

DEWCOM REPORT TO CONFERENCE 2024

CHAIR: REV DR SIDWELL MOKGOTHU

1. INTRODUCTION

DEWCOM members consider it an honour and privilege to serve as a coordinating and facilitative theological think tank for the Methodist Church. It is our understanding that our role is to read the signs of the time and discern areas of engagement for the Methodist Church and to also receive directives from the Church's leadership and structures. It remains our approach that whilst we will engage with theological issues, we have the responsibility to invite, coordinate and facilitate for all Methodist people to do the theologizing work itself. This will ensure that work produced by DEWCOM is critically engaged and owned by the MCSA.

It is DEWCOM's view that although it has the responsibility to lead and facilitate the theologising work, all Methodist Committees must make it their priority to engage their business theologically. The practice of making decisions and only asking DEWCOM after has been found to be flawed and not sustainable.

We have set ourselves commitments that we have made that we still to realise. These include sharpening our research capacity and developing our publishing capabilities. It is our intention that our work must be intellectually stimulating and accessible to ordinary church members.

DEWCOM has also chosen to take the responsibility to produce material that wrestle theologically with the Conference themes on an ongoing basis.

2. STATE OF THEOLOGY IN THE WORLD TODAY

DEWCOM continued with its new practice to invite Methodist colleagues in academia to present to us theological discourses and trends in the world. It is now planned to extend the practice to our ecumenical friends.

This year's presenter, Rev Prof Simanga Kumalo submitted that the world of theology is a contested terrain and the uniqueness of Methodist contribution is important in that context. He argued that there is need for Methodists need for us to revisit and improve on our knowledge of Wesley within the Connexion. This will assist us to be clear on why we choose to be Methodist and what our unique offering in ecumenical settings. We follow Jesus Christ in the company of Mr Wesley. We will have to take the work of how we adapt Wesleyan theology to our local context so that it speaks to people in every situation.

Prof Kumalo went to further to identify where we need to apply Wesley in our context:

- 2.1. **African Wesleyan Theology:** We are in a context where the centre of gravity of Christianity has shifted into Africa. The outside world is waiting for a sensible teaching and theological reflection on what it means to be a Methodist in the 21st Century in Africa. The discussion on Ukuthwasa is one such means to help us to engage about what it means to being an African. We should continue with this

discussion not only to come up with resolutions and then quickly run into other discussions.

2.2. Theology of Chaplaincy: is also relevant in our context as it focuses on the theology of presence in different circumstances, contexts, as required by people. What does a Wesleyan ministry of chaplaincy look like in action? What is the Wesleyan value that our chaplains add to the contexts in which they serve?

2.3. Theology of the Environment: is critical in our discourse today. All creation is the Lord's, and we are responsible for how we use it, and we should not abuse it. Humanity is not at the centre of creation but part of creation.

2.4. Theology of Connexionality: We work together as members of this family. We should not allow ourselves to be divided on issues of geography etc. We have a commitment to remain together as family, even with our differences.

One of the key assertions that Prof Kumalo made is that: The church always assumes that prophecy should always be directed to the world and not to the church itself. There's need for the church to hear prophets who address it because prophetic theology is as crucial to the church as it is to the world.

3. CONTINUED WORK ON UKUTHWASA

DEWCOM hosted a webinar on the experiences of Methodists who are practising Sangomas. This was a panel included a clergy, a leader in the Women's Manyano and daughter of a Methodist minister who is also a leader in the Young Women's Manyano. The webinar was designed to provide safe space for these practitioners to be vulnerable to share their calling, their struggles, ill-treatment and the kind of pastoral support they need from the church. Although there was minimal abuse in the social media, there was general appreciation that these are, no doubt, Christians who are committed to the Lord Jesus Christ.

In response to the 2023 Conference, DEWCOM went on to call for written papers on the phenomenon of Ukuthwasa and traditional healing for publication.

The rationale for the papers are to:

- Deepen our Christian engagement with culture and African traditional wisdom
- Enrich theological discernment and guide ministry and pastoral responses
- Contribute to a resource for understanding the healing practices in Southern Africa

The Sub-Committee has received 17 papers that are diverse and of different quality. The team is in the process of editing these and exploring publishing options for them. The appointed editors will use the DEWCOM Covenant as the framework for engaging and honouring the received materials.

DEWCOM Secretary, Rev Luvuyo Sifo was invited to an interview presentation on *Ukuthwasa* by Radio Pulpit. Rev Dr Sam Dipali also presented did a virtual presentation on the subject titled: *Mollo wa Badimo*.

4. TIMELINE OF THE LGBTIAQ+ CONVERSATION

DEWCOM appreciates that there is now a new committee led by the Presiding Bishop on the focus of LGBTIAQ+. DEWCOM has however, as part of its advocacy on its previous work, produced a pamphlet on the timeline of the LGBTIAQ+ Conversations within the MCSA [See Appendix 1]. The purpose of this publication is to appreciate the amount of work that has been done before and to keep the conversation going. It is DEWCOM's view that while the pace on critical theological issues like that of the LGBTIAQ+, that sustained consistency in the theological work done must never be underestimated.

There are plans to explore a possible new edition of the resource: "In Search of Grace and Truth." The new edit should not just be a reproduction of the old material but should possibly incorporate new ideas and information. This idea will be explored with the Committee on LGBTIAQ+.

5. POLICY ON CLERICAL VESTMENTS

DEWCOM received a snap report of presentations that were made in some of the district Presbyters Convocations. There were differing responses to the document where some districts did not discuss it, others just acknowledged it. In some districts, there were calls for the vestments to be decolonised. Another district called for plainness and simplicity in line with Methodist tradition. We were also sensitised to the need to consider and keep in sync with the Church Unity Commission stance on liturgical provisions. It was raised that there also need to consider the inclusion of lay insignia for office in the document.

6. CARE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

DEWCOM has set up a Sub-Committee to focus on the Care of Creation. A member of the Sub-Committee, Rev Pierre Naude shared on his Masters Thesis Titled: River of Life: River of Death. It focused on.....The Sub-Committee is developing a discussion paper on the theology of care of creation as foundation for Methodist engagement. We were advised that rather than re-inventing the wheel, DEWCOM note and appreciate the work of the Church Unity Commission work on the Season of Creation.

7. ECUMENICAL INVITE

The chair of DEWCOM was invited by the leadership of the Ethiopian Episcopal Church to present to their clergy workshop on both *Ukuthwasa* and the LGBTIAQ+. DEWCOM is thankful to the Revs Sifiso Khuzwayo and Themhani Ngcayisa who availed themselves on the two topics.

8. CONCLUSION

DEWCOM is conscious of the changing world and the need for Church and its theologians to equip itself and develop a theology that is adequately responsive to the world. There is need to also harvest the research outputs – academic articles and theses by Methodists

9. NOMINATION OF COMMITTEE MEMBERS FOR 2023

Rev Dr Sidwell Mokgothu (Chairperson), Rev Luvuyo Sifo (secretary), Rev Christopher Gaya (Bishop – new member) Rev Maria Mucamba (Bishop – new member), Rev Prof Wessel Bentley, Rev Dr Vusi Vilakati, Rev Dr Roger Scholtz, Rev Raymond Keet (Ecumenical Affairs Unit), Rev Ralph Afghan, Mr Peter Frow, Ms Matsela Kolisang-Tjama, Ms Olorato Bonyongo, Ms Jessie Paremore Hikwa, Rev Obusitswe Tiroyabone (SMMS Rep), New EMMU Director), Rev Nozipho Mcineka, Rev Pierre Naude, Rev Tim Attwell, Rev Xolisani Silolo, Rev Vuyelwa Ntshinga, Rev Mantima Thekiso and Rev Jacob Mokhutso.

APPENDIX 1

A TIMELINE OF THE LGBTIAQ+ CONVERSATION WITHIN THE MCSA AND DEWCOM'S CONTRIBUTION TO IT

1. THE YEAR 2000

At the October 2000 meetings of the Connexional Executive, it was agreed that the Doctrine Committee be renamed the Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee (*2000/2001 Yearbook*, para. 21.6, p.279). The CE further referred to this committee, for consideration and report, the matter of Same Gender Marriages (*2000/2001 Yearbook*, para.27.16, p.283).

2. THE YEAR 2001

At the 2001 Conference (held in Port Elizabeth), DEWCOM presented a brief 2-page pink paper sketching some of the work it had begun on questions relating to Christians and same-sex relationships. Conference mandated DEWCOM to continue this work, and endorsed the concluding sentence of that paper as a foundational principle to guide the way forward – that as a church “...we are required to be a community of love rather than of rejection.”

3. THE YEAR 2002

At the April 2002 DEWCOM meetings, a draft report from the KZN Working Group – who had been tasked with preparing a discussion document on same-sex relationships – was received and robustly critiqued. (*2003 Yearbook*, para. 17.2, p.331.) Further engagement with this developing material happened at the September 2002 and April 2003 DEWCOM meetings, in preparation for the 2003 Conference.

4. THE YEAR 2003

At the 2003 Conference (held in Pretoria), DEWCOM presented a 38-page discussion guide entitled “*Christians and same-sex relationships: A discussion guide for the Methodist people of Southern Africa.*” Conference received this document, referred it to the church for discussion, directed DEWCOM to prepare a shorter summary document as a guide to the full document for CQM’s, and mandated DEWCOM to receive the responses and develop a formal position paper for presentation to Conference 2005. (*2004 Yearbook*, Resolution 53, p.74.)

After Conference, DEWCOM added a summary, as directed by Conference; some guidelines and suggested strategies for using the discussion guide in Districts, Circuits and Societies; and other appendices to aid and enable the church's theological engagement with this material. This fuller 56-page document was then distributed electronically throughout the Connexion.

5. THE YEAR 2004

At the October 2004 DEWCOM meetings it was noted that in the diverse responses to the Discussion Guide received thus far, the manner in which the Bible is read and used within this debate was clearly a point of divergence amongst members of the MCSA. The ongoing task of receiving and collating responses continued, as well as discussion regarding the position paper to be presented to the 2005 Conference.

6. THE YEAR 2005

6.1. At the April 2005 DEWCOM meetings, a paper was tabled entitled "A discussion of submissions and recommendations for the Conference report relating to same-sex relationships and the Methodist Church of Southern Africa." This formed the basis of a preliminary report that would be sent to Synods for further engagement in anticipation of the position paper that would be presented to Conference later that year.

6.2. A preliminary report from DEWCOM was distributed to Synods for their discussion, engagement and further response.

6.3. At the 2005 Conference (held in September in Johannesburg), with regard to the same-sex debate, Conference resolved "...not [to] attempt to arrive at finality or legislate on this matter at this stage," and committed the MCSA "...to an ongoing journey of discovering what it means to be part of the church which embraces many different and even opposing views, on this issue." Conference further resolved that "DEWCOM produce workshop material for congregations in which the issues surrounding same sex orientation and practice are studied from different perspectives that represent the feedback that has been received thus far," and expressed the hope that the process of further engagement with this issue would "...challenge us and enable us all to be moved by the love of Christ to remain one body which, far from being divided, is enriched and strengthened by the differing views and perspectives of its members." (*2006 Yearbook*, Resolution 8, pp.75-76.)

7. THE YEAR 2006

- 7.1.** At the April 2006 DEWCOM meetings, discussion began regarding the production of workshop material as directed by the 2005 Conference.
- 7.2.** In August 2006, the Connexional Executive “reaffirmed the 2005 Conference resolutions on the same sex debate...and directed that until Conference has pronounced on the matter, the MCSA continues to recognise marriage as only between a man and a woman. Ministers were urged to refrain from officiating at same-sex unions.” (2007 Yearbook, CE Resolution 4, p.50.)
- 7.3.** At the October 2006 DEWCOM meetings, five ministers known to represent widely diverse points of view on the matter of same-sex relationships were invited to make presentations to a round table discussion on the subject. A summary of this round table discussion was published in the December 2006 edition of *New Dimension*.
- 7.4.** On 30 November 2006, within the Republic of South Africa, the Civil Union Act came into effect, enabling persons of the same sex to enter into a civil union / marriage.

8. THE YEAR 2007

- 8.1.** In May 2007 DEWCOM organised a two-day planning and writing workshop at Jacob’s Well in KZN, which became the basis for the 2010 publication *In search of grace and truth: Christian conversations on same-sex relationships*.
- 8.2.** The 2007 Conference (held in September in Cape Town) directed DEWCOM to convene a meeting “...to consider the wide spectrum of viewpoints on the civil unions of same-sex couples,” and recognised “...that any decision and subsequent action on the issue of civil unions between same-sex partners must await the outcome of the ongoing process of engagement as specified by Conference 2005...and, in the interim, expects Methodist ministers to continue to offer pastoral care to homosexual individuals.” (2008 Yearbook, para. 2.5.1, pp.81-82.) Conference decided “...not to apply [for the MCSA] to be a designated denomination to officiate in civil unions in the current context.” (2008 Yearbook, p.64.)

9. THE YEAR 2008

- 9.1.** In its 2008 report to Conference, DEWCOM acknowledged that a theology of Christian marriage is a key issue in the matters relating to human sexuality currently

facing the church, and indicated its intention to set up a study group to produce material on the topic. (2009 Yearbook, p.229.)

- 9.2.** In October 2008, DEWCOM organised a three-day meeting in Paarl, Cape Province, to facilitate engagement and dialogue across a wide spectrum of viewpoints on the civil unions of same-sex couples.

10. THE YEAR 2009

Other than ongoing work within DEWCOM on the study material, and the announcement on 15 December 2009 by Rev Ecclesia de Lange of her intention to enter into a same-sex civil union, there were no other significant developments in this conversation in the MCSA in 2009.

11. THE YEAR 2010

- 11.1.** Following the disciplinary action instituted against the Rev Ecclesia de Lange for publicly announcing her intention to enter into a civil union with her same-sex partner, DEWCOM adopted, as its response, a 'General statement on the MCSA position with regards to the same-sex debate.' (DEWCOM Minutes, 3-4 March 2010.)
- 11.2.** In September 2010, DEWCOM published the study book *In search of grace and truth: Christian conversations on same-sex relationships*, which was adopted by Conference as a discussion document of the MCSA and referred to the Methodist people for their study and response.
- 11.3.** The 2010 Conference (held in September in East London) adopted a lengthy resolution on the same-sex debate that offered a broad overview of this conversation in the MCSA over the prior 10 years, and the position of the MCSA that had emerged over this time, namely that:
- the MCSA is seeking to be a community of love rather than rejection;
 - the MCSA celebrates the diversity of conviction within the church around same-sex relationships as a challenging but potentially life-giving gift;
 - the MCSA calls for an ongoing process of respectful dialogue and truthful engagement between those holding differing views, not with the intention of ultimately having one mind on this issue, which is unlikely, but rather to come to a deepened understanding of what it means to be the one body of Christ;
 - the MCSA takes seriously its ongoing pastoral responsibility to homosexual people.

In light of the above, the 2010 Conference noted that:

- The MCSA is, *de facto*, a church with divergent convictions on this issue that have theological integrity;
- There is a current theological inconsistency within the MCSA where it allows this divergence of conviction to be held without the freedom for such divergence of conviction to be exercised;

and resolved that concrete suggestions be brought to the 2012 Conference "...as to how the MCSA can create the space for such divergence of conviction to be exercised in ways that will preserve the integrity and unity of the church." (2011 Yearbook, para. 2.27, pp.105-106.)

12. THE YEAR 2011

In its 2011 report to Conference, DEWCOM noted that relatively few copies of *In search of grace and truth* had been purchased, and appealed to Conference that the MCSA should purchase a copy of the book for each minister in the Connexion. (2012 Yearbook, p.218.)

13. THE YEAR 2012

13.1. In response to the directive for concrete suggestions to be brought to the 2012 Conference about creating space for the divergence of conviction to be exercised, DEWCOM submitted a substantial paper to the 2012 Conference (held in Swaziland) offering thoughts and guidance in this regard. Unfortunately, this submission was not included in the 2013 Yearbook. [A modified and updated version of this paper was presented to the 2013 Conference, but again it was not included in the 2014 Yearbook. The 2012 and 2013 DEWCOM reports simply reference these documents, stating that they are available on the DEWCOM blogspot. (2013 Yearbook, p.205; 2014 Yearbook, p. 215.) This problematic and frustrating outcome led to an intentional change in strategy from 2014 whereby the DEWCOM report to Conference would be more substantial, ensuring that critical material would be included and preserved in the Yearbook.]

13.2. The 2012 Conference extended to 2014 the directive for suggestions to be brought whereby our divergence of conviction regarding same-sex relationships can be exercised. It further mandated the MCO to make financial resources available whereby the study book *In search of grace and truth* could be more widely disseminated. (2013 Yearbook, Resolution 30, p.84.)

13.3. In October 2012, DEWCOM hosted a two-day Conference on Family Life, held at SMMS in Pietermaritzburg, where a range of different papers were presented by clergy, laity and academics. These included a number of papers dealing with marriage and new ways of understanding it within our changing world.

14. THE YEAR 2013

14.1. DEWCOM made a further submission to the 2013 Conference (held in Mthatha), as referenced in 13.1 above.

14.2. The 2013 Conference passed a resolution condemning “the continued violence against gay and lesbian people because of their sexual orientation.” (2014 Yearbook, para. 2.20, p.91.)

15. THE YEAR 2014

15.1. In 2014 the study book *In search of grace and truth* was translated into Siswati – available in electronic format.

15.2. DEWCOM’s 2014 report to Conference included a profession of the MCSA’s unity and diversity within the context of the Church’s conversation on same-sex relationships. This was adopted by Conference. Some of the key paragraphs at the heart of that profession included the following:

- *Among us are those who believe that the Bible is clear in its condemnation of all homosexual acts as contrary to the will of God. Also among us are those who believe that the Bible does not condemn all homosexual acts, namely those between two consenting adults in a mutually loving, faithful and committed relationship.*
- *Among us are those who believe that the biblical norm for marriage is between one man and one woman only and that any deviation from this pattern is against the express will of God. Also among us are those who believe that God’s primary concern is for the quality of our loving, and that two people of the same gender who truly love each other can enter into the bonds of marriage with the blessing of God and the Church.*
- *Among us are those who believe that those in loving, faithful and committed same-sex relationships can serve as leaders of the Church and be ordained as ministers of the gospel. Also among us are those who believe that those in such relationships cannot serve in these ways.*

- *All of us believe that the Church is called to be a community of love and not rejection with a responsibility to extend pastoral care to all people irrespective of their sexual orientation, and that no-one should be excluded from any aspect of the Church's life and ministry solely on the basis of their sexual orientation.*
- *We believe that any form of victimisation, hatred or violence towards homosexual people should be condemned in the strongest possible terms. (2015 Yearbook, p.221-222.)*

15.3. It should be noted that the directive from the 2010 Conference, that concrete suggestions be brought to the 2012 Conference regarding the exercise of divergent convictions around same-sex relationships in the MCSA, subsequently deferred to the 2014 Conference, was not dealt with in any way by the 2014 Conference.

16. THE YEAR 2015

In the 2015 DEWCOM report to Conference, it was noted that the original print run of *In search of grace and truth* was nearly sold out, and the MCO was requested to make arrangements for a second print run which would incorporate the Profession of Faith adopted by the 2014 Conference. (2016 Yearbook, p.251.) Unfortunately this never happened.

17. THE YEAR 2016

DEWCOM tabled an extensive 14-page report on the theology of marriage at the 2016 Conference. Unfortunately, it failed to find its way onto the agenda of that Conference.

18. THE YEAR 2017

18.1. The 2017 DEWCOM report to Conference included a substantial section entitled "Continuing the LGBTIQ conversation," which included a comprehensive overview of the MCSA's engagement with this matter over the past fourteen years. (2018 Yearbook, pp.288-291.)

18.2. DEWCOM also tabled three LGBTIQ-related resolutions at the 2017 Conference (held in Randburg):

- Hate crimes against LGBTIQ persons (accepted by Conference).
- Freedom of conscience for ministers to exercise pastoral care to LGBTIQ persons (received by Conference and referred to CQM's and Synods 2018).

- Creating a safer space for LGBTIQ voices to be heard within the MCSA (accepted by Conference). (*2018 Yearbook*, paras. 2.32-2.34, pp.102-104.)

18.3. A further resolution entitled “The administering of ceremonies of blessing for same-sex civil union couples” was received by Conference 2017 and referred to CQM’s and Synods 2018. (*2018 Yearbook*, para. 2.31, p.102.)

19. THE YEAR 2018

The 2017 Conference resolutions on the freedom of conscience for ministers to exercise pastoral care to LGBTIQ persons, and the administering of ceremonies of blessing for same-sex civil union couples, which were referred to CQM’s and 2018 Synods, failed to make their way back on to the 2018 Conference agenda.

20. THE YEAR 2019

20.1. The 2019 Conference (held in Cape Town) directed the Office of the Presiding Bishop to set up a LGBTIAQ+ Community Task Team “...to prioritise the voices of [this] marginalised group... to listen, pastorally support and advocate for all affected persons.” (*2020 Yearbook*, Resolution 6, p.96.)

20.2. The 2019 Conference noted “the work done by DEWCOM on an understanding of Christian marriage; and [referred] the matter back to DEWCOM to formulate a document for engagement at the 2020 Conference.” (*2020 Yearbook*, Resolution 5, pp.95-96.)

20.3. The 2019 Conference received a resolution entitled “Legal rights of LGBTQI Methodists,” and referred it to Synods for discussion and to feedback to Conference 2020 for decision. The nub of the resolution states “...that while the MCSA continues its development [of] a theology of marriage, no citizen of a country within the Connexion that allows Civil Unions, shall be prevented from entering into a legal Civil Union Partnership, which may include opposite sex couples or same-sex couples, presided over by an official of the department of Home Affairs, Magistrate or other official representing the countries within the Connexion that allow Civil Unions.” (*2020 Yearbook*, Resolution 20, pp.99-100.)

21. THE YEAR 2020

21.1. DEWCOM requested a deferral to the 2021 Conference of the directive to develop a discussion document on the MCSA’s theology of marriage. (*2021 Yearbook*, p.248; see point 20.2 above.)

21.2. The 2020 Connexional Executive, dealing with the essential business of Conference due to the suspension of Conference because of the COVID-19 pandemic, confirmed that the majority of Synods agreed to the referred resolution entitled “Legal rights of LGBTQI Methodists” (see 20.3 above). This has the effect of saying that the church will not prevent any LGBTQI Methodist within the MCSA from entering into a legal Civil Union Partnership.

21.3. The Connexional LGBTIAQ Task Team began its life and work in 2020. Its initial report, which details the multi-faceted purpose of the task team, can be found in the *2021 Yearbook*, pp.272-273.

22. THE YEAR 2021

22.1. The development of a discussion document on Christian marriage (see 20.2 and 21.1 above) was referred to the Committee on Marriage and Family Life.

22.2. The LGBTIAQ+ Standing Committee continued its work, which included the launch of various digital platforms. (*2022 Yearbook*, pp.314-318.)

23. THE YEAR 2022

23.1. Members of DEWCOM were invited to participate with others in a dialogue with St Stithians College on issues of gender identity and inclusion in a Christian school. (*2023 Yearbook*, p.289.)

23.2. The 2022 Conference (held in a hybrid manner in Pietermaritzburg and 15 satellite District venues) passed a resolution entitled “Recognition and Officiating of Civil Unions.” It acknowledged “...the protracted period of time the MCSA has been in dialogue on human sexuality in general and the conducting of civil unions in particular,” and so resolved “...to place the matter of same sex marriage on the agenda urgently, and undertake that a decision on whether to officially allow MCSA ministers to officiate at same sex marriages be made....at the ensuing Conference.” (*2023 Yearbook*, Resolution 43, p.120.)

23.3. The 2022 Conference directed “...the LGBTIAQ+ Standing Committee in partnership with DEWCOM to produce standardised resources which would provide a framework for discussion and teaching around sexuality, sex and gender,” especially for pre-teens, teenagers and young adults. (*2023 Yearbook*, Resolution 35, p.116.)

24. THE YEAR 2023

24.1. The 2022 Conference Resolution 35 on the production of resources for teaching around sexuality, sex and gender (see 23.3 above) is directed to the LGBTIAQ+ Standing Committee as the primary responsible party. DEWCOM'S involvement will be determined by that team.

24.2. DEWCOM undertook to compile a timeline of the LGBTIAQ+ conversation within the MCSA since the year 2000 and the work that has been produced by DEWCOM up to this point. (DEWCOM Minutes, 7-8 February 2023.)

Compiled by DEWCOM