



Report on the MCSA Heritage Indaba & 150th Indian Mission Anniversary Commemoration Durban, KZN, S Africa 16–19 August 2012

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During the British Methodist Conference in July 2012, I was invited by the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), Bishop Zipho Siwa, to contribute to the MCSA's Heritage Indaba and represent the British Methodist Church during the commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of the Wesleyan Mission to the Indian community in Natal.

Theme and purpose

The Indaba (a traditional form of African problem-solving, where everyone has a voice and attempts to find a common story) took as its theme: 'Learning from the past, Moving to the future'. Its stated purpose was: 'To reclaim, recapture and celebrate our history, heritage and legacy'. The Indaba was a response to the call in 2008 by the former Presiding Bishop, the Revd Ivan Abrahams (now General Secretary of the World Methodist Council), for the MCSA to build on its heritage and affirm the contribution of those who built the Methodist witness in Southern Africa. In his introductory remarks, Bishop Siwa spoke about the Indaba as 'a step towards healing and transformation, which is the vision of MCSA' and of the importance of the heritage of Southern African Methodists in maintaining and building up the Church community, in acknowledging the works of God in the past, and in recognising ways that should never be travelled again: 'a journey of appreciation, and pain, of restoration and re-energising'.

The overall output of the MCSA's focus on heritage is to be a Methodist Development Foundation, including heritage, the objectives of which would be:

1. physical preservation of heritage sites
2. research
3. annual 'pilgrimages'
4. creating opportunities for eco-tourism and employment
5. rural development
6. an information bureau for young people.

This was to be the first of several occasions when I was struck by the issue of 'balance'; between what in the British Methodist Heritage context we might say was the relationship between our dual *raison d'être*s of 'preservation' and 'use for mission' of our heritage.

Story-telling

Acknowledging that they come from a story-telling tradition, the MCSA General Secretary, the Revd Vido Nyobole, introduced the bishops and other representatives of each of the six countries/12 districts of MCSA participating in the Indaba – Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland – to tell the story of their evangelisation and Methodist growth.

They spoke of British and African missionary campaigns and martyrs, highlighting that an early form of civil disobedience was a necessity to be able to start to preach, but also indicating the impact of interdenominational rivalries. They described their local places of importance to the Methodist story. Recurrent characters became familiar names and common themes emerged, such as the strength of educational provision through the missions.

We were also addressed by representatives of the Anglican Church and the National Heritage Council (NHC). The Anglican Church would be interested in partnership with MCSA on heritage. They are particularly exploring how their heritage assets might leverage in Government support for community development projects. Advocate Sonwabile Mancotywa, NHC CEO, spoke about the national challenges in preserving Southern African heritage and particularly resisting the tendency towards selectivity: 'victors and victims tell different histories'.

A great deal of South Africa's recent past is one that many would like to forget, but the NHC understand that it must be preserved 'to develop a dialogue', so the next generation remember and never repeat atrocities. The Advocate suggested that research showed there are economic and educational benefits in heritage preservation. He encouraged the MCSA to identify their nation-makers and 'models' on which focus (*what we might call projects of Connexional significance*), and also emphasised that the Church should be a driving force in heritage in South Africa since 80% of the population are worshippers. He was challenged (by a veteran of Robben Island, now on its museum council, on the subject of changing street names from their colonial names to those, ostensibly in honour, of the black architects of the democracy) that there is a delicate balance to be achieved between preserving, honouring and developing our heritage: the latter being about making new, rather than changing the old, which may render important history void. It was also emphasised that 'honouring' and 'preserving' are not mutually inclusive: that we 'record our history, but live our heritage'. By going back to 'walk on the grounds of your forbears' it becomes part of you, and of the future.

I presented an overview of the development of Methodist Heritage in Britain to date, focussing in particular on our theology of heritage as mission, the developments at our key sites (being the roots of the Wesleyan tradition), and some of the challenges, evolution (such as the incorporation of archiving into the Heritage Committee's remit) and current strategic direction of Methodist Heritage. I was asked further about our sustainability, the interaction of our heritage sites with their local communities, identity formation, the tension between history and heritage, the effect of aging congregations, and about contemporary change in British Methodist Church and perceptions – of adding value or being a cause for concern – about immigrant Methodist communities to Britain, especially where they do not necessarily entirely integrate, but set up alongside the local Methodist Church.

Interpretation and visitor behaviour – ways forward

We made a day-long visit into the more rural regions and suburbs around Durban to three historical attractions (the King Shaka Museum, Chief Albert Luthuli's House and Ghandi's Settlement), with lavish refreshments provided at two long-standing societies in the coloured community, Stranger and Sparks Estate.

What I found most interesting was the difference in the behaviour of our group as tourists at each attraction, proving somewhat unscientifically, that: the most important facts should be in the first couple of lines of a museum display panel because that's all that will be read; that innovative, quirky display can be very engaging, but must still be accessible and readable, and be able to stand visitors' touch or foot traffic; and that large, isolated images and phrases may speak the most powerfully.



1. Prof Joan Millard, Revd 'KK', me and Revd Emmanuel Gabriel at the King Shaka Museum
2. Zulu settlement reconstruction at the King Shaka Museum
3. Bed and cabinet in a bedroom used creatively as display areas at Luthuli's House
4. Verulam Church – the oldest in SE Africa (1850): note it has no roof, but so far retains wall plaques, bell and stained glass!
5. Gauze hanging in Ghandi's House
6. Dinner for the 150th anniversary commemoration of the Indian Mission in Natal
7. Dr GK Nair (Co-Ed.) presenting me with copies of his book *Celebrate: Indian Christians in South Africa 1860–2010* at Mobeni Heights Methodist Church after the 150th anniversary commemoration service for the Indian Mission.

This may reduce the interpretation almost to 'decoration', but in many of the potential Methodist heritage–mission projects I heard discussed during the Indaba, the heritage may be the inspiration, but it will not be the sustaining factor, and within the final implementation of those projects the message will need to be transmitted 'in passing'.

One of the most challenging aspects of the MCSA Indaba was how, given a 'clean sheet', the MCSA should determine what to seek to preserve and promote of its heritage across six countries and how to sustain the heritage it chose to maintain, given that it will be essential to build into heritage preservation projects ways to improve medical welfare, consider environmental concerns and develop education and employment from the outset.

The Indaba seemed to be leading to 6–12 individual district pilot projects addressing maybe 6–8 different, locally-relevant issues and exploring model solutions, which can be evaluated and replicated across the other districts. These included: archive management and relationship to academic institutions, integrating environmental development and sustainability (e.g., the possibility of reopening historic water courses: 'Drinking from our own wells'); tackling relict buildings of note (e.g., Verulam church); educational initiatives; tourism opportunities and engaging with Government.

Commemorating the Indian Mission

The Indaba was followed by a dinner and celebration service the following day to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Indian Mission in Natal. I spoke during the cultural evening that followed the meal, taking the letters and Synod reports of the first Wesleyan missionary to Natal in 1862, the Revd Ralph Stott, as my subject and source material (accessed from the SOAS Library prior to my visit).

I allowed Ralph's first impressions and concerns to tell his story in his own words. (A degree of editing became necessary during the presentation when I realised that with an additional audience of over 100 of the coloured community, even with significant emphasis in my introduction on the 19th century authenticity of the material, I could not use the term 'coolie' as often as Ralph did!) However, the presentation seemed to be received positively and I was warmly thanked.

Other business

A press release from the MCSA Connexional Team about the Indaba resulted in an invitation for me to speak on SAFM Radio as part of a women's afternoon programme. Although their preferred focus was not the Indaba *per se*, I was loathe to turn down the opportunity for MCSA to be part of the broadcast and so, with support from the MCSA Connexional Team, I was able to get prior notice of the preferred angle for the programme – women in Methodism in South Africa – and briefly prepare suitable content emphasising the long-standing role and influence of women in our Church from Susanna Wesley to mentioning the strong, current women's movements in South Africa and the increasing number of women presbyters.

For the remainder of my time in South Africa, I was generously escorted by the Indaba's organisers, Laura Pillay and then the Revd Emmanuel Gabriel, to visit local churches and experience various aspects of the life and community in Durban, from the old colonial town to the estates of the extremely wealthy to the poor suburbs, dominated by traders from the coloured and immigrant communities. It was a great insight and I am very grateful for Laura and Emmanuel's time and kindness.

Conclusions

On reflection since attending the Indaba, I have come to consider the way 'use' and 'conservation' interact to be one of the most significant learning points for me from this experience. It is an issue of key significance for British Methodist Heritage, as well as MCSA. Any more 'conventional' mission work, planned alongside the 'pure' conservation and use of our heritage, is also likely to be the sustaining part of the work.

So, while some aspect of our history might cause a project to be initiated and be expected to be 80% of its purpose and mission activity (e.g., forming or confirming Methodists' identity, explaining their past to help them plan mission for the future and/or outreach and engagement with those outside the Church), it might end up being just 20% in the 'purest' sense, creating a vehicle for wider mission work to focus on for the other 80% of the time.

Given the scale of their work in MCSA, I can already see that putting the leadership in contact with the pan-European network, 'The Future of Religious Heritage', could be of value. There are also other groups and organisations here that we can link them up to on specific aspects of their work. For example, I have recently discovered a group in the UK working on building identity through their built heritage for young people from ethnic minority groups, who may be able to share experience on engaging young people in their black or coloured heritage in a traditionally white-majority story. I have prepared a separate paper of reflections and ideas for networking etc.

I am hugely grateful to the MCSA for their generous invitation and hospitality. I pray that our continuing dialogue may be fruitful and the blessings on the endeavours of the MCSA's Development Foundation be abundant.

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