

Episcopal Address (2020)

My dear co-workers, delegates in Christ,

Peace and joy to you in the Lord!

Thank God for His favour and protection that we still have the breath of life to attend this year's Annual Conference session. Even though we could not physically gather all the delegates to have our meeting at one place, we are glad that we could make use of the online platform to hold this meeting to discuss and to plan for the direction of the coming year. This year, we have no choice but to use online platforms regularly to hold Sunday Services, small group bible study meetings, prayer meetings, special seminars and all other meetings. Usually the usage of online platforms will be less than two to three hours. However, in this two-day conference, we shall be having a continuous seven to eight hours of online meeting daily, which may be tiring to all. I hope all co-workers and delegates will be patient and conduct various discussions in a gentle atmosphere.

The year 2020 is a very special year. Society has been greatly hit and affected by the raging of the new Coronavirus. Likewise, our personal lives, work, and ministry have also faced numerous challenges and every family too is dealing with pressures and anxiety. When the state leader issued a ban on movement, churches could not hold physical worship services. CMCA churches immediately made arrangements to utilise online platforms to carry out Sunday Services, prayer meetings, small group bible studies, Sunday Schools, etc. Some members have told to me that the use of online platforms for gathering is very well received and very convenient, as they do not need to worry about contracting Coronavirus through physical contact with others. Some believers found the online gatherings beneficial as they could attend several worship sessions in a day. Besides, they could also go online at any time convenient to them and attend whichever church that has their preferred music or preaching by pastors of their choice. For me, such thoughts may be based on own interests and preferences. In the long term, would it affect our sense of commitment to the church to which we belong, and would we feel distanced from our fellow brothers and sisters in our church?

Christian life is about being committed to our Lord. It also involves being committed to the Church of Christ. Paul in Romans 12:4-5 said "For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." Any organ that leaves the body would lose its original purpose and will quickly deplete and die. The same is true for Christians who do not commit to a particular church. Paul, in Ephesians 2:19, reminds us that we are "fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household." We need to commit ourselves to the local church family and to recognise that this local church is our spiritual home, otherwise we would not be able to experience the reality that the church is God's household. As such, I call on all CMCA believers to quickly return to physical Sunday Services, when the government stipulates that we can have gatherings of 50, 100 or more people. Regardless how the situation may change in the future, we should all be loyal to what God has entrusted us with and, together, build a church that is after God's own heart.

I. Building a church after God's own heart

In last year's Episcopal Address, I mentioned the five characteristics of a church that is after God's own heart, namely a church that pursues unity in one spirit; a church that prays together in one spirit; a church that cultivates disciples; a church that lives out the love of God; and a church that is actively involved in global missions. I have also proposed some practical steps.

I hope that all pastors and church leaders could use these characteristics as guides to pursue our churches' ministries. What performance or progress have our churches made in these areas this year?

In the pursuit of unity, are we more united in one spirit among our pastors and pastors, pastors and stewards, stewards and stewards, and brothers and sisters' relationship? Did we take the time to quiet ourselves before our God, reflect and review our motive in serving God, as well as reviewing our behaviour and dealings with others? Beside these, did we earnestly familiarize ourselves with our Book of Discipline? I would like to thank District Superintendent Rev Dr. Albert Chiew for explaining the Book of Discipline to the pastors, stewards and members of the Australian West District on 17th – 18th July at Grace MC. I hope that all the co-workers and leaders of CMCA will handle their church affairs in accordance to the principles in the Bible and the provisions in the Book of Discipline, so that it is easier to reach a consistent action and direction.

In the aspect of praying together in one spirit, is there any improvement in our personal prayer life, or prayer time with our family members? Has the number of attendees to our church prayer meetings increased? Due to the pandemic, our church prayer meetings have been conducted on the online platforms. Generally, there is a significant rise in the number of attendees, which is a good phenomenon. I hope that through the breakout rooms function of Zoom, the prayer meeting attendees could be divided into smaller groups, so that they could share their personal prayer items, and then intercede for each other or pray in turn. The Australian West District has organised Combined District Prayer Meeting twice. What a marvellous gathering! I hope that other churches in the same city or same district would be willing to do the same.

In the aspect of cultivating disciples, was our plan unable to proceed as scheduled due to the pandemic? Many churches did not promote the Red, Green, Purple and Gold Discipleship trainings. Under the current government's restriction order, the traditional way of evangelising and cultivating new believers as disciples could not proceed as planned. As such, we have to look for new avenues on how to share the gospel during pandemic and pay serious attention to the ministry of discipling new believers. Today's Christians could grab the opportunity to provide comfort and positive messages to those who are in the state of hesitation, frustration, lost, panic and introduce them to God's gospel. Christians could still take part in discipleship training through online platforms.

In the aspect of living out the love of God, did our church care for those who are in need? During the pandemic, even though we could not physically visit members who are in need, I do know of some pastors who used phone calls to contact and encourage their members. I hope next year our Board of Christian Social Concern could implement the plan to set up Methodist Care Centre or community services in our community, which could not be implemented this year.

In the aspect of global missions, due to the pandemic, the one-and-a-half-day Mission Camp planned by the Board of Missions, for implementation by the District Commissions on Missions, could not proceed as planned. A lot of plans for overseas short mission trips were cancelled too. The Board of Missions is hoping that next year the "Kairos" Course on Missions or the "Challenging Visions" Course on Missions could be organised to equip our believers to be 'World Christians'. Originally, a missionary was preparing to set off for the mission field. However, his departure was also delayed due to the pandemic. I pray that God would raise more missionaries in CMCA.

II. Rethinking the sub-themes of 2019-2020

1. 2019 – "Abiding in the Lord to bear much fruit"

In last year's Episcopal Address, I mentioned that to build a church that is after God's own heart will have to start with connecting our lives with God. Jesus has commanded us to abide in him, so as to bear much fruit. I have also stated that we should allow the word of the Lord and the love of the Lord to fill our lives, so that we could live out a good testimony. Only by consistently establishing a good relationship with our Lord Jesus in our daily lives, could we live a life for God, bear much fruit, lead a victorious Christian life abundantly, glorifying God and benefiting others.

“Abiding in the Lord to bear much fruit” is not only the objective for year 2019, but also a spiritual exercise that Christians should pay attention to in their lives. In addition to maintaining time with our Lord Jesus (to read, meditate on God's words, concentrate on seeking God's will), we should also yearn to be filled with the Holy Spirit, put to death the weaknesses of the old self, so that we can love another in the community of Christians, and also live out God's love in the society.

A good relationship with God is the foundation of our faith. God wants us to be disciples after God's own heart in our family, society, the world (to the ends of the earth). Therefore, we have to “build healthy families to serve the Lord”, “care for the community to reach the lost”, and also “equip the church to engage with cross-cultural missions”.

2. 2020 – “Building healthy families to serve the Lord”

The church is made of many family units. If the family units are healthy, the church will also be after God's own heart. A “healthy family unit” is a God-centred family, a Christian family that follows the biblical principles, and the whole family serves the Lord together.

In February this year, the Australian South District organised a one-day seminar at Glory MC entitled “Rebuild the Family Ministry, Revive the Church”, with a total of 4 lectures by Brother Chiong Siong Khai. The attendees benefitted greatly from the seminar. Subsequently, due to the pandemic, another seminar in April and the Marriage Enrichment Camp were cancelled, and various family camps and church camps by local churches could not be held too.

In conjunction with the theme and vision of the Annual Conference, the Board of Christian Education launched the “Family Discipleship” Ministry, through the holding of a yearly National Family Discipleship Conference that will be broadcast live through the online platform and invite brothers and sisters from all districts to attend the conference together. On 7th – 9th August this year, the first National Family Discipleship Conference was organised by CMCA, and we were honoured to have invited the President of the Sarawak Chinese Annual Conference, Rev Dr. Tie King Tai as the guest speaker. The theme of the Conference was “Go Home!” and it consisted of 4 talks. A total of 550 people signed up to participate. We also thank Rev Tie for freely providing us with Mandarin and English family altar materials.

Due to the pandemic, the Australian government implemented movement control orders and for a few months, many adults were forced to work from home, kids to attend classes at home, or even have to attend online Sunday Services at home on Sundays. Although the situation gave us lots of inconvenience and challenges, families got to spend more time together than before. This is a good opportunity given by God for us to build our family. When Christian families can make good use of the time together, we can enjoy more family happiness and improve the emotional ties between family members. We hope that this pandemic will enable us to build better relationships with our family members. Let us rely on God more and to seize the opportunity to serve God. We need to learn to treasure the life now, as life is unpredictable and we do not know how much time God will give us to bear witness to him on earth.

III. Implementing the plan of “Caring for the Community to reach the lost” in 2021

As we continue to practice “Abiding in the Lord to bear much fruit” and “Building healthy families to serve the Lord”, next year we will further testify to the Lord Jesus in the community where we live. A church that is after God’s own heart should care for the community. Whether it is the Old Testament or the New Testament, we can easily see in the Scriptures that God asked his people to participate in caring for the community. There are over 400 verses in the Bible that mention God’s concern for poverty, and 42 verses related to social services. In the Great Commandment, the Lord Jesus taught us to love the Lord your God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and secondly, to love our neighbour as ourselves. The phrase “Love your neighbour as yourself” precisely explains the scope and principles of Christian social care. The Lord Jesus takes preaching the gospel as the primary task in this world, but He also travels around to do the good works, healing the sick, and satisfying the hungry.

Caring for the community is a broad subject. For many Chinese churches, this is also a very controversial topic, especially involving social actions and participation in politics. Some Christians think that the more alienated we are from politics and society, the better. We only need to passively obey the law, fulfil our duties and pay taxes. What we care about is to spread the gospel, pray together, love each other, and build up the church of Christ. Other Christians think that we are also members of society; we are citizens of the kingdom of heaven and citizens of the earth, and we have the mission of Christ to be the light and salt in the world, living out our good deeds to witness God’s love. To them, Christians should actively participate in political activities and social care to help build a harmonious and stable society. Some churches even believe that the ministry of the church also includes eliminating social maladies, engaging in social reforms, and even intervening in political issues. Among this group of Christians, some even love to promote anti-government sentiments, arousing people’s suspicion and making the people anti-government consciousness. I hope that we will have more discussion and reflection on this crucial subject next year.

John Stott mentioned in the book “New Issues Facing Christians Today” that social care can be divided into two types: (1) Social services (for example: helping disadvantaged groups). (2) Social actions (for example: participating in demonstrations to oppose abortion, same-sex marriage, racial discrimination, environmental pollution, etc.). Social service is to relieve those in need; social action is to relieve its cause. Social services are charitable activities; social actions are political and economic activities. The goal of social service is to take care of individuals and families; the goal of social action is to change the social structure. Social service is merciful; social action is just.

Our social concerns started with the preaching of the gospel by John Wesley. For Wesley, the external works of mercy, just like the internal works of piety, are both, God’s means of grace to the believers. His social and ethical beliefs drove him to shift from godly ministry to compassionate work, continuously, from personal holiness to social holiness. In the process of initiating the work of compassion, he devoted himself to seeking welfare and justice for others, especially the poor. He turned the gospel of salvation into practical actions. He tried his best to bring practical help to those in various needs so that they could experience the love of Christ. Therefore, we are not just doing some good deeds in the community, but winning people for the Lord, in line with the mission of the Lord Jesus to preach the gospel.

John Wesley was not only specifically concerned about the welfare of the poor, such as setting up a loan agency for them to make them self-reliant, providing free clinic services, and providing houses for poor women and children. He also had the courage to protest against injustices in the society, such as condemning businessmen, brewers, doctors and lawyers. When John Wesley attempted to carry out social reforms and preached the doctrine of freedom

from sin, those engaged in industries related to social evil began to persecute him. At that time, some cities directly regarded the Methodists as revolutionary elements, saying that they disrupted social order, subverted state power, and used all means to destroy them. Similarly, if Christians today rise to attack the sinful behaviour of society and attempt to reform the structure of society, we must first prepare to face various persecutions. Our strength is weak and this is currently difficult to achieve. Perhaps CMCA can consider joining with other Christian groups, such as NCCA for the opportunity to express Christian views to the regime on various social issues. More importantly, we need to teach believers that we must fulfil our responsibilities in society. We also pray that God will raise God-fearing people in this society and be willing to participate in politics in this country.

I would like to thank Rev Elijah Chew, Chairman of the Board of Christian Social Concern, and his members for drawing up the following plans for next year (For details, please refer to the report of the Board of Christian Social Concerns):

- We educate believers on the social principles and creed of the Methodist Church. The third part of the Book of Discipline Social Principle: The Methodist Social Creed, which includes five major aspects: The Family, Economic Life, The Church and General Welfare, Human Rights, Peace and World Order. The board will compile a set of Chinese and English Study Material of the Social Creed so that the believers may have better understanding of the Social Creed.
- We plan to hold a “Social Concerns Awareness Day” in the districts in April to highlight the responsibilities and roles of Christians to society. We will have a seminar on “Wesleyan vision of Justice and Social Concerns” in July to explore CMCA’s vision of social care, the Wesleyan movement and social care, and the local churches’ participation.
- We encourage each local church to promote a social care-related activity once in every two months. I hope that all churches can build bridges with the community through social concerns activities.
- We will continue to cooperate with MMM to carry out any overseas social concerns activities and hope that each church will assist in raising funds to support the MMM’s poverty alleviation work in Nepal, Cambodia, India, and other regions.
- We will draw up monthly prayer items for social concerns and invite all members to pray for these items. We can plan the work to be promoted, and we need to pray for God’s help to fulfil these plans.
- We will register a Methodist social service organization with the government and establish a board to draft the charter and operation guidelines, to organize all necessary departments. The Episcopal Address from last year mentioned that we could seek government subsidies to develop community care.

As we reach out to our communities, we need to be ready to integrate ourselves in the communities with our passion for caring for and supporting the communities. Our church needs to be one social change agent in transforming, reforming and rebuilding the community. We need to support the government policies and program which are in consonance with our faith and belief.

Our LAMM Academy could consider developing community services, such as providing English courses and other introductory courses to immigrants. In addition to strengthening believers’ spiritual knowledge and ministry skills, and nurturing local preachers, LAMM may also consider becoming a Registered Training Organization (RTO) that offers basic courses, such as Cert III in Child Care, Personal Care Assistant, and Social Work. This plan is to create employment opportunities for groups in the community and at the same time, allow CMCA to

maintain connection with the community.

IV. Strengthening CMCA's English Ministry

Strengthening our English-speaking ministry should be our concern. We hope that we would be able to retain our next generation so that they can continue to serve the Lord faithfully and zealously in our church. We need to nurture our second-generation preachers for English ministries. I thank Rev. Chew (Coordinator of our English Ministry), Rev. Alan Lau and Rev. Sean Kong (our Youth Directors) and all the pastors and church leaders for your diligent efforts in expanding and strengthening the English Ministries in CMCA.

In last year's AC Session, I kicked off 2 initiatives. The first initiative is to provide elementary theological courses for the second-generation youths in our church through LAMM. The purpose of this program is to provide participants with basic theological education in order to enable them to be more effective in their Christian witness and ministry. This may also help to prepare some of them to take up further theological training to prepare themselves as full-time workers for the Lord. This year we have conducted 3 courses: Christian Spirituality, Old Testament Survey, New Testament Survey. There were 19 participants in the first course, 11 in the second and 16 in the third. In 2021, another four courses will be conducted. We hope all pastors and church leaders would encourage our youths to enroll in these courses.

The second initiative is Ministry Training Strategy: 2 years internship, recommended by Rev Elijah Chew to Board on the Ministry. This initiative is to provide training for all who are interested or are aware of God's calling. They would undergo training in the church under the mentorship and guidance of pastors. Due to the pandemics this year, this initiative was not launched as planned. However, we hope and pray that next year, local churches would take advantage of this initiative to identify and nurture potential pastors and church leaders.

There is more we can do and need to do. Briefly, at the Annual Conference level, we will invite speakers from established Methodist colleges and seminaries to give our pastors, leaders, and congregations a better understanding of, not just the uniqueness of the Methodist Movement, but also the factors that helped bring about the Great Spiritual Revival of 18th Century England, then Europe, America, and the world. The Methodist Church was actively involved in community services. Under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, they served in market-places, bars, coal mines and prisons. As Methodism spread from England to other places of the world, the believers established schools and medical clinics and continued to interact with the communities in practical ways. In those days, the Methodist Church impacted the communities tremendously. In line with the sub-theme for next year i.e. "Caring for the Community to reach the lost," the English congregation and, in particular, our energetic youths and young adults are encouraged to actively find ways and means to connect with the local communities and to provide practical services, thus blessing the local communities, in so doing.

Furthermore, I hope that pastors of English services can regularly share experiences, shoulder each other's burdens and encourage one another through Zoom, Whatsapp or other online platforms. From time to time, church leaders from English services can be invited to participate in online discussion forums on social issues, ministry skills or other topics. As a result of the convenience of online activities, I hope that invitations to certain seminars organized by an English congregation could also be extended to brothers and sisters in other Methodist English congregations. We can even consider holding national CMCA online prayer meetings and Bible exposition seminars in English. In order to realize such activities, we need to establish a cohesive English-speaking pastoral team who has the desire to build a church after God's own heart.

V. Other Matters

1 The Need of Theological Education Scholarship Fund

Thanks to all churches for organizing the collection of a second offering towards our Theological Education Scholarship Fund on Theological Education Sunday. This year, brother Jacob Law and brother Vincent Ling will graduate from theological school and they will be joining full time ministry next year. Next year, we will have 3 theological students: brother Johnny Hii, brother Tim Gao and brother Richard Leong.

At the 25th Anniversary Thanksgiving Service last year, we raised \$4,843.30 for the fund, well short of our target of twenty thousand dollars. At the moment there is only about ten thousand dollars in the bank. It is not enough to just depend on a second offering on Theological Education Sunday. I hope pastors, church leaders and brothers and sisters in all local churches would see the importance and urgency of nurturing pastors.

2 ABN Matter

In last year's Episcopal Address, I mentioned that every local church can register its own ABN, but local churches under the CMCA have to abide by the regulations of CMCA. In last year's AC Session, we resolved that each local church will sign a memorandum of understanding (Deed of Covenant) with the Annual Conference. It is hoped that all church leaders will seek to complete this action as soon as possible.

3 Safe Church Program

CMCA has adopted the NCCA's Child Safety Policy as our over-arching guide. CMCA is fully committed to safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults. We are committed to: (a) Safe recruitment of leaders; (b) Adequate training of leaders; (c) Have a clear Code of Conduct; (d) Continued supervision of leaders; (e) Responding to allegations of risk of harm (abuse) and serious misconduct; (f) Responding to other disclosures of abuse; (g) Provide an open safe environment; (h) Understand and value diversity. All local churches need to set up a Safe Church committee to monitor the required training and make sure that proper registers are kept for all church workers and volunteers. At the AC level, we need to have one Safety Officer to coordinate the Safe Church programs across Australia.

4 To Increase the CMCA office staff

Due to the pandemic, we have no plan to increase the number of office staff. However, when the volume of work picks up, I feel the Annual Conference Office should employ one more worker. Last year I raised the issue that in order to further develop ministries of the Annual Conference, both the Board of Social Concerns and Board of Mission should consider employing at least a part time officer to help in launching all the work that has been planned by the Annual Conference.

Conclusion

The Annual Conference has other important ministries which you can read about from the reports provided by chairpersons of the various Boards. Finally, your humble servant once again appeal to all pastors and church delegates that, for the sake of God's glory, and through the help of the Holy Spirit and by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, let us in oneness of heart build a church after God's own heart.

In His Service,

Rev Dr. Albert Wong (Bishop)