

General Assembly 2018: Address by the Revd Dr Collin Cowan

Saturday 6 July 2018

This is the full text of Dr Cowan's reflection as delivered to the communication teams prior to General Assembly. There were deviations from the given text when it was delivered.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, on behalf of our Moderator, the Revd Darchonhaia Darnei, Directors and Trustees of Council for World Mission Ltd and Council for World Mission (UK), as well as all my colleagues in the Secretariat, I extend warm Christian greetings to this Assembly of the United Reformed Church. We join you in prayer for inspiring and meaningful discourse and for positive, life-transforming outcomes.

Your Assembly comes just under a month of the historic summit in which the President of the United States of America, Donald Trump, and the Supreme Leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Kim Jong-Un, signed a document, committing these two geopolitical centres to a more peaceful coexistence and hopefully to pave the way for the peaceful reunification of the Korean people. Whilst many questions may remain unanswered, this positive step resonates with CWM's theme of 'Healing: Hope in action'; and reaffirms our conviction that our hostile histories and the brokenness that characterises much of life today, need not define our future.

The URC is meeting in the midst of its own geopolitical struggles. There is the issue of Brexit and its implications for a united Europe and an example to a world that is regressing towards fractiousness and exclusivism. There are tensions within the United Kingdom, with Scotland and Wales asserting their perspectives on whether a United Kingdom is necessary and if so what it should look like. And there is the troubling emerging issue concerning the Windrush generation and its implications for hundreds of thousands of people who are affected by the decisions of the UK government, and the consequent emotional and economic hardships.

These are some of the issues the context of this assembly, as the URC does its utmost to remain a faithful steward of the mysteries of God, the plan of God to act in grace towards a broken, perishing world (John 3: 16-17). It is within such a context that our call to evangelism ought to be heard; and the response that is required is one which grounds evangelism in an understanding that it is about telling and living the story of God's interest in the wellbeing of the world. In this sense, evangelism is about healing: hope in action. As rightly stated by Dr Fr Monodeep Daniel, evangelism is about building community, not dividing people; and it is equally about 'forge[ing] relationships of solidarity with those who share the vision to resist the tyranny of the dominant' (*Travelling Together: Daily Devotions 2018*, 190).

Healing is God's gift to humanity and to all of creation and the Church is an instrument of God, commissioned to participate in healing the broken body, relationships and the future through hopeful actions. In this regard to 'resist the tyranny of the dominant' is part and parcel of building community of all people, bridging the divide, marked by prejudice and hostility, and paving the way for relationships of trust and goodwill.

Your theme for this assembly, 'Walking the Way: Living the life of Jesus today', resonates with CWM. CWM's object is Christocentric, in the sense that we believe that Jesus embodied the purpose of God in the exercise of his mission and commissioned his first disciples to carry out that said mission (John 20: 21). To live the life of Jesus today is to accept Jesus' call to the first disciples as ours as well, locating that call in the context of our realities today. To that extent, CWM welcomes this theme and wishes you all the best as you explore its relevance and implications for your ministry and mission.

I deem it a great privilege and honour to have been asked to share with this Assembly, a little about the Council for World Mission, the organisation of which this great church, the URC, is an esteemed member;

and whose ongoing support has enriched the quality of our engagement with God's mission. My intention is to share a little about who we are and what we do, locating it within the context in which we do mission, with the hope that it will bear relevance to the mission to which the URC is called and committed.

Council for World Mission: A mission organisation with a vision of life in fullness

CWM is 40 years old. This international mission organisation came into being in 1977, incorporating the London Missionary Society (1795), the Commonwealth Missionary Society (1836) and the (English) Presbyterian Board of Missions (1847). Its members are located in six global regions around the world – Africa, Caribbean, East Asia, Europe, Pacific and South Asia. There are 32 member bodies that share this partnership; and as stated earlier, the URC is a strong and serving member. In celebrating 40 years we reaffirm our commitment to partnership that is defined by equal representation at the table, equal access to the resources of the organisation and equal opportunity for participation in the sending and receiving of partners in mission to enrich and strengthen each other in the exercise of ministry. This is a point for celebration and thanksgiving. Indeed, CWM has a story to tell of what it means to be a missionary organisation that has been transformed from the old paradigm of doing mission, as practised by its antecedent bodies; and we give glory to God for the testimony that we have made significant advances over these forty years, particularly in our strategy to work through our member bodies, affirming our conviction that local communities provide live contexts for missional engagement. As we look to the future, we are all challenged to seize the moment, imagine the path for a sustainable future and be part of the discernment process that will enable us to hear the Spirit's call and be ready to respond with prompt obedience.

In 2010, CWM developed a theology statement, in which we defined our mission context as empire. We have adopted the definition of empire from the joint Globalisation Project of the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa and Evangelical Reformed Church in Germany as:

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.

This statement clearly names empire as the power dynamics that are at play, informing systems and structures and impacting the quality of life, or lack thereof, for humanity and the creation. With its vision of 'fullness of life through Christ, for all creation', CWM has embarked on a journey, in partnership with the ecumenical community, to accompany member bodies in reading the signs of the times and responding to God's cry at the broken humanity and the groaning creation. We consider it a great privilege to be invited to a relationship of partnership with God to build life-affirming communities, where justice, peace and goodwill are the defining marks.

In keeping with our theology statement, and in pursuit of our strategy of accompaniment, CWM identified four intersecting priorities to guide its work for the period 2010-2019:

- Enable member bodies to develop missional congregations
- Express solidarity and prophetic witness
- Reflect and research

- Deepen partnerships and ecumenical engagement

Our aim is that through a process of mutual accompaniment, member churches would become attuned to what is going on in the world around us, with all its beauty and its brokenness; aware of our need to collaborate with others in dreaming and acting for the experience of a different world; and active in building solidarity for engagement with God's mission as we understand it. Our goal is life-affirming communities – healing and restorative communities, free from economic injustice, ecological destruction, militarisation and conflict, abusive and manipulative power, among other destructive vices working against God's beautiful creation.

There are six broad programme areas through which CWM attempts to live out its strategy of working through member bodies and in partnership with the ecumenical community. These six programme areas are deliberately intertwined to give cohesive expression to CWM's commitment to doing mission in the context of empire and to pursue its vision of Fullness of life, through Christ, for all creation. These programme areas are:

- Mission Support Programme (MSP)
- Partners in Mission (PIM)
- Discernment and Radical Engagement (Dare)
- Leadership Formation (Leaf)
- Capacity Development Programme (CDP)
- Cutting Edge Mission Initiatives (Cemi)

Highlights of these programmes

This paper will not allow me space to elucidate on all the things that CWM does to give life to these six programmes. However, I will offer a brief overview of a few that may carry interest for this gathering.

Hearing God's cry

Hearing God's Cry is an initiative that is intentional about helping member churches to look at their context, with all its pain and turmoil, through the lens of empire; and to discern how God identifies with and invites us to be part of God's instrument for the healing of the suffering and struggle of a broken humanity and a groaning creation.

Legacies of slavery

Through a series of hearings, as we retrace the transatlantic journey of enslaved nations; and the related ideologies that continue to govern our lives to this day while encouraging lamentations from the deep recesses of the heart. CWM commits to participate in righting the wrongs of history. In the position paper on this initiative, we assert that "Tackling the legacy of slavery begins with a determination to face truth". This is precisely what the hearings are about. The task beyond these hearings is for CWM to respond with courage and for the sake of justice, and with the hope of a future that is better than the past and present.

A More Able Church

With the diligent support and commitment of the United Reformed Church (URC), the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan (PCT) the Church of South India (CSI) and the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM), CWM facilitated the launch of four projects on 'A More Able Church'; an attempt at affirming and advocating with and for persons living with disability. These projects will serve as pilots for encouraging all member churches within CWM to incorporate ministry with and for persons living with disability as an integral part of the life and witness of the church, and as a matter of justice.

Dare (Discernment and Radical Engagement) global forum

DARE global forum, aims to influence and heighten the consciousness of churches to the brokenness and groaning of God's creation; to shake the comfort zones of academic institutions, especially theological institutions, that avoid tough issues and settle for academic palliatives; and to share in the framing and shaping of an agenda to topple empire and promote justice and peace.

Solidarity and engagement

CWM is committed to solidarity and engagement, through our members, thereby helping to give voice and presence to the witness of the church in context. As a case in point, both the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar (PCM) and Church of Bangladesh (COB) have had to deal with the vexing crisis being experienced by the Rohingya people of the Rakhine State in Myanmar. The Rohingya people represent the largest group of stateless people in the world; and the suffering being experienced, and seemingly sanctioned by the Myanmar government, is a cause for much concern. PCM is trapped in a context where prophetic witness though necessary, is challenged; and COB is being called to consider the humanitarian implications of having close to a million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. In response, CWM has initiated conversations with both PCM and COB and we are continuing to work with them to identify the most appropriate ways to support them. Through the South Asia region, CWM has made a visit to the refugee camps in Bangladesh where the Rohingya people are given temporary shelter. We have also written to member churches to join us in responding to the humanitarian needs both in Bangladesh and Myanmar. The URC had already initiated conversation with CWM to participate in this project and has made a substantial financial contribution to this end. Given our closeness to the issues, URC has also sought guidance from CWM on the timing and appropriateness of advocacy in this matter. Other churches are responding positively to this invitation for partnership on this issue.

Young women's leadership symposium

As part of our overall leadership formation strategy, which involves an annual youth initiative in all the regions of CWM, we have designed a young women's leadership symposium, aimed at heightening awareness and developing capacity among young women. This initiative is a deliberate attempt at balancing the gender inequalities and redressing the patriarchal framework that dominate the culture of the day by preparing young women for leadership. We believe that for our vision for equal gender representation in leadership to be materialised, a preferential option towards enabling young women to claim their place at the table is necessary. This initiative, which began in 2017, runs for four to six weeks and is modelled after the Training in Mission programme.

Sharing of people

The three-pronged partnership strategy adopted in 1977, was the sharing of people, ideas and money. Sharing of people has been a tremendous success story for CWM. For example, CWM's PIM programme has been well served by those who have made sacrifices to leave their homelands to serve on the mission field in distant places and unfamiliar cultural settings. We owe a debt of gratitude to them, their families and both the sending and receiving churches for keeping this flagship programme of CWM alive. The URC is a participating church both by way of sending and receiving partners, thereby ensuring that this programme remains dynamic.

Sharing of people extends way beyond these formal initiatives of CWM. Taking account of just the year, June 2017 to June 2018, for instance, there is a total of 87 persons who served the governance structure alone. This figure does not take into account persons who serve in multiple roles nor in staff positions. For example, were we to consider the finance and staffing committees separately from the Board, there would have been an additional nine persons to those already on the board. To name one person in particular, a gift of the URC to CWM for this period, John Ellis, our Treasurer, serves in eight settings within CWM, seven of which are in his substantive role as director and treasurer – board of directors, members' meeting, investment

committee, audit committee, finance committee, staffing committee, policy review group and core leadership team with Moderator and General Secretary to review agendas and debrief before and after each meeting of the board.

In our very recent history, say the decade which started in 2010, the URC alone has offered at least ten persons to CWM. Individuals such as Geoffrey Roper, Elizabeth Nash, John Parry, Jane Rowell, Gwen and Bernie Collins, Christopher Baillie, Philip Woods, Nneoma Chima, Peter Cruchley, Michael Jagessar, John Ellis and your own General Secretary, John Proctor, who have served the organisation in various ways, each contributing significantly to our life and work. Were we to multiply this across the 32 member churches, not counting ecumenical partners and other well-wishers of CWM, the number would grow significantly, demonstrating that the sharing of people is one of our greatest success stories.

Nifea (New International Financial and Economic Architecture)

In partnership with the World Communion of Reformed Churches, World Council of Churches and Lutheran World Federation, CWM has embarked on a journey to imagine what an alternative to the present death-dealing financial and economic arrangement may look like. We contend that the present economic and financial systems and structures serve only a few at the expense of the many and that God's beautiful creation, in all its forms, is being sacrificed. We believe that complicity, even through silence, places the faith we profess at stake; and that there is urgency in highlighting, exploring and enabling the life-sustaining alternatives to come to the fore.

Much of what is needed to impact corporate structures can only be done by a united approach, hence this ecumenical solidarity. However, CWM has been conducting a series of colloquia on the economy of life within the six regions, providing space for member churches to learn about and engage with the issues, especially as it relates to actions that can be taken in their respective contexts. These have gone extremely well and in response to these conversations, we have decided to embark on the development of theological education material to further equip member churches and to support theological institutions in addressing this concept of the economy of life. We propose to create an alternative power base that is informed, competent and confident to engage with the present economic system and financial structures that will:

- Be committed to building life-giving communities where the intrinsic value of life is honoured and not sacrificed for profit;
- Address issues to do with the care of creation, the responsible use of Earth's resources, the eradication of poverty as a matter of justice, and the experience of life in fullness for all creation.

This is another area for collaborative work; so whilst CWM is committed to taking the lead, we intend to draw insights and support from others, such as the URC, who are already working in this area.

CWM's sustainability – The board of directors and management have wrestled with the re-emerging question of sustainability over the past year in very deliberate ways. We have concluded that sustainability is about financial capacity, which takes into consideration our stewardship of our present investment and all potential sources of income; CWM's longevity as a life-affirming mission organisation, working through member churches and in partnership with the ecumenical community; and life itself, God's priceless gift.

Whilst there is no easy answer to this three-pronged quest, we are mindful that taking the time to consider all options available to us is a necessity. Accordingly, the finance committee is charged to working with management to ensure that the issue of financial sustainability is held in creative tension with the sustainability of life and the ways in which the missional engagement of CWM contributes to this ultimate purpose.

We have discussed in detail the financial contribution of members to the mission of CWM and affirmed that this should be encouraged. We do take into account the significant other ways in which members contribute to CWM and note that it is not possible to place a monetary value on these. Notwithstanding, we believe and are committed to continue encouraging members to contribute as they are able to the income of CWM.

2020 and beyond process

The board of directors has commissioned a strategy planning group (SPG) to embark on a strategic planning process to discern and develop a plan to guide the work of CWM for the period 2020-2029. The planning process is intended to be stakeholder-driven, participatory and open. It is anticipated that this ever-widening circle of stakeholders will be open to the movement of God's Spirit, such that the emerged plan reflects God's purpose for life and wholeness (John 3: 16-17). In a world where peace is at stake; poverty, a stubborn reality to contend with, separation and occupation continue to marginalise peoples, religions and cultures, and where human greed and callousness remain dominant across cultures and contexts, this is a critical juncture in the life of CWM as a mission organisation.

As a critical stakeholder, the URC is expected to play a major role in assisting us to read and analyse the social landscape, to interpret the quests of member churches and to think and plan in a holistic way so that the outcome is truly reflective of the of CWM's identity and sense of call. We welcome Rev John Proctor as a member of the SPG and look forward to his usual interrogative and insightful contribution to the process. We seek your prayers for God's direction of our path and for wisdom and courage to be faithful disciples of Jesus of Nazareth throughout this exercise.

Council for World Mission: Structure to facilitate participation and engagement with God's mission

CWM's strategy of engagement with God's mission, through member churches and in partnership with the ecumenical community, is undergirded by a strong and robust governance and management structure.

There are three layers to the structure, which was approved by the board of directors in 2015.

- The coming together of members from all 32 member bodies, in an annual members' meeting (AMM), during which time the annual general meeting (AGM) is also conducted. The AMM is an opportunity for members to come together to share stories, celebrate accomplishments and discern together ways to strengthen the mission of CWM. The AGM is a formally constituted court to conduct the regulatory and fiduciary business of the Charities. CWM currently operates two charities – Council for World Mission Ltd and Council for World Mission (UK). The latter is governed by a trustee body of six, drawn from the six regions of CWM.
- The board of directors, which is headed by a moderator, is comprised of twelve members, two drawn from each of the six regions of CWM. The board is elected by the Assembly of Members and serves for a period of four years. To fulfil the regulatory requirements of Singapore, a thirteenth director will be appointed by the board of directors, and ratified by the AMM, in the event that no Singaporean is named among the twelve. The board of directors, which has responsibility for the general oversight of the organisation, reports to the AMM and the AGM.
- The management is headed by a general secretary, appointed by the members, on the recommendation of the board of directors, for a period of five years. The management is organised into three broad teams – programme, finance and administration and office of the General Secretary. Management has responsibility for the execution of CWM's strategy and reports to the board on a quarterly basis.

With the restructuring of the board, in which the role of members is separated from that of the board and all 32 members are no longer individually represented on the board, it was felt that there is need for a mechanism to facilitate to voices of the members to be fully expressed and considered in planning and decision-making processes. Accordingly, the members mission forum (MMF) was created.

The MMF, which includes a principal officer, a mission personnel and a youth from each member body of the respective region, meets once a year, and prior to the AMM. Through the meeting of the leadership of the Members in regions, concerns of members are heard, reading of the context and theological reflection thereon is facilitated and an action plan agreed that may involve further consideration by the AMM and the Board of Directors or form part of the ways in which each member body will organise its missional engagement for the ensuing period.

Staff in regions

Management is organised in a dispersed team, with staff appointed to work in regions, walking alongside members in a more deliberate and intentional way, and making the linkages between global initiatives and contextual (member church) issues.

Council for World Mission: Values to inform and guide relationships

In addition to its theology, vision and its mission statements, CWM has named four values as the guiding motivation behind its every action and the standard by which its identity and integrity may be measured.

- Justice in relationships
- Mutuality, Equality and Interdependence
- Generosity of spirit
- Unity in Diversity

With these values come with an accompanying set of principles that inform and inspire us in our daily engagements.

Among the means through which we hold ourselves accountable to these values and principles, is the checks and balances we place on ourselves through established frameworks.

Accountability framework

The audit committee has responsibility to serve as a 'watch dog' for our operation and practices, ensuring that they are in keeping with established policies and procedures. Annually, there is internal auditing exercise that is outsourced; and there are of course the external auditors charged with responsibility to scrutinise our financial practices and transaction in line with established international standards.

The accounting hierarchy of management, board of directors and members provides another layer of accountability and this is linked to the work of the committees, such as finance and staffing committees, with more direct responsibility for in-depth scrutiny and control.

Policy framework

The board of directors has approved a suite of policies to provides a clear guidance within which Management may operate and to strengthen accountability. For the purposes of this conversation three such policies are singled out to emphasise CWM's commitment to living by our values and principles:

- Our investment policy carries a section that holds it accountable for ethical Investment; and we have identified five areas for special attention in this regard – pornography, gambling, tobacco, alcohol and armament.

- There is a whistle-blowing, which serves to reinforce CWM's commitment to transparency and accountability. The policy outlines ways in which whistle-blowers will be protected from recrimination and how to accompany both the whistle-blower and the person so charged with pastoral care and support. The chair of the audit committee, in consultation with the Moderator, is responsible for establishing a whistle-blowing committee to respond to any allegation of mal-practice under the whistle-blowing policy framework.
- There is also a Respectful working relationships policy, which covers such things as sexual harassment, bullying and discrimination.

Conclusion

The present board of directors, at its orientation session in November, 2016, were reminded that in 1995, the occasion of the bicentenary of LMS, CWM carried as its theme words that depict adventurism, audacity and deep aspiration for a mission organisation that is not trapped or contained by the limitations of our experience or the short-sightedness of our faith: 'Dare to Dream.'

That journey of dreaming remains a pertinent preoccupation and I invite the URC to persist together with the CWM family on this journey. It is an invitation for all of us to commit ourselves to function with daring hope, audacious expectation and oneness of purpose. CWM has etched its mark on the world stage; there is no turning back now. Instead we must continue to carry the flag of our ancestors proudly and bravely – naming our complicity, confessing our wrong, restoring the breach, celebrating the plentiful good and raising the banner higher.

And he showed me a river of the water of life, pure and clear as crystal, and it went out from the throne of God and of the Lamb. And in the centre of the street on this side and on that, upon the river, The Tree of Life which produces twelve fruits, and every month it gives its fruits and its leaves for the healing of the peoples (Revelation 22:1-2).

John's dream of another world, from the island of Patmos to which he was banished for his courage to confront and resist power, is that which inspired him to challenge and encourage the churches of Asia Minor to remain faithful, even unto the point of death (Revelation 2:10, NIV). No lesser courage is needed today in the face of empire; and such a dream is that which will cause us to see and embrace the alternative with confidence.

Thank you for this opportunity to share these reflections with you as you gather for this important meeting of the church council. I wish you every blessing in your deliberations and pray with you for the enlightenment of the Spirit for discernment and decision-making.

Collin Cowan
July 2018