

MISSION IN THE CONTEXT OF EMPIRE

PREFACE

CWM's life and witness has been shaped by a number of theological statements, most particularly *Sharing in One World Mission* (1975), which paved the way for CWM's transformation from a colonial British mission agency to an international community of churches sharing together in God's mission as equal partners.

Then in 1999, *World Mission Today*, which described the challenges and opportunities of mission at the end of the 20th century, enlarging our ecumenical vision to include partnership with other faiths and creation, recognising the inherent colonialism of the narrowly Christocentric and anthropocentric worldviews that had been assumed as part our faith.

Continuing in our journey of faith we find ourselves again returning to this theme of mission in the context of Empire; wrestling with the manifestations of colonialism in the 21st century. CWM, as a product of the modern missionary movement, and a beneficiary of the movement's colonial heritage, through its members also shares in the pain of injustice and ignorance that mark this age. As such we are called to name and live our hope; to express our faith for today and what it means to be a follower of Jesus in this time and place. This statement therefore continues in the radical tradition of mission, looking beyond ourselves and engaging with the powers and principalities, as it seeks to describe what it means to follow Jesus, whose mission we have made our own: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10:10).

Adopted by our Trustee Body in July 2010 this theological statement sets out how we understand our calling today: naming our context as Empire; describing our approach (and alternative paradigm) as partnership; and setting out our vision of fullness of life through Christ for all creation. Recalling Jesus' storytelling approach to theology it uses a narrative style, grounding our faith and the convictions that arise from it in the lived experience of people across the world.

Whilst the statement is very much the product of the collective reflections and efforts of those we gathered together in Kuala Lumpur in February 2010, I want to especially thank Daniel Dong-Sung Kim for his assistance with finalising and editing the text.

Philip Woods

Executive Secretary for Mission Programme
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PREAMBLE

A group of fifteen theologians from CWM member churches and ecumenical partners met in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia from 1-5 February 2010 to constitute a theology working group. The task of the group was to reflect on CWM's journey to date and our current global context. We were also given the task of articulating the theological grounding and mission implications of CWM's new vision and mission statements with a view to informing CWM's strategy and its implementation.

Vision

Fullness of life through Christ for all creation

We met at a time when the world was still struggling to come to terms with the devastation resulting from the earthquake in Haiti. The calamity compounding the lives of the people on this small island nation brought to the fore the stark reality of our world ensnared in the clutches of Empire. Throughout most of its history the people of Haiti had been systematically exploited by colonial powers to serve the global economic greed of large businesses. The people and land were stripped of all recourse to life. Even in the midst of death and destruction the legacies of imperial exploitation denied the right of the Haitian people to rebuild their lives from the rubble. Although some countries stepped up to absolve a small fraction of the financial debts of the Haitian people they failed to stand up and absolve themselves of the monumental moral debts that they had incurred against the people of Haiti.

Mission

Called to partnership in Christ to mutually challenge, encourage, and equip churches to share in God's mission

The structures of injustice and exploitation continued to compete for dominance and the people of Haiti were once again relegated to the status of beneficiaries of the charitable actions of benevolent external powers. At no time in the minds of the Powers were the people of Haiti acknowledged as equals. None regarded them as the subjects of their history, and none accorded them the respect as a people capable of reconstructing life from destruction. Precious few acknowledged them as partners, willing to stand alongside them, to accompany them on their long journey to wholeness and fullness of life.

Though the events surrounding the people of Haiti occurred in one small part of our world there are echoes of it in many other places, not least Palestine, the cradle of our faith, where religion manifests itself as yet another dimension of the complexities and challenges of the present context in which we live and bear witness to the gospel of life. Against this background we began our reflections.

MISSION IN THE CONTEXT OF EMPIRE

God's mission has always taken place in the midst of Empire. God becomes incarnate through Jesus in an imperial world. From the time of his birth Jesus' life was threatened by Empire, and we learn in the gospel accounts that it is the Empire and its allies who eventually execute him. His birth was heralded as so great a threat that the ruler Herod, an ally of the Roman Empire, saw immediately the need to dispense of the baby Jesus and ends up killing all male children up to the age of two. Jesus and his parents flee the oppressive regime at home and find asylum in Egypt. And though the immediate threat passes they are unable to return to their home as the shadow of death still loomed over their land. Such was the power of the Roman Empire and those like Herod who colluded with it. The same power, manifesting itself throughout the religious as well as political establishment, eventually executes Jesus, and as Mary McKenna cautions us to remember: "To say Jesus died

on the cross for our sin is often to ignore or forget that he died because he was dangerous to a society that wanted to hold onto its power. Jesus died on the cross for his beliefs, his idea of God, his preaching, his siding with the poor and the outcast."¹ While the story of his birth and his eventual execution tell a story of adversity in the midst of Empire, the story of Jesus also tells a story of defiance in the face of death, and more importantly through his resurrection it tells a story of hope.

It is true that the *Missio Dei* has always taken place in the midst of Empire, and the same is true in our time as well. Our stories today parallel the story of Jesus in the midst of Empire. A fundamental challenge, therefore, facing the church as it responds with God's love in the world is how can we best follow the example of Jesus in his response to Empire? More importantly who is the Empire in our midst today and how does this Empire manifest itself?

We speak of Empire, because we discern a coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power in our world today, that constitutes a reality and a spirit of lordless domination, created by humankind yet enslaving simultaneously; an all-encompassing global reality serving, protecting and defending the interests of powerful corporations, nations, elites and privileged people, while imperiously excluding even sacrificing humanity and exploiting creation; a pervasive spirit of destructive self-interest, even greed - the worship of money, goods and possessions; the gospel of consumerism, proclaimed through powerful propaganda and religiously justified, believed and followed; the colonization of consciousness, values and notions of human life by the imperial logic; a spirit lacking in compassionate justice and showing contemptuous disregard for the gifts of creation and the household of life.

(Definition of empire from the Globalisation Project - Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa and Evangelical Reformed Church in Germany.)

Its complexity is reflected in the fact that, whether we realize it or not, even the way we think of Christ is shaped by large and ever-changing conglomerates of power that are aimed at controlling all aspects of our lives, from macro-politics to our innermost desires.² Empire, in sum, has to do with massive concentrations of power that permeate all aspects of life and that cannot be controlled by any one actor alone. "Empire displays strong tendencies to domesticate Christ and anything else that poses a challenge to its powers. Christ becomes part of the system to such a degree that little or no room exists for the pursuit of alternative realities of Christ."³ At present, the pressures of Empire manifest themselves, for instance, in sanctions against nations that refuse to comply with norms established by the powers that be, in economic arrangements that exploit the labour power, the land or other assets of less powerful nations, and the stimulus of a seductive consumer culture that permeates more and more spaces around the globe through the media and the market. All these pressures are directly transmitted to the people. The elements of Empire today are vested with those who wield political, cultural, military and corporate power. As it has been described, "Empire seeks to extend its control as far as possible; not only geographically, politically, and economically but also intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, culturally and religiously."⁴ This is the reason why it is so difficult for churches to critique it or even to acknowledge that it exists. The questions that need to be raised by churches in the 21st century are how can

churches, through mission, address the challenge of Empire and the powers that push free market capitalism which destroy the people and the Earth? How can churches move from single issue based advocacy to challenging these powers at all levels of their manifestations including within churches and among churches?

In the Accra Confession Reformed Churches have responded to these questions, stating "that the integrity of our faith is at stake if we remain silent or refuse to act in the face of the current system of neoliberal economic globalization."⁵ And CWM, WARC and the WCC have taken up this challenge through *Oikotree: putting justice at the heart of faith*⁶ promoting a covenanting for justice movement.

What follows speaks to the need for this witness as we examine some stories to illustrate how Empire manifests itself in our various contemporary contexts. These stories, while illuminating the extent to which Empire encroaches on the lives of people also speak of the existence of hope in the midst of trial and tribulation.

1 Mary McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children: Neglected Stories from the Bible* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 223.

2 Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Post Colonial Times* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2007), p. ??.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

4 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 23.

5 Accra Confession, *Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth*, adopted by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) General Council, August 2004

6 *Oikotree: putting justice at the heart of faith*

Rev. Arce's story

Rev. Arcé is a Cuban minister retired from the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. When he reached retirement age, he looked forward to benefiting from the funds that had accumulated over many years in his pension account. Unfortunately, this dream of enjoying the economic fruits of his retirement was not realised because he was told that the United States prevents the transfer of funds to Cuba from the U.S. This is a policy that has been in existence since 1962, and while the policy is condemned by the United Nations it still continues, rendering Rev. Arcé helpless and unable to take care of himself and his family because he is unable to access what is rightfully his, and what he has worked so hard for over many years. Rev. Arcé is one of many retired employees, such as teachers, missionaries and other church workers, who are all disadvantaged by this policy and practice.

Rev. Arcé's story illustrates at least three ways in which Empire works in our current context. The first is the way in which economic injustice is a result of Empire. For example, Rev. Arcé is a hardworking man and deeply committed to the church, and yet in his retirement he finds himself unable to be financially secure. His financial insecurity is not a result of what he has done or failed to do. It is the consequence of the Empire's malevolent use of position and power to deprive him and numerous others of their rightful claim on life. His story challenges the theology of the Empire which holds that people are poor because they are sinful or lazy.

The second way in which Empire affects us in our contexts is through political domination. In Rev. Arcé's story, and so many others like him, we see how the U.S. exercises political domination over other nations without regard for the voices from within the U.S. and the rest of the world against such injustices. This domination is often sanctioned by religion – a belief that God has ordained such imperial powers. For example, in the era of George W. Bush's presidency of the United States, it is widely recognised that he used religious language more than any president in recent U.S. history to sanction his policies and practices. Similarly the Roman Empire, at the time of Jesus, spread the belief that the Empire was established by the gods and that the emperor was to be worshiped as he was the representative of the gods.

Thirdly, while political and economic injustice is evident in Rev. Arcé's situation another dimension also emerges. This third dimension is a sense of hope in the midst of adversity. This hope arises out of resistance to the Empire – a resistance that is embodied in the decision taken by many churches in the U.S. to continually challenge the unjust policies and practices of their government that robs Rev. Arcé and thousands of others like him, depriving them of what is rightfully theirs and which is necessary for them to enjoy fullness of life. Their resistance is an indication that even in the midst of Empire, people have agency to sustain their hope.

Mrs. Khumalo's story

South Africa won the bid to host the 2010 Soccer World Cup. This huge sports competition is said to bring economic benefits for the host countries, for FIFA⁷, and the sports and tourism industry. However, Mrs. Khumalo's story paints a different picture. This is her story:

Mrs. Khumalo has been working as a vendor/informal trader for over twenty years, in the Morning Market in Warwick Avenue, in Durban, South Africa. She brings her little produce of tomatoes and sweet potatoes, which she grows on a tiny piece of land at the back of her house, to the market to sell so that she can generate income to support herself and her family. Unfortunately, the Durban Municipality, in its bid to meet the demands of FIFA and the standards expected of host cities, as well as an internationally favorable environment for the World Cup has agreed to clean up the city and thus decided to close down the market in order to erect a new, world class shopping mall. This move is to accede to FIFA's demands, intellectual property rights, standards and expectations.

Mrs. Khumalo is faced with a dilemma. The closing down of the market leaves her desperate. She is old and does not have access to a private pension. The Municipality offers her the option of renting space at the new mall that they are building, and while she knows that she cannot afford the rent with the sales of her meager produce she nevertheless seeks a loan from a *mashonisa*/micro-credit business in order to move her business to the new mall. She is concerned that she might not be able to pay back her

loan and the *mashonisa* has stated in their contractual agreement that in the event of her inability to pay back her loan her house would be confiscated.

Mrs. Khumalo and the other vendors have organised themselves to protest against the closing down of the market; their evictions; and the non-democratic decision by the Municipality to close down a market that has been in existence for many generations. They claim that the decision to close down the market is not helpful to small traders and communities, and will only benefit the large businesses that can afford rental spaces in the new mall. They also argue that the Municipality's decision was made in the interest of the rich businesses and capital that is linked to international corporations. Unfortunately, their protests fall on deaf ears and the proposed mall is already being built.

Mrs. Khumalo's story illustrates that the advent of a seemingly innocent, enjoyable sports event, such as the World Cup, brings with it an economic imperialism. It creates benefits for a few business people and huge corporations at the expense of small enterprises and the people. Secondly, her story highlights the injustice of not being able to reap what she has literally sown with her own hands. The biblical character of Job portrays the helplessness of Mrs. Khumalo well. Job is able to feel the pain and the plight of the poor when he loses his status as a rich farmer. He, therefore, laments in Chapter 24:9-12 "The fatherless child is snatched

⁷ FIFA is the international governing body for soccer (football).

from the breast; the infant of the poor is seized for a debt. Lacking clothes, they go about naked; they carry the sheaves but they still go hungry. They crush olives among the terraces, they tread the winepresses yet they still suffer thirst. The groans of the dying rise from the city, and the souls of the wounded cry out for help. But God charges no one with wrongdoing.”

Indeed, it seems in Mrs. Khumalo’s case that God is charging nobody with wrongdoing, but the fact that the traders organise a protest, suggests elements of defiance in the face of adversity. While the World Cup is supposed to provide opportunity it instead robs people of opportunities to earn a decent and honest living. The protestors in Mrs. Khumalo’s story conjure up images of Jesus storming into the temple and turning over the tables of the traders in the temple. Mrs. Khumalo’s story shows that the current Empire breeds injustice instead of strengthening the rights of the weakest. The survival of the fittest is the guiding principle in what can be called market fundamentalism. The life and teachings of Jesus provide a paradigm for the content of our mission which is to continuously take the side of those who are reduced to objects and victims by the prevailing unjust structures of Empire. We have to reach the point where we too can say like the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 62:8b

“Never again will foreign warriors come to take away your grain and wine – you raised it and will keep it.”

Sunitha’s story

Sunitha is a young Indian woman. She has been married for sixteen years and has two children, aged fifteen and nine. Her husband beats her periodically. X-rays show that the latest beating has caused a fracture to her skull. Both she and her husband come from working class backgrounds, with little education. Sunitha works in a shoe factory and her husband works casually. He is an alcoholic. Sunitha is paid more than her husband who has been unemployed for some time, but in order to make ends meet they need even his meager wage. Sunitha and her family live with her mother, a widow, in a Dalit village in Orissa. They belong to a very conservative evangelical church, one that does not ordain women nor allow them to participate equally in the life and activities of the church. The pastor and elder counsel Sunitha not to leave her husband. They quote Jesus as saying that he does not permit divorce. Sunitha’s mother blames Sunitha for the beatings, saying she does not cook well and does not take good care of her husband. Consequently, she is classed a poor wife. Sunitha remains in the abusive marriage because she continues to heed these voices.

The story of Sunitha highlights the following:

Firstly, it highlights the dangers of cultural imperialism. In the story, Sunitha's pastor, elder and mother appeal to culture to "keep Sunitha in her place" and this place unfortunately is a place of oppression and violence.

Secondly, it highlights religious imperialism which colludes with cultural imperialism. By appealing to inadequate and limited interpretations of scripture, they actually clearly oppose the value of the human being. This non-recognition of the value of Sunitha as a human being could ultimately lead to her death.

Thirdly, caste discrimination is based on racial injustice, and as such the caste system prevents people from acquiring equal access and opportunities for education. So Sunitha's story is not unlike many other Dalits in India who because of poor education, find it difficult to obtain meaningful employment and often resort to drugs and alcoholism.

Stories from the Pacific

In another city, Copenhagen, Denmark in 2009, world political leaders assembled to seek a radical and binding agreement on how to address issues of climate change and global warming that arise out of unsustainable production and consumption patterns. They failed, however, to come up with such an agreement due to their national and corporate interests and lack of political will. While the most powerful states which are responsible for major pollution and thus climate change are refusing to reach an agreement, the small nations who are adversely affected by global warming and climate change will continue to bear the brunt of the burdens of climate change. The poor of the world, particularly in the Pacific islands are under great threat as the low lying islands around the world are threatened by rising sea levels. Iosia and Erita, who are residents of the Pacific islands of Tuvalu and Kiribati, are worried about where and how their families will survive the prospects of the drowning of their islands. They are also worried about whether they will be received by their neighbours, such as Australia, which sometimes sends away or refuses to accept the asylum seekers or refugees who leave their countries because of ecological disasters. This is in contrast to the welcome extended by other equally vulnerable Pacific island nations that have committed to extend hospitality to those who are displaced by rising sea levels.

The drowning islands of the Pacific are an example of how Empire puts primary emphasis on production and consumption at the expense of ecology and the people. It challenges us to reclaim a theology of stewardship over the integrity of creation.

As participants in God's mission we are called to live in opposition to Empire

In the light of these stories from different parts of the world, how are we, as the body of Christ called to theologically and missiologically respond in the context of Empire?

The above stories are stories from Cuba, South Africa, India, Tuvalu and Kiribati, but they have a resonance and relevance with stories from all over the world, and indeed the stories bear resonance with the stories we find in the Bible. This reminds us that we are all connected as a human family through our adversities, across time and space, from the biblical times to our own. For us in the body of Christ, this connectedness becomes even more significant because as the apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:27 "You are the body of Christ and each one of you, is part of it." Therefore, Rev. Arcé's story; Mrs. Khumilo's story; Sunitha's story; and the story of Iosia and Erita is our story. We cannot disown it or ignore it. In fact, the *Missio Dei* requires us to respond in a loving, compassionate and just way for indeed we are our sisters' and brothers' keepers.

Because we are participants in God's mission we are called to live in opposition to Empire. If we are to be true to the mission of God, as expressed through God's incarnation in Jesus, then we have no option but to follow his model of resistance to the imperial forces of his time. These imperial forces were, among others, cultural, economic, religious and political. Jesus provides a new standard by which the imperial forces are consistently measured up against, perhaps even a new Empire, the kin-dom⁸ of God. This is what Jesus was establishing, not just for the future but for the present, God's kin-dom on earth. And God's kin-dom is clearly different from the Empire. While one has to be powerful to enter the Empire one has to be like a little child to enter the kin-dom of God. Jesus raises the excluded and marginalized, and in answering the question of who is the greatest in Matthew 10:13-16 and Mark 9:35 he gathers children around him. In this kin-dom the last shall be the first and the first shall be the last (Mark 10:31). Mary, as the poor peasant girl chosen to give birth to God's plan to accompany us in this world, is an example of how the last shall be first.

⁸ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz first used this term to express relationality as opposed to hierarchy.

The reign of God is in direct opposition to the Empire. In the political sense, if the world had to be operated on the principles of the reign of God rather than the principles of Empire, then there will be less a need for power and control, and more a sense of shared power or even a relinquishing of power. This is where Jesus' kenotic act of emptying himself provides a glimpse of what the reign of God is all about (Philippians 2:1-11). Further to this, as opposed to the individualism expressed through Empire, the mission of God is community, as expressed in the relational essence of the Trinity. In the kin-dom of God, fullness of life is more important than archaic rules. We see this consistently throughout the gospels. Empire, on the other hand, stands in direct contradiction to "fullness of life."

We are challenged to continue in the tradition of the Prophets of the Old Testament and in the prophetic tradition of Jesus. In Luke 4:16-19 Jesus re-interprets the prophet Isaiah for his mission in the world, which is to "proclaim the good news for the poor and the oppressed." This prophetic understanding of mission is to transform the present to bring release to the captives, and to proclaim that the downtrodden will be freed from their oppression.

PARTNERS IN GOD'S MISSION

The founding of the Council for World Mission (CWM) and its predecessors, most notably the London Missionary Society (LMS), share in the story of Empire sometimes critically, often beneficially.

The LMS was born in an era of globalisation, of burgeoning free trade, including the trading of slaves. As it reached out across the world to bring the gospel to new places it rode on the back of this rapid expansion of western enterprise. Its groundbreaking work, however, was often distinctly radical, proclaiming good news for the poor and liberating the oppressed. In some places, such as Guyana, missionaries gave their own lives as they acted in solidarity with the slaves whose freedom they sought.

Nonetheless, viewed as a whole the LMS was clearly “not free from the influences of colonialism, cultural imperialism and paternalism.”⁹ And it was the awareness of this and the realisation of injustice inherent in the current structures of mission alongside the “growing selfhood of the churches in the two-thirds world and their desire to engage in mission, locally and globally, as full partners”¹⁰ that led to CWM’s formation in 1977 as a “community of churches in mission.” As the founding document, *Sharing in One World Mission*, states “we seek a form of missionary organisation in which we may all learn from each other, for in that fellowship we believe that the Holy Spirit speaks to all through each.”¹¹

The same document also noted: “At this point in history it is important that we share power as widely as possible, that we hold as much as we can ‘in common’ and that we value the different ways of discipleship in which Christ leads others. We do not cease to use the resources we have for God’s service; but we cease to regard them as our own.”¹²

Lastly, in its proposal for the new body it observed that most important of all it must not become so concerned with relations between churches and between Christians that it overlooked the needs of God’s people. As Christ lives for all humankind, it stated, so those who follow Jesus are called “to keep in the centre of their concern the neighbour at hand or across the world for whom Christ died and lives.”¹³

In these simple statements a new paradigm of mission founded on partnership was established: “No particular church has a private supply of truth, or wisdom or missionary skills. So within the circle of churches which we serve, we seek to encourage mutuality. This is a recognition that to share in international mission every church is both a receiver of help and a giver of its talents.”¹⁴

9 CWM: *A Different Concept in Mission* (2005), p. 2f.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Sharing in One World Mission* (1975), 2.7.

12 *Ibid.*, 2.8.

13 *Ibid.*, 2.9.

14 *Ibid.*, 2.6.

In these terms the idea that we are partners together in God's mission took shape. Over time this has become further elaborated, so that in *World Mission Today* (1999) this view embraces both creation and people of other faith: "As partners in God's mission we do not locate our calling within a narrow Christian redemption history perspective but in the larger perspective of God's presence in the whole of creation leading it to the New Creation. Such a perspective permits us to explore in new ways the relationship between creation and redemption. It also gives us a new openness to work together with people of other faiths and beliefs for justice, peace and the integrity of all God's creation."¹⁵

In many respects CWM is indebted to the wider ecumenical movement for expanding its theological horizons in understanding how mission should be conducted. It is with pride that we recognise how CWM has sought to enact a significantly radical understanding of partnership in mission. At the same time we are conscious of the resilience of systems and relations of dominance and dependency that continue to plague partnership in mission, and we humbly acknowledge that within the CWM family such contradictions are equally prevalent and treacherous.

Even though our self-understanding speaks of partnership and mutuality we still struggle to realise it in our life and witness. We must confess that whilst we hold a lot in common we have been slow to share that which we still regard as our own; that there are those amongst us, both churches and people, who do not share in the life and wealth some

take for granted; that we have been slow to address the inequalities and injustices in our midst, let alone the needs of our neighbour in the world beyond our small community of churches; and that we have failed to hear the Holy Spirit speaking to all through each and so have not received the learning that these contradictions teach us about ourselves and our calling in the world. This must challenge us to re-engage with what it means to be partners in God's mission.

Walking together

Partnership is neither paternalistic nor pretentious. It seeks neither to conceal injustice nor avoid the contradictions of the political and economic reality in which we live. Rather, partnership is an invitation to recognise that Jesus meets and accompanies us on the journey and opens our eyes to the transforming influence of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24).

The Bible tells the stories of people of faith as they seek to follow God. Frequently this is told through the image of journeying, which also incorporates acts of walking, leading, following and accompanying.

Two disciples, one named Cleopas, were journeying to Emmaus talking about the things that had happened in Jerusalem. While they were on their journey "Jesus came near and went with them" (Luke 24:15b). When asked about the content of their discussion they recounted the mighty deeds of Jesus before God and the people. This Jesus Christ, their hope and redemption, however,

¹⁵ *World Mission Today* (1999), 4.12.

was condemned to death and crucified, but whose body was now absent as proclaimed by some women witnesses. In that journey Jesus revealed and taught them “these things” concerning the Messiah and these disciples confessed how their hearts were burning within them while Jesus was talking and opening to them the scriptures while they were “on the road” (Luke 24:32).

Though many simply perceive partnership as being between two or more people for CWM partnership is also with Jesus coming to walk with us, confronting us, teaching us, staying and eating with us. Partnership is more than individual edification leading to a personal spiritual and religious experience. True partnership transforms and empowers the individual to partner with others in the journey with Jesus. We see this in the fact that for the disciples the journey did not stop when Jesus “opened their eyes” (Luke 24:31) but also included their return to Jerusalem, the centre of power and destruction, which they challenged with the powerful witness of the risen Christ.

In the Abraham saga, God calls Abraham into a journey with Godself to be a blessing to all nations (Genesis 12:1-3). That journey with God is often fraught with fear, uncertainties and challenges from within as seen in the dispute over the question of land with his nephew, Lot (Genesis 13) and also from without such as the powerful kings of Empires (Genesis 12:10-20; 13; 14; 20). However, in the Abraham saga, we recognise that women, foreigners and slaves, characterised in Sarah and Hagar, were not full partners of that journey, though they were not voiceless (Genesis 16). Therefore, we need to lift up

the voices of those that have been silenced and invisible who have also been called to partnership in this journey. The lifting up of such voices allows us to experience the wealth of diversity which God has gifted to the church.

The social location of the Corinthian church was one that was ethnically, socially and economically diverse. Such diversity posed a challenge for their witness and praxis within the community as well as in the light of the Roman Empire. The members’ pledge of allegiance to personalities had created divisions within the church and consequently the apostle Paul had to redirect them to Jesus Christ, “who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30; cf. 1:10-31). Furthermore, in his second letter to the Corinthians Paul asserted that Christ had given the Corinthian Christians a ministry of reconciliation on the basis that God has reconciled Godself to them in Christ. Therefore, as Christians, we are called to be reconciled to one another and also to God, and in so doing be “a sign of hope and an offer of salvation and fullness of life to all” (2 Corinthians 5:16-21; *World Mission Today*, 4.3).

Moreover, the varieties of gifts that were present in the community were a celebration of the one Spirit that activates them for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:4-7). Such a partnership of diversified gifts is activated by the one and same Spirit who also inspires the community to declare “Jesus is Lord” (1 Corinthians 12:3), a statement which is the declaratory voice of resistance to the rule of Empire.

Partners with creation

The journey in partnership not only pertains to our relationship with Jesus and with other human beings but with the whole of God's creation. Perceiving ourselves as in partnership with creation necessitates a view of creation which is "radically Theocentric." Every area of existence, the historical, the social and the cultural, as well as the physical natural area is a "seamless whole created by God."¹⁶ Creation is an expression of God's desire for and delight in partnership with humans and non-humans (Psalm 24:1; Proverbs 8:22, 30). Furthermore, in entering into partnership with humanity God has entrusted us with care for each other and the natural order (Genesis 1:26, 2:15). But the giving of trust entails risk. Human beings have been given autonomy through choice; and we have not always made good choices (cf. Genesis 3 and 4).

Some of our choices, such as the dumping of nuclear waste not only poisons the ground but disrupts and displaces the lives of local communities which in turn affects the region, then the nation and ultimately the whole planet. An example is Taiwan's power company, Taipower, who planned to build a nuclear waste plant in Taitung County, Daren Township. News about this project sparked many peaceful demonstrations opposing the disposal of nuclear waste, mainly near aboriginal communities. After some discussion on the matter, the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan Paiwan and East Paiwan presbyteries called for all churches to unite against Taipower's use of monetary kickbacks as means to seduce aboriginal residents away from their resistance to

environmental exploitation, recognising this as a form of human exploitation. Accordingly, the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan sees the connection between human exploitation and environmental exploitation and addresses it as part of its missionary task.¹⁷

Alongside our autonomy we have been given the power to name, a power which enables relationships (cf. Genesis 2:18-20). Instead, we have abused that power by naming others in a way that excludes and alienates them. Yet, in our mission of caring for each other and the natural order God accompanies us forgiving, healing, sustaining and redeeming (cf. World Mission Today, 2.5.). In Christ, God renames us and calls us "friend" (John 15:15).

In our search for a full expression and experience of partnership as CWM we lament the contradictions we see in ourselves, confess our complicity and are willing and ready to critique our personal and collective commitment to the process. However, we embrace the eschatological notions of partnership; and as we envision the future we engage the present with honesty and openness.

16 Gene McAfee, "Ecology and Biblical Studies" in Dieter T. Hessel ed., *Theology for Earth Community – A Field Guide* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), p. 36.

17 Lydia Ma, "NIMBY: Taitung Residents and Churches Oppose Nuclear Waste Storage Plant", in *Taiwan Church News*, 2996 Edition, December 29, 2008 – January 4, 2009. http://enews.pctpress.org/2966/2966_8.htm

Hospitality – resisting the forces of exclusion

In a context of continued quest for globalisation and the ‘one world alliance’, people of the Majority World struggle with the pain of discrimination, stigmatisation and marginalisation. The deportation policies and practices of the Global North strip individuals of their human rights, removes them from their homes and creates social upheavals in vulnerable communities. This is a sin perpetuated against humans with whom we journey in partnership with Godself, and is the context in which CWM can and must strive for a partnership that honours diversity and promotes integrity in relationships. For example, when a person leaves the Caribbean at an early age to live or work in North America or Europe and commits a crime there rather than pay for their crimes in the place that they have come to know as home they are repatriated to their country of origin, often with nothing. Quite often such persons have lost touch with family and friends in their countries of origin and are now required to start all over among strangers. This hostile approach to dealing with immigrants is inhumane and unfairly transfers the problem to countries of the Majority World whilst countries of the North shirk themselves of what ought to be their responsibility.

In other contexts foreigners suffer from discrimination and even xenophobic attacks. A case in point is the attacks in South Africa in May 2008 against foreigners from other African countries. The foreigners were accused of taking the jobs of the locals and blamed for the crime and other social ills in the country. Such attacks have

led to widespread tension, trauma, and displacement of people and loss of lives. This situation is not unique to South Africa and is, in fact, widespread throughout the world.

In these contexts of dislocation of God’s people we understand partnership to mean providing hospitality and promoting humanising relationships. CWM, through our members throughout the world, seeks to fulfil the biblical mandate that invites us to be welcoming: “The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love them as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. . .” (Leviticus 19:34).

This biblical imperative finds expression in the story of Ruth and Naomi who both experienced each other’s culture at a time when each, as stranger, experienced the hospitality of the other. When there was a famine in Israel Naomi and her family went to Moab in search of economic security and was graciously received. Similar hospitality was returned to Ruth when she accompanied her mother-in-law back to Israel when the famine was over (see the Book of Ruth).

CWM is strategically positioned to live out this hospitality through the sharing of our resources of people, money and experiences of hurt and hope. This spirituality of hospitality is a gift we cherish and an opportunity we claim to live and work together towards an experience of life in fullness.

Partnership in community

The journey of partnership on which we are as CWM is a struggle for justice and a commitment for critical solidarity. From this perspective we acknowledge that the brokenness and fragmentation of the human family affects us all. This is well expressed by the saying that “an injury to one is an injury to all.”

During the political upheavals in Zimbabwe CWM accompanied the people of that country through visits, advocacy and material resources. The resources supplied by CWM were used to purchase seeds for the rural communities in Zimbabwe, which assisted them in rising above the challenges and re-claiming hope. In the words of one of the people who received the seeds: “we prayed, God spoke to you, provided rain; and we have a bumper harvest as a result.” This is a testimony of the positive impact of sharing and critical solidarity, and an affirmation of God at work in partnership with humanity.

Partnership calls us to hold each other accountable in the journey of mission. It recognises that we are responsible to God, individually and collectively, for the ways in which we live our lives. This means that an individual or a member church cannot operate in isolation of the community. We are guided by the principles of *Ubuntu* and *Sangsaeng*, which express the conviviality of our relationship. This is further captured in the African saying that *motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe* (a person is a person through relations with others). This echoes Paul’s words to the Corinthians: “For the body does not consist of one member but many .

. . . the eye cannot say to the hand I have no need of you, nor again the head to the feet I have no need of you . . . if one member suffers all suffer together, if one member is honoured all rejoice together.” (1 Corinthians 12:14, 21, 26)

This convivial nature of the partnership toward which we aspire as CWM is made all the more visible in the inter-connectedness and inter-dependence of each member to the other as the body of Christ. CWM’s understanding of partnership as journeying with the Godself in Jesus Christ along with all of God’s creation serves to strengthen the conviviality of the life that all creation shares.

FULLNESS OF LIFE

For CWM fullness of life has been the goal toward which we, as a community of churches in mission, have constantly sought to orient our actions. The Report from the 2002 London Consultation quotes John 10:10¹⁸ in characterising the life affirming ministry of Jesus, and the 2009 document “Shaping the Future: A Strategy Framework for CWM Trustees” states that CWM’s vision, inspired by the same verse, is to seek “fullness of life through Christ for all creation.”

John 10:1-16 presents a more detailed description of the context of Jesus’ promise of fullness of life, in the Parable of the Sheepfold, of which Jesus is the gate and the good shepherd. Jesus is the gate through which the sheep come in and go out and find pasture; the good shepherd who is willing to lay down his life for the sheep. He is also the one who “has come.” Therefore, our fullness of life is rooted in the incarnation and the redemptive work of Christ.

Fullness of life, as a theme, can be found throughout Scripture and has a number of facets:

- a) Real and practical blessing, such as longevity (Genesis 5); peaceful living in relation to the whole of creation (Isaiah 65:17-25; Micah 4:3-5); and communal and family relationships (Psalm 128). Both Micah and Isaiah refer to the natural world, Isaiah with a breathtaking leap into an eschatological vision.
- b) Inclusivity, as evidenced in the Hebrew celebrations such as the gathering of tithes when the landless and resourceless Levites, widows, orphans and aliens are intentionally included; also the sequence of stories in Mark 6-8 in which the feeding of the five thousand men (not counting women and children) is shaped by the encounter between Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman, into the more inclusive feeding of the four thousand.
- c) A sense of invitation to the heavenly banquet, in which God offers all good things to the people (Jeremiah 31:12-14); and the outcasts are especially welcome (Matthew 22:1-10). This is one of the few places where Jesus mentions physically disabled people without the sense that fullness of life must include physical healing.

- d) Being filled with the very nature of God (Ephesians 3:14-19). Human beings have deep spiritual needs which God fills utterly and sacrificially with God's whole nature. The writer sets this in the context of his prayer for the Ephesians, that they will know the length, breadth, depth and height of Christ's love which is actually unknowable.
- e) The eschatological vision of a fulfilment when shame, suffering, weeping and even death are overcome. (Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelation 21:3-4) This is the crux of fullness of life. It is the vision of the *eschaton* pouring back into the reality of life. It can never be completely achieved in this life but is constantly before us as an ideal. It is God's gift and our desire, God's challenge and our imperative, God's call and our hope.

In this regard fullness of life is a promise yet to be fulfilled, that is not possible "right now." "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together." (Isaiah 11:6) This promise of life in fullness comes at a great cost where the whole establishment of this world may have to be reorganised into a life-affirming community in which "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spear into pruning hooks, nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." (Micah 4:4) Herein lies

its worthiness and necessity. It is necessarily valuable because it is costly.

A life-giving movement

But fullness of life is much more than human action in solidarity. It is a movement of the Holy Spirit, a Pentecost festival. It looks like being filled with new wine! Everyone is amazed, "and how is it that we hear them speaking our own native language . . . In our own language we hear them speaking about God's power." (Acts 2:8, 12) The imperial languages are silent. Native languages are heard, understood and respected. As such, fullness of life springs up with all the freshness and simplicity of the small villages over against the grandeur and ornamentations of the great city centres – "they shall sit under their own vines and under their own fig tree and no one shall make them afraid." (Micah 4:4) This is real economy and an antithesis of speculative economy.

And so we ask ourselves, "Where is fullness of life?" "Where do we find fullness of life?" "How do we reach it?" The Tree of Life is hidden, but it is within us. Fullness of life is within our reach. Peter once said, "Where shall we go – the eternal living word is with you!" (John 6:68)

18 "The thief comes only to kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

Although scripture continuously confirms that fullness of life is a gift of grace conferred upon creation by God and is to be shared by all there continue to be individuals and groups that abuse and misrepresent the Bible to justify their acts of violence over and against others, stifling and destroying life. Within many contexts religious fundamentalism continues to act as the enemy of life in all its fullness offered in Christ. The religious stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the presence of non-life in their cultures, failing to name the forces of death and destruction. The presence of hunger and poverty, and the deprivation of adequate resources for health and well-being, which are vital in ensuring fullness of life for individuals and communities, are not the natural and normal consequences within which we must live. It is a sin which Christians who have become acclimatised to the abnormalities of society and therefore blind to the cultures of death prevalent in today's world fail to name and call to account. In this respect the absence of the fullness of life in so many of our lived realities compels us to seek justice and righteousness so that the true Shalom of God may reign.

More pertinent in this era, in which we live under the shadow of the Empire and its ominous clutches of globalised market forces, we are required to acknowledge that fullness of life is in no way equal to the satiation

of our physical desires and the temporary satisfaction of our materialistic cravings. While the use of money is a necessity we must always be attentive to its dangers. Money cannot and should not become our god for it can never give life. All too often the forces of mammon are utilised to procure weapons and instruments of death rather than life. The quest for mammon and the illusory comforts of material and physical satisfaction as an alternative to the fullness of life that can only be received as a gift from the Creator God robs humanity of the genuine worth of life and is also the primary reason why all creation groans for liberation and true life in fullness. It is imperative for us to recognise that fullness of life is life lived with the whole of creation, without which life itself cannot be sustained.

By Christ's death we are united with God and have received the opportunity to experience life in fullness. It is important that we, as Church, celebrate this costly privilege by embracing it as a gift. We understand also the weight of bearing witness to this gift and for that reason are committed to be mindful of our relations to all that share the gift of life that God has given to us.

Life-giving communities

God-given fullness of life challenges us to recognise those whom we call neighbours – to love them with love and care in Christ's name, and also be prepared to name and confront the forces of injustice which stifle and kill life. Neighbour does not mean just those near us or those with whom we get along. Following Jesus' witness, the neighbour was the woman at the well who belonged to a different people; the victim of violence helped by the Good Samaritan; even the woman caught in adultery. The neighbour is not just a person in need, but one that is in need.

We are also challenged to live out our life in fullness in the ways Jesus relates himself with people with disabilities; for them he himself became disabled, wounded and even died on the cross. By this action Jesus lives for us that participation is life-giving in reality.

As bearer and recipients of the fullness of life the church must be true to what it has privileged itself to be by faithfully asking how effectively it reflects fullness of life in Christ in the ways it ministers in the situations in which it finds itself.

Fullness of life may be an expression for the inclusion of all into the common life. When those who are in the centre are able to move into the realities of the weak and the marginalised it is a new world where every creature finds authenticity in the pluralities of the creation. Job can hear about God from his location in the centre. When the centre is moved and when he is no more in the centre he claims "Now I see God." (Job 42:5) We must become enabled to see the blossoming of the fullness of life. God has so much to reveal. There is so much light to be shed from God's word.

We must learn to shed the scales in our eyes. It is a whole process of de-learning what we have learnt. We need to see the mysteries of transcendence. We need new lenses (theological education), new paradigms, and new methodologies for new realities, so that we can join with Cleopas and proclaim "our eyes were opened!" (Luke 24:31)

At times it seems that the fullness of life is mysterious and difficult to define logically. The Bible speaks about it in the language of imageries, stories, events, history and faith. And so we must mutually assist each other to discover, conceptualise and practice what we speak as the fullness of life. Fullness of life must happen and become a reality in a context of poverty, war, epidemics, marginalisation, fundamentalism and terrorism. In contra-distinction to this "reality" fullness of life finds its expression

in inclusion, sharing, equality, diversity and abundance. It must begin with the last in the community. It is a subversive spirituality struggling against the powers and principalities of the world. It ultimately moves towards the establishment of the kin-dom of God. What follows are some samples of how the mysterious transcendence is lived in the realities of our present world.

A life-giving witness

Namibia has many Uranium mines which generate much income for the nation. However, it is also true that the majority of the population is reeling under severe poverty. Hunger is a stark reality among the people. There are certain organisations, including the church, which are trying to address the issue of hunger, particularly by feeding the children. It means so much for those whose children cannot afford even a single meal a day. This is a small and a humble beginning. This only shows the long way to go towards fullness of life. Although seemingly small and negligible one should not forget that living out and bearing witness to fullness of life must begin somewhere near.

Nyogi, an Indian mathematics graduate, took a different choice for his life, quite different from the other enterprising students and moved to a tribal village. He went and lived among them in a small hut. He married a tribal woman and became one of them joining them as a mine worker. He slowly organised them and demanded that the mine companies

pay the minimum wages according to the laws laid down by the government. This resulted in a staggering increase in the income of the workers. Immediately, the owners of the mines opened many alcohol shops and all the men went to drink. Consequently, all the money was drained by the rich mine owners. In response, Nyogi organized the women and discussed the matter with them. They resolved that all the women together would collectively not permit the men to drink. Those who do not listen to the proposal will not be allowed into their homes. The alcohol shops had to be closed in a week's time. They further discussed how the increase in money could be best used. They built a school for their children and a hospital for them. They became very strong and organised. Nyogi was shot dead by the mine owners. Now the movement is led by his uneducated wife. All through this Nyogi lived in a small hut with his wife. Is this not a way to move towards fullness of life?

One day, the Holy Spirit spoke to a pastor of a church in Argentina telling him to walk through the shanty town on the outskirts of the small town in which his middle class church was situated. Cautiously, he did so, but nothing happened. The next day the Spirit challenged him again to walk through the shanty town, so he did, and nothing happened. The third day, the Spirit spoke to him again. By now he was puzzled rather than afraid, and he walked through the shanty town. This time, people approached him, and he fell into conversation. He began to

engage his own congregation with the people of the shanty town. They started a place of worship there, and began to give out food. Gradually, they established a clinic, school and eventually a piece of land where the inhabitants could grow their own food, so becoming less dependent on handouts. A minister from London visited the community. Her church ran a homelessness centre, which catered for 150 homeless people each Sunday. She told the story of her own church, and listened to the stories of the Argentine church. One of the Argentine people stood up in the church service and brought the London minister a big bag of rice. She was horrified, and protested that she couldn't possibly take it from them, but they insisted – it was for the homeless people of London. The minister took the rice back (sneaking it through Customs). They cooked it at the homelessness centre, and she told the story of the Argentine church. Two homeless alcoholics told her to wait a minute. They left, and after a while, returned with a £50 note – a huge amount of money in the context. They said it was for the people of the shanty town. This presented another dilemma. Had the money been stolen, or begged on the street? With the Argentine economy at the time, there was no way to send the money through the bank. So the minister bought a Christian book, and interleaved the £50 note in the pages. She sent it with a card, saying that the contents of the book would be “greatly enriching to the people.” Later she heard that the money had been received and well used. She and the Argentine pastor were nothing

in this, but messengers. The poor people of two communities had reached directly to each other, and offered resources, contact and a subversion of their two economies.

As we listen to these stories and view these images from text and context it is important for us to understand how they are useful tools, opening up our theological understanding as we continue on our journey of partnership towards the realisation of fullness of life in Christ for all creation. More specifically, they help us to search God's word and world as we continue to challenge ourselves and each other as partners in God's mission.

CONCLUSION

The stories of life told above strengthen and embolden us in our search for creative and meaningful ways to share with the world the Story of Life. Much in our world today continues to strangle the lives of the people and estrange us from the very source of Life itself.

This collection of stories which inform our theological reflection and call us to missiological response continue to pose to us the question “How can we, as the body of Christ, respond in the context of Empire?” How are we to continue in the tradition of the Prophets of the Old Testament and in the prophetic tradition of Jesus?

As a member of the much wider and global body of Christ, CWM has sought to respond to these questions in a specific manner. Through the proclamation and the intentional efforts of our members to realise true partnership in mission CWM has, and continues to strive to establish God’s kin-dom on earth, a community in which all creation basks in God’s gift of life in all its fullness. For CWM fullness of life continues to be the goal toward which we, as a community of churches in mission, seek to orient our actions.

In recent times we have come to understand this as enabling our members to develop missional congregations. As the stories here illustrate instances of injustice and God’s offer of life are played out in particular contexts, local places where God’s people are called to witness their hope, and connect their faith in proclamation and action to the needs of those around them. To be a missional congregation is to enter this scene as a partner in God’s mission, celebrating and offering fullness of life through Christ for all creation. As a community of churches we engage in this together, mutually challenging, encouraging and equipping each other.

As this process of theological and practical reflection has revealed we are not unaware of our need of repentance, lamenting the contradictions we see in ourselves. However, this process of contrition is undertaken in conjunction with a stronger emphasis on conversion – not simply a turning from but a much more dynamic turning toward. What is offered here is not simply a critique of our past but a collective commitment to the future, an engagement of the present with honesty and openness as we embrace the eschatological notions of partnership as we envision the future together, with God and each other.

Once again we acknowledge and affirm that partnership calls us to hold each other accountable in our journey of mission. It recognises that we are responsible to God, individually and collectively, for the ways in which we live our lives. This means that an individual or a member church cannot operate in isolation of the community. We are guided by the principles of *Ubuntu* and *Sangsaeng*, which express the conviviality of our relationship. This convivial nature of the partnership toward which we aspire as CWM is made all the more visible in the inter-connectedness and inter-dependence of each member to the other as the body of Christ. CWM's understanding of partnership as journeying with the Godself in Jesus Christ along with all of God's creation serves to strengthen the conviviality of the life that all creation shares.

And so the results of our time together are offered not as "the" definitive conclusion but as a sign in our journey with God and with each other as CWM. Together we still have much to learn and to do together. Our journey of partnership in mission with God and God's created world is far from complete.

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