

REPORT FROM THE LISTENING GROUP

To the people of God, to our sisters and brothers in Christ, we have gathered from near and far, from all over the Anglican Church of Southern Africa and beyond. We are from many nations, many tribes, many backgrounds, many ages-and-stages but we are one as we gather in Jesus' name to seek to live Jesus-shaped lives.

Anglican's Ablaze has witnessed to the unity in diversity within the Anglican family and it is a beautiful sight to behold. A renewed commitment to living a "Jesus Shaped Life" has come through all aspects of this conference, from plenaries, parallel sessions, workshops and the many people seeking ministry in the Prayer Chapel.

DAY ONE

On day one, Archbishop Moon Hing amused delegates with his story about eating farm chicken (frogs). The mind won't accept what the stomach is prepared to enjoy. We must not let our minds – our preconceived ideas of being Christians, or even Anglicans, get in the way of being VIP Christians: Christians of Vision, Intention and Participation. What is your and my vision? How are we intentionally pursuing this vision? How are we participating as a member of a local church and as part of the body of Christ? The archbishop warned us that if we do not have a vision of who we are in Christ, one that helps us commit our ALL to God, others will seek to determine that vision and the nature of our commitment.

This call to being VIP followers of Jesus has reverberated throughout the conference. Mandy Pearson spoke with passion about what we can do in society to make a difference. We can be overwhelmed by the news and the statistics but behind every statistic is a human story, a face, a person, not somebody to be the object of charity but someone to be journeyed with, engaged with, served with. We each have been placed in the body of Christ with a VIP purpose to work out. The passion and purpose of this body was sharpened by Raymond Bukonya when he examined what it means to give our bodies as living sacrifices. The church was birthed in the single, sufficient, absolute atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. His life and death is the example for the church to emulate and we do so in and through the bodies that we live. It is in our bodies that we worship God. It is from our bodies that we offer a sacrifice from what we have and we have to embody humble sacrifice as VIP Christians.

DAY TWO

On day two it was mango trees. Everybody was talking mango trees. We thank Archbishop Moon Hing for this modern parable that struck home. The mango tree that had the best mangoes in the world, that everybody enjoyed from all over, had consumed, then neglected, until the tree became diseased and produced no more mangoes. Yet over all the years that the tree bore fruit nobody thought to plant a mango seed to grow another tree, let alone realizing that every harvest had the potential to grow a plantation of mango trees. Consumer Christians only consume. VIP Christians see that each mango has the potential to become a plantation of mango trees. Are we planting or consuming? Are our churches bearing fruit that all enjoy but it goes no further? Are we disciples making disciples, churches planting churches, mango trees becoming mango plantations? All this will fade away but the word of God planted in good soil will bear an eternal harvest in the lives of the family of God, the people of God, raised up in Christ Jesus.

Trevor Pearce built on this in the evening plenary challenging the church to rekindle being an evangelizing community and inviting us to stand-up and step-forward, quite literally. God wants to make all things new.

DAY THREE

Christians need to apologise to the world about how we represent Jesus to his world. These were the sobering words from Johann van der Bijl in the opening plenary session of day 3. The lesson Simon-Peter had to learn and the church has to re-learn over and over again is that Jesus seeks to restore and reinstate us until we know we know that following him is not about us, but all about him. The good news is that Jesus does not give up on us, or his church, when we fail and fall short of this reality. The church desperately needs disciples that are mature yet still learning, humble yet still confident, well versed in scripture yet also empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The theme of the Holy Spirit was to dominate day three. The words of our Baptismal Creed affirm that the Holy Spirit gives life to the people of God. Judge Theron spoke of the need for families to be made whole. Allan Smith reminded the church that God chooses ordinary people and empowers them by the Holy Spirit to be used for his glory. Our own archbishop, ++Thabo Makgobo, reminded us of our responsibility to be stewards of God's creation. The caution of Archbishop Moon Hing from Day One – that the mind won't accept what the stomach is prepared to enjoy – has been heeded because the prayer ministry team can testify to the hundreds of people who have come through the doors of the Prayer Chapel and come forward after sessions to taste and see that the Lord is good. Despite what some may think in their heads, their experience is telling them "God is good, all the time; All the time, God is good!" During sessions and workshops, tea-breaks and lunch-breaks, at every opportunity where people have been open and seeking, the Holy Spirit has been giving life to the people of God. Much more can be said, but it is time to conclude.

CONCLUSION

We have been inspired by the speakers in the plenary sessions but being the family of God and figuring out how to be the church is not straightforward nor easy. The parallel sessions and workshops helped work through and confronted a number of the more difficult issues.

Two in particular created a stir. Africa Mhlope, speaking about culture, identified and then killed some sacred cows. He confronted our different cultures head on and spoke clearly and sharply about putting Christ above culture. We are first and foremost sisters and brothers in Christ. Our identity is as the children of God and on this we must focus to rebuild communities and nations. The primary ministry of reconciliation has not been given to politicians but to the church, to us, to you and me, in all our different countries. We must be community builders and nation builders.

The second was Nicky Gumbel's parallel session. (Nicky's word to the church was ----- . The sound did not work, so there was no word!) Besides some of you feeling conned that Nicky wasn't here in person (and we apologise for this misleading advertising), his DVD talk had no sound, just his image, and as Raymond Bukunya reminded us on the first night, an image is not the real thing. Never fear, up jumped Sam Uys to speak passionately about Alpha, why the Alpha course matters and how Alpha can benefit our churches. Alpha helps you not only enjoy

the mango you're eating but to plant a seed and then another seed and another until you have a plantation of mangoes! But there was more to this moment. We did not need a Nicky Gumbel from England. We have our very own Sam Uys from Southern Africa.

We feel God shone a light on this moment to say something like, "to my church in Africa, to my people gathered here, I have given you all you need to grow and thrive. Be bold as a lion. Have courage like an eagle. The seed for your mango plantation is hidden within the mango you hold in your very own hands. It came from another tree once, in another land, planted by another people, but it is yours now and must be planted away from the older trees to grow and find its place in the light. Do not let anybody deceive you. Arise, go up and plant, make disciples. The peoples of our nations need to taste and see that the Lord is good."

But as this challenge is laid before us, the question arises, who will be the ones who do this? Will it be our bishops? Our clergy? No, it must be all of us. We who are many are one body for we all partake of the one bread, Jesus. We who have tasted and seen that the Lord is good. We who have been empowered and emboldened by the Holy Spirit. We, the body of Christ, must present Christ to the world because nobody else can or will. To give the last word to an ancient woman of our faith, from another land, from another time, but someone who has tasted and seen that the Lord is good, St Teresa of Ávila:

"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

Amen.

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