



# The Council for World Mission

## RISE TO LIFE

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CONFESSING WITNESS TO LIFE-FLOURISHING COMMUNITIES

**GLOBAL ASSEMBLY THEME EXPRESSIONS**

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# PREAMBLE

## RISING TO LIFE WITH JESUS

As CWM, member churches and partners gather in Johannesburg, South Africa in June 2020 around the theme '*Rising to life with Jesus*', we are mindful that on June 16th, 1976, the youth of Soweto dared to rise up against the dehumanization of Apartheid. They rose up against the racist architecture of the Bantu education system. Many lost their lives. What began in Soweto spread across the country as part of an anti-Apartheid movement.

The youth of Soweto were not alone in their defiance against systems of domination and oppression. Jesus and his disciples radically challenged the might of Roman occupying power also felt the wrath of the system. Jesus was nailed outside the city for taking on empire. The ways of empire seek to censor, silence and force submission out of its subjects. Yet time and time again, prophetic voices relentlessly point to a better way, a better life, and better future that stands in contrast to empire's ways. They arise. They keep arising!

Rising to life with Jesus is a continual process. It is a call of discipleship to rise up, rise against tyrannical ways, and rise towards a vision of fullness of life for all of creation. Confronting powers and principalities is not an easy task. It is risky and costly. It requires witnessing and testifying that all are accepted, valued and equally beloved. This is what rising to life with Jesus proclaims.

The Spirit of the living God is the same Spirit that raised Jesus to life. It is the same Spirit that animates and empowers us to protest, resist and transform death-dealing ways. This same Spirit moves us beyond barricaded communities to become sacred spaces of generous hospitality. This Spirit beckons us to move from the comfort of the sidelines into the messiness of doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly in our faith.

Fullness of life invites us to critically engage the powers that deny, destroy, and dehumanize. Rising to life with Jesus demands us to name all that subjugates and distorts fullness of life. Rising to life with Jesus comes with the sound of the blowing trumpets that tumbles the walls of empire crashing. These walls have been built and continue to be built on the backs of those who have been marginalized and disenfranchised. Walls of economic injustice. Walls of ecological degradation. Walls of gender prejudice and violence. Walls of racist oppression... These walls must come down! They must fall! Brick by brick. Stone by stone. #WallsMustFall #FeesMustFall #RhodesMustFall

The story of South Africa and its ongoing struggles for liberation is one of many from across the world. Apartheid continues in various forms and across contexts. Rising to life with Jesus invites us to spiritual disciplines against destructive systems. The call of Jesus to come follow him is not just a rising '*oe'r the*

*grave'*, rather, it is his spirit is a spirit of defiance that rose up and continues to rise up against systems of oppression.

*Rising to life with Jesus* invites us to a way of life committed to a transforming vision of society where all are free and where our identities are no longer determined by normalized and accepted structures of oppression.

These are Kairos moments to respond.

The time is now to answer the call to rise up against dehumanizing and death-giving ways.

The time is now to take on this mission of rising to life with Jesus in modeling the ways he confronted powerful elites and systems of oppression.

The time is now as we embolden ourselves to be audaciously hopeful with defiant cries and critique of empire.

So, we rise up! Rising up in resistance against empire is to rise to life with Jesus towards a life-giving and life-affirming movement of embodied love.

## Sub-Theme: Rolling the stone away

Assembly Theme: Rising to Life with Jesus

Texts: [John 20:1-10](#) (NRSV); [2 Corinthians 5:14-20](#) (NRSV)

The stone is rolled away! Hallelujah! Free! Free at last! Freedom is indeed found in Christ! Yet there are other stones, in the midst of our celebration that continue to stand in the way of all creation sharing in the fullness of life.

The stone imagery invites us to see ourselves as stones together - not a random pile of rocks or stones - but stones belonging to a dynamic structure built with Christ as the chief cornerstone. It is a wonderful image of belonging. It invites us to our own imaginings and reflections; stones are old, young, brittle, strong, shiny, fractured, solid, full of holes, rough, smooth, large, small, coloured, differently shaped and oriented and precious - there is room for all.

The language and imagery of stones is used time and time again in both the Hebrew bible and New Testament. It is used in both life-affirming and life-denying ways. On the one hand stones were used to build walls of separation, symbolize the hardness of hearts, and as props to condemn. Yet on the other hand, stones were gathered to make markers as memorials of journeys made. The early Church considered the risen Jesus as the chief cornerstone, the foundation, on which God's house of living stones is built. Rising to life with Jesus means being called to be living stones gathered to build God's way of fullness of life for all.

The rolling away of the stone mimics the poetic imagery of the rolling of justice that the prophet Amos speaks of. The rolling away of stones is an ongoing process of moving the hefty burdens that stand between death and life. The rolling of the stone is an affirmation that God is not in the business of formulating a strategy for containment. God invites us to an adventure. One that ushers in the fullness of life project which is at the heart of our life together as rising/resurrection communities. We are invited to rise with Jesus and come together as communities which show how life can flourish.

The rolled stone can no longer contain the risen Jesus. The celebration of hallelujahs is our deference to this rising up that refuses to bow down to colonization, imperialism and death-dealing ways.

So: get up! Stand up! Arise! Do not be afraid! We are not alone!

### Reflection:

Where in our life together do we hear the call to new life—to come out of the tombs we've been sealed in – the tomb of fear, anxiety, hopelessness or the tomb of dreams lost or hopes delayed?

## Sub-Theme: Breathing Life into the Valleys of Death

Assembly Theme: Rising to Life with Jesus

Texts: [John 20:11-18](#) (NRSV); [Ezekiel 37:1-14](#) (NRSV)

God breathes life which names and renames. This breath of life connects all of humanity and creation. The earth breathes. The creatures within it breath. The interconnectedness of breath weaves us together. Each breath defies death. Each breath deserves dignity. This is important because we live in a world dominated by inter-connected powers that suffocates every attempt to rise and share in the fullness of each refreshing breath.

Entombment is a form of suffocation. It denies breath and life. When many are made to live in abject poverty, war and degradation, this suffocates life and creation groans under the weight of such domination. Such is the way of empire. A 'rising-up' beyond expectations happened in the resurrection story and breathed life not only into Jesus' lifeless body but continues to breathe into our own lifeless bodies.

Rising to life with Jesus means breathing life into the valleys of death. Thus, when breath and spoken word meets, desolate powers and systems of death are exposed and undone at that moment as the Risen Jesus says, 'Mary'.

With this, the apostle Mary receives her commissioning. This is the woman who was not scared away by the power of empire. This is the woman who did not abandon Jesus. This is the woman who walked the way of the cross, took the valley of death with Jesus, and found the tomb was empty and the garden filled with his living body.

The prophet Ezekiel was brought to the valley of dry bones to do the impossible - breathing life into dry bones. We too are called to rise to life with Jesus to do the seemingly impossible task of breathing life into valleys of injustices. With so much death and so many agents of death around, we are called to collectively breathe together to (con)spire with the winds of change and facilitate renewed struggles for justice.

### Reflection:

What and where are the 'dry bones' in our lives and in our society (systemic)?

There are prophets and witnesses amongst us speaking to the power of empire. Reflect on the prophets and witnesses who are breathing life into valleys of dry bones.

## Sub-Theme: Confronting Power, Claiming Peace

Assembly Theme: Rising to Life with Jesus

Texts: [John 20:19-23](#) (NRSV); [Mark 4:35-5:20](#) (NRSV)

When the South African youth of Soweto took to the streets on June 16, 1976, they confronted the language of power designed to force assimilation into one dominant language and identity. This is the logic of empire that is bent on control, conforming, and commodifying. What started out as a peaceful protest ended up with lives sacrificed on bloodied altars of empire.

Central to all empires is the claim to be the means to peace, that is, their version of control. Rising to life with Jesus recognizes God's involvement in the struggles for justice for the sake of the humanization of the world. This is a challenging task as we confront power in the process of claiming a stake to a peace-filled future.

For too long we have accommodated empire's claim that to be peaceful we have to be homogenous. We had to mimic empire and its legion of demonic agents that sought to erase our unique identities, delete our languages and wipe out our ancestral ways of being in the world. This must be contested, challenged and confronted.

We need to reclaim our unity in Christ while maintaining and respecting our multiple expressions of being. One of the counter-empire ways we do so is to move beyond the language and operation of empire by creating spaces and agency for the multiplicity of languages, identities, cultures and practices.

Rising to life with Jesus means to confront the power of Legion as demonic and destructive and parodies what lies ahead ultimately for imperial powers: an unclean, unholy headfirst rush to disaster. In doing so, we claim peace not as the absence of war, but as the presence of justice.

### Reflections:

What are the fears that we, individually and collectively, need to acknowledge to give 'peace' a chance and unlock possibilities for new beginnings?

Consider some examples in your context of 'taking on power' and experiencing uprising.

## Sub-Theme: Lamenting, Repenting and Repairing- Towards Healing

Assembly Theme: Rising to Life with Jesus

Texts: [John 20:26-29](#) (NRSV); [Psalm 42](#) (NRSV)

*"....no reconciliation, no forgiveness and no negotiations are possible without repentance. The Biblical teaching on reconciliation and forgiveness makes it quite clear that nobody can be forgiven and reconciled with God unless he or she repents of their sins.....It would be quite wrong to try to preserve 'peace' and 'unity' at all costs, even at the cost of truth and justice and, worse still, at the cost of thousands of young lives. As disciples of Jesus we should rather promote truth and justice and life at all costs, even at the cost of creating conflict, disunity and dissension along the way. To be truly biblical our Church leaders must adopt a theology that millions of Christians have already adopted-a biblical theology of direct confrontation with the forces of evil, rather than a theology of reconciliation with sin and the devil." [The South African Kairos Document, 1985]*

*"If people want to see life beyond Empire they can certainly see it in Jesus. They should be able to see it in us too. But, so often we are compromised to the cultures of Empire. CWM's work as a partnership of churches is to call each other to Christ's side and Spirit, to choose life over death and discover the ways, like the early church, of being missional congregations in the context of empire, who share the Good News of Jesus through bringing hope, healing and change." [Unmasking Empire, CWM 2018]*

CWM is confronting our colonial past and the racist present we helped to create. We, like the disciples, meet Jesus risen and alive bearing wounds which we inflicted through our complicity in empire and Christianity. This was made manifest through enslavement and the teaching of racist theologies, hierarchies and practices. CWM has, like its forebear organisations, been silent about this, until now. We recognize that people of African descent continue to experience the residual effects of the sinful practices of racism and all related forms of discrimination.

CWM's repentance is rightly rooted in a commitment to reparation. Our working premise is that reparation, which is an aspect of restorative justice, is not seen as a loss or a cost. It is a sign of our commitment to transform lives and communities. Our desire to make reparation is to see change happen, not to write off a past we wish to forget. This change needs to take place in communities who still live with the legacies of slavery and in the life, witness and systems of CWM and member communities as we move to becoming intentionally anti-racist.

Rising to life with Jesus calls for a recognition of the intersections of the various forms of oppression. It also calls us to recognize the hypocrisy of naming racism as sin, while retaining other forms of oppression.



Thus, as we repent of our complicity in racism, we recognize that we have also been complicit in other forms of oppression. As we touch one of Christ's wounds, we lament the other wounds we have inflicted for the same reasons and see the path for further change as the risen Jesus invites us along.

**Reflection:**

In what ways have we used repentance as a replacement for reparation? How might we more intentionally move towards restoration?

## Sub-Theme: Dismantling Violence; Embodying Love

Assembly Theme: Rising to Life with Jesus

Texts: [John 21:15-19](#) (NRSV) [Isaiah 48:1-20](#) (NRSV)

The agenda of empire is to control, dehumanize, and commodify bodies. It disfigures the imprint of God's image in each human being and casts a mark of itself to everyone it owns. We are not to be owned. Our bodies are not to be used for the pleasure of empire. Those who rise to life with Jesus must rise up and rise beyond ways that forces the submission, domestication and domination of bodies. Rising to life with Jesus challenges empire's ways by affirming the divine and holy in each human being. Rising to life with Jesus points to the embodying and establishing of the Word made flesh.

Peter's story shows that rising to life with Jesus must be anchored in an ethic of love. Until this ethic is embodied, no alternatives can take on the violent systems created by empire and Religion. Following in Jesus' way must be embodied with love, compassion and radical hospitality. Unless this ethic of love becomes incarnate, there is no other way to rise from under the weight of empire. The Isaiah text shows us that the violence of Babylon must be dismantled at all thresholds of Israel's community. They rose up and refused to participate in the dominating ways of Babylon. In doing so, they dismantled violence and embodied love in their community, homes, and sacred spaces.

The two biblical texts of Isaiah and John also point to discipleship as lived out in the liminal spaces of the world that is and the world as it ought to be - the 'in-between' space of Babylon and Zion. The 'in-between' space is a painful place. It is a place of loss, displacement and exile. Jesus rose up from such a space. No stone could have held him back. Empire's attempt at entombment fails in such 'in-between' spaces. And likewise, we who rise to life with Jesus are not confined to Babylon; we break forth toward Zion.

Rising to life with Jesus, dismantling violence and embodying love invites us to be communities inspired by Jesus' rising up. It is a call to intentionally engage in theologies, spiritualities, and practices that take to the streets and demonstrate Christ's love and presence. In doing so, we rise and thrive in struggles within communities. Systems of violence are narcissistic, idolatrous, cruel and self-serving; systems of violence lure, chew and spew us out. It detests those who choose to rise to life with Jesus.

Given this, more than ever before, rising to life with Jesus demands a sustaining spirituality of resistance and resilience. Such a spirituality is a counter-empire movement of and for love.

### Reflection:

From your own context(s) reflect on the challenges in dismantling violence. In what ways will 'embodying love' take shape and given content?

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