puts forward a threefold pattern of ministry (Deacon, Presbyter and Bishop) that is contrary to the twofold understanding of Ministry, Conference rescinds the 2003 definition and requests DEWCOM to make the appropriate doctrinal amendments as part of the discussion document for Conference 2020 .”

Given the current request by Conference for doctrinal amendments, DEWCOM requests a directive from Conference to explore and reflect on how the current practice of Ministry of Oversight within the MCSA Connexion has evolved since the inception of the Office of the District (Synod) Bishop in 1989, noting the marked and varied changes in our Southern African context over the past 31 years. The estimated time for this work would be two years. In the interim DEWCOM presents the following Statement on the Ministry of Oversight, which was reaffirmed by Conference in 2019, and reads as follows:

The ministry of oversight in the MCSA is understood to be exercised by an ordained presbyter of the MCSA with the duties and functions afforded to them with reference to the Laws and Discipline of the MCSA, para. 6.9-6.10. As Methodists, serving in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, we concur with Mr Wesley’s view as expressed in a letter to Francis Asbury, that the title “Bishop” should not be construed to imply an ecclesiastical office which represents an order of ministry that is superior to, or different in essence from, any other order of ministry, position or role in the life of the church. Resisting the temptation to create a superior and distinct order of ministry, namely episcopacy, the MCSA in 1989 implemented the renaming of the Office of the Chairman of the District to that of the Office of the District Bishop; and the Office of the President of Conference to that of the Office of the Presiding Bishop without the change of personal title from Reverend to either Bishop or Presiding Bishop. The terms “Bishop” and “Presiding Bishop” refer to the title of the office and not to that of the individual. By virtue of not being ordained to an order of ministry (specifically episcopacy) that is distinct from and superior to that of presbyter, the presbyter who serves in the Office of the District Bishop or that of the Presiding Bishop, does not occupy this role for life, but may be elected to this office by means of the stipulations as directed in the Laws and Discipline of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. Those who serve in the Offices of the District Bishop and the Presiding Bishop do so as pastors of the pastors, custodians of the doctrines, laws and disciplines of the MCSA, striving for Ecclesiastical unity, both inside the MCSA as well as with the broader ecumenical family.

(<http://mcsadewcom.blogspot.com/2012/08/statement-on-ministry-of-oversight.html>)

Please note the new address for this statement is (<https://www.smms.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Statement-on-the-ministry-of-oversight.pdf>)

DEWCOM further requests Conference to reaffirm the current definition and practice of the Twofold Pattern of Ordained Ministry within the MCSA, the ministry of Word and Sacraments, Presbyter, as found in chapter four of our Book of Order (2016), and Word and Service, Deacon, as found in chapter thirteen of our Book of Order (2016), and the respective works of these Orders of Ordained Ministry within the life of the Church, as set out by our current understanding as found within our Book of Order, 2016 edition.

DEWCOM notes the ongoing conversation as found in resolution 41 of Conference 2019, about the Synergising the Orders, and that this is an ongoing work, and advises Conference that the outcome of this work may directly impact on any doctrinal amendments or work thereon as it relates to our current definitions and practice of Orders of Ordained Ministry.

DEWCOM further commits to make this theology pattern of our ordained ministry of our programme for discussion and education in 2021.