

DEWCOM submission to Conference 2012 on the same-sex debate

1. Pre-amble

At the 2010 Conference of the MCSA, an extensive resolution on the same-sex debate was adopted (*Yearbook 2011*, para.2.27, pp.104-106) that consisted of four broad elements:

1. It offered a summary of all the Conference resolutions that have been adopted on this issue since 2001.
2. It re-affirmed the MCSA's position that has emerged over the past decade of engagement with this issue which states that the MCSA is seeking to be a community of love rather than rejection; recognizes and celebrates the diversity of conviction within the church when it comes to same-sex relationships; seeks ongoing respectful dialogue between those holding differing views within the one body of Christ; and takes seriously the church's ongoing pastoral responsibility to homosexual people (*Yearbook 2011*, para.2.27, p.105).
3. It highlighted the current theological inconsistency within the MCSA where divergence of conviction is allowed without the freedom for such divergence of conviction to be exercised (*Yearbook 2011*, para.2.27, p.106).
4. It referred the bible-study material entitled '*In search of grace and truth: Christian conversations on same-sex relationships*' to the Methodist people for their study and response, with the directive that concrete suggestions be brought by districts to Conference 2012 as to how the divergence of conviction within the church on this issue can be exercised in ways that will preserve the integrity and unity of the church.

2. Recommendations

DEWCOM notes with concern that the dissemination of the resource booklet '*In search of grace and truth*' has been extremely limited. Furthermore, it would appear that very few districts have actively engaged this material, and consequently are not in a position to bring the kind of suggestions to Conference 2012 that the Conference 2010 resolution envisaged.

1. DEWCOM therefore recommends that the 2010 directive be extended for an additional period of two years until the Conference of 2014.
2. DEWCOM requests Conference to mandate the financial resources necessary to ensure a far wider dissemination of the booklet throughout the MCSA.
3. DEWCOM urges Conference to hold districts accountable for doing all that is needed to bring the concrete suggestions that Conference requires.

3. Observations

As one of the entities within the MCSA that continues to engage the issue of same-sex relationships rigorously, DEWCOM offers the following observations for the church's consideration:

Where we are at present on this issue as the MCSA

- i) While much has been said about the differences of opinion within the MCSA on this issue, it is important to recognize that there is significant common ground that is shared by those on opposing sides of this debate. This common ground includes the following:
 - The conviction of the authority of Scripture.
 - The conviction that sexual orientation (be it heterosexual or homosexual) is not grounds for anyone to be excluded from membership, leadership or the ordained ministry within the MCSA.
 - The conviction that any form of casual, promiscuous or predatory sexual behavior (be it heterosexual or homosexual) is totally unacceptable and contrary to the gospel of Christ.
 - In the light of the social alienation and discrimination that many homosexual people experience in Southern Africa, the church has a particular responsibility to be extending Christ-like compassion and pastoral care to homosexual people.
- ii) One of the main points of divergence between those on opposing sides of this debate is whether or not homosexual people in permanent, faithful, monogamous relationships can be admitted into membership, leadership or the ordained ministry of the MCSA.
- iii) Other significant points of divergence are whether the church can bless same-sex unions; and whether Methodist ministers can officiate at civil unions of same-sex couples.
- iv) There are many societies and circuits within the MCSA that have yet to begin discussing same-sex relationships, in spite of repeated directives from Conference over the past number of years that the Methodist people engage this issue and utilize the various discussion and study resources that have been made available to do so. Ministers and lay leaders need to be encouraged and equipped to ensure that throughout the Connexion this issue is engaged.

Some of the possible implications of creating space within the MCSA for a divergence of conviction on the issue of same-sex relationships to be expressed

- i) There will not be uniformity of practice throughout the MCSA on this issue if the space is truly created for divergent convictions within our church to be freely exercised. In some parts of the church there will be greater or lesser expressions of acceptance towards gay and lesbian people than in other parts. Far from being a weakness, this can be a bold witness of the MCSA's commitment to live out the meaning of our unity in Christ in the face of a potentially divisive issue.
- ii) The local church – at society and circuit level – will be the principal arena wherein the practical expression of divergent convictions will have to be worked out. The relationships of trust and collegiality amongst those who worship and serve together are best suited to manage the demands of this process.
- iii) Should space be created within the MCSA for divergent convictions to be expressed, no minister should be forced to act contrary to his or her conscience on this issue if the integrity and unity of the church is to be preserved.
- iv) The need for respectful dialogue and truthful engagement will be an ongoing imperative. There is no substitute for the challenging and often uncomfortable task of listening deeply to the stories of others, especially those with whom we disagree, and then courageously sharing our own. To this end, the booklet *'In search of grace and truth'* is an important resource which models the kind of respectful dialogue which is required. Every effort should be made to ensure that this resource is used as extensively as possible throughout the Connexion.
- v) Those who insist that the MCSA must abandon its current position in favour of an unequivocal stance either for or against the full inclusion of gay and lesbian members are at odds with the overall tenor of the MCSA's deliberations on this issue over the past decade. The unique opportunity being presented by this particular issue is for the church to model a boldly inclusive ecclesiology whereby the space is created for diverse convictions to be exercised.

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4. Conclusion

If the MCSA is serious about allowing the expression of diverse convictions on the issue of same-sex relationships, it needs to accept that such a move will not be without considerable difficulty and pain. The ongoing process of societies, circuits and districts engaging this issue with honesty and integrity will require much humility, forbearance and prayer. Mistakes will certainly be made and injuries inflicted. There will be those on both sides of the debate that will accuse the church of compromising the values of the Kingdom. In the midst of it all will be real women and men whose sense of place and belonging within the church will rest crucially on the sorts of decisions that are made.

Challenging though this task before us may be, the opportunity that it presents is truly immense. In a world increasingly characterized by sectarian intolerance, we can offer a life-giving witness as to the true nature of Christian unity – a unity that is not devoid of disagreement or divergence, but rather seeks to make space for the disturbing other. Such a radical hospitality of the spirit will surely open us to the sacred in our midst, and will enable the common life we share together as the body of Christ to point more faithfully to the exquisite beauty of an infinite God in whose image we have all been made.