

World Council of Churches ~ The Middle East Council of Churches
International and Ecumenical Conference
Christian Presence and Witness in the Middle East
21 – 25 May 2013
Notre-Dame du Mont Monastery – Lebanon

Jesus said, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it gives your Father great happiness to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12:32)

“Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid.”

Preliminary

Gathered in Lebanon, a land that bears the impression of the footsteps of Jesus Christ, a nation in which Christians form an integral and vibrant component of its culture and civil society, a place that is a crossroad of cultures, peoples and religions, the participants in this meeting included leaders and representatives from Christian churches in the Middle East and Christian Churches and organizations from 34 other countries, in order to help strengthen the Christian presence and witness in the Middle East for the benefit of unity, justice and peace for all in this crucial region, in times of significant changes for the whole region and for every nation. We meet while neighbouring Syria and the region is experiencing unprecedented political, cultural and historical convulsions, disrupting and endangering the lives of all who live in this region, including Christians.

Participants in this conference, long-scheduled by the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) to take place during the Paschal season for the Orthodox participants and at Pentecost according to the Gregorian calendar, arrived at the conference hoping for news of the safe release of the two Archbishops from Aleppo, His Eminence Boulos (Yazigi) Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Aleppo and Alexandretta and His Eminence Mor Youhanna Gregorios (Ibrahim) Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan of Aleppo in Syria, kidnapped over one month ago. The news of their kidnapping shocked the whole world especially people of this region, and galvanized Christians around the world. But they remain captives, as do hundreds of other kidnapped persons. This reality also represents a symbol pointing to the situation faced by the people of Syria, and throughout the region, and cast long shadows over our consultations—urging us to action, not merely reflection. We pray and hope that their speedy release, and assistance of the leaders of Muslim and Christian communities, will strengthen inter-religious co-operation.

Our work together

The conference participants—both from churches of the Middle East and from other parts of the world—have met in order to be the witnesses of our common Christian faith. We believe that the Gospel calls us always to love God and love our neighbours and all people, as did Jesus Christ, the revelation of divine love. In Him, the whole of humanity is reconciled and united in the bond of God’s plan of salvation.

The conference has joined together in prayer according to the traditions present and in Bible study and sharing. It has been resourced by a very rich and diverse array of experts from the region and from abroad, as well as by the working document, “Christians in the Middle East: Presence and Witness” that has provided welcome foundation to our work. Not only by these things, but also by the decades that have preceded this conference have participants been prepared. We are

committed to witness together what we have heard, to bear each other's burdens, and to undertake actions that our common Christian identity requires of us.

We acknowledge some fundamental principles underlying our consultations:

1. From the time of Jesus Christ and over the intervening centuries, Christians have been rooted in the soil of the Middle East. The Christians living in this region are an essential part of their lands.
2. Christians in the Middle East have a long history of living in plural societies that respect all diversities, understanding that all people are created by God. The teaching of Jesus Christ is that no violence is acceptable, particularly violence that is committed in the name of religion. The Gospel-rooted imperative of witness and service to the neighbour marks the historical role of Christians in the region and in the world.
3. Christians living in the lands of the Middle East reject being labeled "minority" since they reject being understood as a lesser people (*aqalliyya*). They rather understand themselves as full citizens of their nations. States have the responsibility to protect all of their citizens on an equal basis. Numerical proportion historically has not limited the contribution and role of Christians in the East.
4. This is a time of crisis with special intensity here in the Middle East, but affects all of humankind. The elements of this crisis include an intensification of religious tribalism, increasing fundamentalism in many of the world's religions, dispersion of the influence of radicalized Islamist groups, widespread violence and insecurity, a deficit in democratic legitimacy and credibility, poverty and lack of opportunity, especially for women and youth, Christian emigration from the region, and a generalized sense of abandonment following decades of unhelpful intervention. Christians, Muslims and Jews all experience the destructive effects of these trends.
5. Palestine continues to be the central issue in the region. Resolving the conflict between Israel and Palestine in accordance with the UN resolutions and international law, will greatly help resolving the other conflicts in the region. The persistence, after sixty-five years, of continuing dispossession of Palestinian people—Christian and Muslim alike—from their land by Israeli occupation, continuing settlement of land inside the 1967 borders by a nation empowered by overwhelming military strength and external alliances and influence, is central to the turmoil in the region and exacerbated by duplicity of policies of the western powers, especially the United States. Christians have been called to condemn and act against this continuing injustice, affirming the voice and demands of Palestinian Christians, including as heard in the *Kairos Palestine* document.
6. Jerusalem today is an occupied city with a government which has adopted discriminatory policies against Christians and Muslims alike. "Jerusalem is the foundation of our vision and our entire life. She is the city to which God gave a particular importance in the history of humanity. She is the city towards which all people are in movement – and where they will meet in friendship and love in the presence of the One Unique God." (*Kairos Palestine*) Christians look to Jerusalem as a place God blessed with the significance of His presence, a place revered by the faithful of three religions. Jerusalem must be an open, accessible, inclusive and shared city for two peoples and three religions, with careful protection of their holy places. It needs to be the place that models for the world the possibilities of living

together peacefully in mutual respect in accordance with God's plan. We look to Jerusalem to be the symbol of the world as it should be and for which we long.

7. Christians who promote "Christian Zionism" distort the interpretation of the Word of God and the historic connection of Palestinians—Christians and Muslims—to the Holy Land, enable the manipulation of public opinion by Zionist lobbies, and damage intra-Christian relations.
8. Christians must reject Islamophobia, which mischaracterizes Islam as an undifferentiated whole, and undermines decades of cultivation of co-operation with Muslims, and must refuse the temptation to amalgamation, generalization, and sensationalization of our Muslim brothers and sisters.
9. The churches of the Middle East include faithful women, youth, and men as lay members of their congregations. Strengthening the possibilities for lay participation, and witness will strengthen the churches. Empowering women of the region to develop their capacities and to publicly articulate their unique perspectives will enrich society and the churches.
10. Youth have been at the forefront of engaging in the process that continues after the events that roiled Tunisia, Egypt and Libya in 2011 demonstrating the vital importance of their presence and role in civil society and in the churches. Young people in the Middle East have been engaged in work for a society based upon respect for the human dignity of all persons, human rights, equality, citizenship, the rule of law, freedom and mutual respect. The churches are also challenged to continue to listen to and engage with them in meaningful ways, using their capacities in church and society. Churches may need to reflect on ways that grassroots actions exercised by citizens questioning authority, rejecting corruption and favoritism and eroding traditional tribal cohesion will affect the churches.
11. Governments throughout the region are hearing demands for participation, access, transparency and accountability. The churches in the Middle East are aware that the guarantee of our free and pro-active Christian existence in the region is not a bequest given by political powers, but is acquired by being courageous in exposing the structures and mechanisms of oppressive political systems, and by persistent patience in changing mentalities and structures.
12. The circumstances throughout the Middle East present the churches with a Kairos moment, as did South Africa in 1985, and Palestine in 2009, each of which called the churches to prophetic action. This is another time for such action, for a new vision of Christian cooperation in the region, for recommitment to Christian-Muslim engagement, for engagement with Jewish partners also working for peace and justice, expressing our Christian vocations by working together to express mutual support and solidarity, all of which may help to stem the flow of Christians from the region and to eliminate the barriers to full and meaningful lives for Christians in the countries of the Middle East. In the Middle East, Christians understand that "only united can we flourish; divided we vanish."

Call to Action

The Christian churches of the Middle East, present through heads of churches and church representatives, representatives of sister Christian churches of the World Council of Churches and

ecumenical partners, recognizing this as a Kairos moment for the Christians in the Middle East, commit to support one another in steadfast prayer and call for the following actions to support the continuing vital Christian presence and witness in the Middle East.

To the member churches in the region, we encourage you to:

Recognize and affirm each other and your shared ministry as a sign of the unity for which the Lord prayed “*that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us*” (John 17:21).

Continue to be being involved in the building of democratic civil societies, based on the rule of law, social justice, and respect for human rights, including religious freedom.

Commit to engage together to re-invent, reinvigorate and renew the Middle East Council of Churches, in order to continue being the voice of Middle East Christians to the world, being the trusted source of basic, objective information.

Reflect on ways that grassroots actions exercised by citizens in their countries questioning authority, rejecting corruption and favoritism and eroding traditional tribal cohesion will affect the churches, in order to understand and participate in the important changes going on.

Empower women in the churches to develop their capacities and provide opportunities for their meaningful participation in the churches and society.

To the Middle East Council of Churches:

Include significant roles for young people, developing the capacity of the next generation whilst at the same time enhancing the capacity of the MECC by their gifts and perspectives. Engage with young people in meaningful ways, using their capacities to enhance their participation in the church and society.

Encourage the process toward developing a Kairos statement for the region.

Envision the role of the MECC to include regional and international advocacy on behalf of the Christians in the region, engaging in theological exchange with ecumenical partners, amplifying the voices of the Christians in the Middle East, including to regional ecumenical organizations and national councils of churches worldwide and inter-governmental institutions.

Advocate for efforts in education to build a better understanding and respect among the different religions, including revision of textbooks, especially in how they portray other faiths, their history and their beliefs, integrating insights from religious studies and historical research.

Develop exchange programs to facilitate the sharing of experiences, information on interfaith relations and dialogue among the churches and religions. Encourage and facilitate responsible pilgrimage to the region.

To the World Council of Churches:

Recommit itself to working with the MECC as a partner.

Develop a new vision and theological foundations for WCC engagement with other religions in order to work more directly together for understanding, peace and justice, particularly with respect to areas where political and social tensions have been misidentified as struggles between religions;

draw upon the expertise and positive efforts of churches in regions with effective inter-religious cooperation.

Engage on a regional and international level in advocacy on behalf of the Christians in the Middle East, continuing programs that enhance those efforts (for example, Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum and Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel). Also engage in advocacy for all oppressed and marginalized persons in the region.

Convene the spiritual and academic resources of the WCC and ecumenical partners in consultations to address Christian Zionism, disclosing its sources, its use as a political weapon against the Palestinian people, and its effects on intra-Christian relations.

Encourage member churches to develop and disseminate educational materials that accurately reflect the geography and history of the Middle East and the realities of sister churches located there.

Communicate, with ecumenical partners, the dire humanitarian situation within Syria and suffered by refugees from Syria in neighbouring countries, appealing to WCC member churches to interpret their relief policies in ways that deliver resources to the most vulnerable. Seek ways to exert pressure to stop actions of violence.

Encourage WCC member churches to support measures both to prevent war and to open channels for citizen diplomacy and mutual understanding with Iran. WCC member churches should explore ways to visit their contexts and remain in fellowship with them.

Encourage WCC member churches to support the churches in Iraq by visiting them in their contexts and remaining in active fellowship with them.

To the MECC and WCC:

Advocate that churches and nations around the globe ensure that Jerusalem is established as a city of two peoples and three religions with unrestricted and free access for all humankind.

Advocate for a nuclear-free Middle East.

Caution and work against any kind of escalation of tensions in the region.

Encourage the United Nations, United States, European Union and Russia, along with other countries in positions of political power, to create policies that promote peace with justice for all peoples of the region.

Explore ways to attract to the region resources to provide quality education, development, employment opportunities, including especially decent work for young people, which would counter socioeconomic pushes to emigrate from the Middle East.

Use re-envisioned instruments of inter-religious dialogue and cooperation to raise awareness among Muslim and Christian leaders, including women and youth participation, and leaders of other civil society groups, to accept and respect each other for the sake of mutual benefit and co-existence.

Appoint a small group including persons from both the MECC and the WCC to further develop the working paper “Christians in the Middle East: Presence and Witness” drawing upon the consultations that took place at this conference to finalize a document can be presented to the Tenth Assembly of the World Council of Churches meeting in November 2013 in Busan, South Korea.

Encourage the participation of women and youth from the region in the Busan assembly.