



The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land

Address to the Disciples of Christ General Assembly | July 2015

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My dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

I bring greetings to you from Jerusalem, the city of our Lord's death and resurrection. I also bring greetings from the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL). Our congregations in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, Beit Jala, Ramallah, and Amman, Jordan, are each sending their love to you. We appreciate all that we are doing together with the Disciples of Christ in the United States. We are living into our calling of being a blessing to one another, accompanying one another in the light of Christ.

It is a pleasure to be here with you at this General Assembly. It is good to be gathered together to pray and seek to discern God's will for our churches, our communities, ourselves. These assemblies are like giant family reunions. I am grateful that you have invited me to join the family party.

But we do not come together for simple things alone. The present time presents many challenges for our communities, both here in the United States and around the world. Together, we are seeking to address the challenge of climate change, poverty, contagious diseases and global economic systems that seem to promote inequality and injustice.

But there are important challenges being felt acutely in the United States. Here, you are dealing many issues, ranging from gun violence to human sexuality to structural racism within policing practices. When families gather, they not only celebrate but take stock of their circumstances and seek to make changes for the better. I am glad to see these challenges being address in this Assembly.

I am especially conscious that I have entered the United States after two major acts of violence. This last Thursday, a young American of Arab descent opened fire on two military recruiting offices in Tennessee, killing five soldiers and injuring a police officer. Just over a month ago, a young man participated in a Bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and then opened fire, killing nine people. What are we to make of this? This evening, I will address rising global challenge of extremism. At the same time, I am keenly interested in this Assembly's

focus on the Black Lives Matter movement. Jesus teaches us that every life is important: black, white and brown, Palestinian and Israeli. At the same time, Liberation Theology reminds us that God exercises a “preferential option for the poor.” I look forward to learning from you about the Disciples’ movement for social justice both in the United States and around the globe.

A Critical Time

This is a critical time for the Arab world, especially for Christians in the Middle East. We are facing increasing unpredictability throughout the Middle East. According to the United Nations, more than three million Syrians have been forced to leave their homes and flee into neighboring lands. This has created a huge strain on those host countries. This refugee crisis, along with the military conflict causing it, is already transforming the politics and, more importantly, the culture of the Middle East.

Even as I describe the difficulties we face in the region, I ask that you do not generalize. Our situation in the Holy Land and in Jordan is quite different than what is being experienced in other places. What we see in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and other places is deeply concerning to us. At the same time, the daily life of my church has not yet been affected by the bloodshed and persecution now facing many within the Middle East Council of Churches. I therefore have a role to play in speaking out against the chaos and injustice faced by so many of our sisters and brothers in Christ as well as all their neighbors.

This ongoing crisis affects Christians in particular ways. We have just observed the second anniversary of the kidnapping of two Orthodox Christian archbishops from Aleppo, Syria. In the fog of war, we still do not know where they have been held and even if they are alive. Their kidnapping marked a decisive turning-point for how Christians in Syria understood the civil war and therefore sent shockwaves through all Christians in the Middle East.

Now, we have the continued military strength of the so-called Islamic State. They are just one of many groups trying to determine not just Islamic practice but how Islam can provide a system of government. Whether you call them ISIS or ISIL or, as we do, *Da’esh*, the entire Middle East is trying to come to terms with this new group. Wherever *Da’esh* or some other group emerges, anybody who does not conform to its particular version of Sunni Islam is under threat. While they menace other Muslims, more specific threats are made against other religious groups, including Christians.

In those parts of the Middle East where there are active wars, we are therefore seeing fundamental threats to Christian presence in more than one part of the Middle East. If they have the resources to do so, our people are leaving the region at an alarming rate. Once they leave, they rarely return. Even while we are experiencing this crisis, we are observing among other church partners—especially in the West—what one might call an unintentional indifference. The situation in the Middle East is so complex, so culturally complicated, and so politically charged that it can feel like the domain of

governments alone. So it feels that, in some cases, churches have given up on trying to comprehend the region. The church voice is then reduced to empty statements of concern or lament, hoping that someone else will come up with a solution.

I am here today to request that the Disciples of Christ and other churches in the United States refuse the temptation to say the Middle East is too complicated or that it is not the business of the churches. The Christians in the Middle East are crying out for your active, generous, and creative engagement. What is the Middle East without Christians?

I have heard some Arab Christian leaders express great frustration with western governments and churches, wondering if they would be satisfied if there were no Christian presence in the Middle East. This is of course not true, but we have not seen actions to back up that sentiment. The actions we have seen hurt our communities rather than help them stay in their land. When, for instance, the Yazidi people were dismissed from their land, the government of France issued eleven passports. Arab Christians do not want to be evacuated out of our lands. What we want is for people to stay in or return to their own communities. We need to be protected not by foreign powers but by equal citizenship and equal rights guaranteed through a common constitution. Yazidis, Christians, and other minorities should be able to return to their own villages with the security provided by their own society and governments, not the violent protection of international troops.

We find, however, that it can be difficult for our companions in western churches to fully understand our perspective. I hope that you do not mind if I speak frankly and directly on a few different issues. It is my sense that the presence moment requires it.

First, I will tell you that many Arab Christians express disappointment with churches and church-related organizations in the West. We are tired of their speeches. We want action. We face continual challenges in working together for supporting Christians in the Middle East. Middle East churches bear responsibility for building relationships with the global Body of Christ. But there is also responsibility in the West to not abandon Christians in the Middle East.

Second, we are not helped but harmed by some western efforts to describe or respond to the challenges we face. This has been the case with the challenges of extremism. In this time of crisis, we have found that some western Christians are taking the opportunity to claim Arab Christians as their children, treating us as damsels in distress who need to be rescued from our Muslim neighbors. We strongly reject this paternalistic, neocolonial approach.

A third challenge facing the Middle East is the need for robust ecumenical institutions and efforts. Strong cooperation will ensure that more Christians are able to remain in the region and will bolster their contributions to Arab societies. Together, we must find ways to strengthen both the Middle East Council of Churches and the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches. These institutions are integral to our shared witness. In Greek, the word for witness is *martyria*. Given the forms of extremism and political

instability we are seeing, it is possible that the time of *martyria* has come. If the witness our presence and participation in society is not enough and we are asked to give our lives for the sake of Christ, we are ready for that.

There are many reasons one can name in order to explain or comprehend the eruption of different forms of extremism in the Middle East. At its basis, extremism (especially religiously-sanctioned extremism) is a symptom of frustrated political possibilities. When there is no horizon for political possibility, extremism grows. This despair has grown for several reasons. First among them is the inability or unwillingness of the international community to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While this conflict may indeed be out of the hands of leaders in the region, they also have not been able to demonstrate confidence that it will be resolved. Secondly, the collapse of pan-Arabism has created a vacuum leading to the political fragmentation of the political order. All of this was exacerbated by military attacks from regional and global powers that weakened governments still further and helped sustain anti-western sentiment. Finally, the events known as the Arab Spring have provided even greater space for non-state actors. Together, all of this history has led to the present point in which religiously-sanctioned extremism is dominating the common life of the Middle East.

Even this short analysis helps us understand that the problems facing Arab Christians do not stem from Islam and Muslims alone. Statements like that harm us because they naively separate us from our neighbors, neighbors with whom we are facing the same struggles. We have noticed that your newspapers are filled with opinions that use Arab Christians as tools in some sort of civilizational struggle. We have seen many recent articles using us to perpetuate western competition with the Islamic world. This is not just Islamophobia, but virulent hatred of Islam. We have also seen specific arguments using the plight of Arab Christians as a tool to justify support for the State of Israel. The argument we see growing in western media is that *Da'esh* somehow represents the "true" face of Islam and that all "civilized" groups are in battle with "savage" or "barbaric" Muslims. Because of centuries of western intervention based on "protecting" Christians, such arguments harm our ability to survive in the Middle East. Instead, these arguments strengthen extremists on all sides, in Europe and the United States as well as in the Middle East.

I was grieved when a colleague pointed out to me Franklin Graham's shameful response to the shootings in Chattanooga. "We are under attack by Muslims at home and abroad," he said. Recalling American rejection of German and Japanese immigrants during World War II, Graham suggested "We should stop all immigration of Muslims to the U.S. until this threat with Islam has been settled" since "every Muslim that comes into this country has the potential to be radicalized." This exclusionary, hateful message does not reflect the embracing love of Jesus. In Palestine, we have lived with Muslims for 14 centuries. It has not always been easy or simple. If you would like to learn from us Arab Christians how to live with Muslim neighbors, we are happy to receive you, offering hospitality alongside our Muslim friends. *Ahlan wa-sahlan*. You are most heartily welcome.

Western efforts to demonize Islam and Muslims create problems for Christians in Israel and Palestine. The Israeli Knesset passed a law last year granting Christians special privileges in Israeli legal structures. A law passed last year asserted that Christians, unlike Muslims, are not Arabs, but Aramaeans, something we have never been. Under the guise of protecting us, we Arab Christians are being severed from our cultural and ethnic heritage. The occupier of our land is now seeking to fully occupy our minds. Any concept that Arab Christians are somehow set apart from broader Arab society threatens to undermine our participation in those societies. While we are concerned about extremism, we are equally concerned about such attitudes. Who will stand up for the Christians? We expect that our partners around the world will stand with us as Arab Christians, grounded in the unity we have in Baptism, as we stand up for ourselves!

What is Demanded of Us Together?

My dear friends, the present crisis demands an ecumenical response from the global church. It cannot be addressed by Middle Eastern Christians alone. Western churches need to work with us to develop the ways they seek to inform their societies and influence their governments. The key to this challenge is to strengthen civil society through education. Churches in the Arab world need to be accompanied as they seek to maintain their long-standing ministries of education. Education is the focus that will build our civil society and help all of us combat every kind of extremism.

Another concern I hope we share together is that local churches in the Middle East are struggling with administrative and financial issues. We appreciate our international partners; I deeply value the relationship the ELCJHL has with the Disciples of Christ. The assistance we need is not just about money. It is about strengthening our sense of accountability to one another—between our churches and within our churches—while strengthening accountability to our societies. At this point, the administrative and financial challenges we face make us into birds flying with a broken wing. If these challenges were removed or decreased, we could soar like eagles.

We can do this work together because, in the Middle East, we are not strangers. We have been carrying the Gospel of Jesus Christ for 2000 years. For 2000 years, we have been in what is now called the Middle East, residing in and contributing to the countries that have grown up around us. Although we are small in numbers, we refuse to have a minority complex where we seek our own protection alone. Instead, we must understand our presence as a witness. Arab and Middle Eastern Christians together—all four families here in the region—must understand that our role in society is to be instruments of peace, brokers of justice, builders of civil society, promoters of human rights (including women's rights), defenders of freedom of speech and conscience, initiators of dialogue, ministers of reconciliation, and apostles of love. It is our task to contribute toward a Middle East of blessed diversity that promotes equal citizenship with equal rights and equal responsibilities.

In the longer term, we need to develop strategies for reducing the appeal of religiously-sanctioned extremism. Some would argue that religious extremism is the natural outworking of religious commitment. My response is that religious extremism is, in fact, a perversion of religious commitment itself. I must be clear: no religion has a monopoly on extremism. In addition to violent expressions of Islamic extremism which harm Christians, Jews and moderate Muslims alike, we are seeing a growth in Jewish extremism, especially among some settler groups. While Christian Zionism can seem less directly harmful to human flourishing, Arabs are very aware of how Christian Zionists justify and promote state violence by “blessing” wars against certain enemies as reflecting the will of God. All of these forms of extremism drive us away from relationship with one another, harming our shared capacity to draw create a sustainable future in which all human communities can flourish.

As I said last week at a gathering of Christian leaders denouncing the burning by Jewish extremists of the Church of the Multiplication at Tabgha, “To be silent is to allow the extremists including the perpetrators to turn us to hostages and pawns. We demand that all believers in God speak up and raise their voices to denounce hostile acts such as this venomous act.”

As Charles Kimball has observed, “Whatever religious people may say about their love of God or the mandates of their religion, when their behavior toward others is violent and destructive, when it causes suffering among their neighbors, you can be sure the religion has been corrupted and reform is desperately needed.” When, on the other hand, “religion remains true to its authentic sources, it is actively dismantling these corruptions.”¹ We must be clear: it is unacceptable for anybody to use Holy Scripture—whether the Qur’an, or the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Christian Bible—to support any kind of war or oppression.

All religious leaders—both in the Middle East and around the world—have a responsibility to identify and challenge the many ways religion is abused in their societies. The call of our religion as taught by Jesus himself has been affirmed by the 138 Muslim signatories of “A Common Word”: “The basis for this peace and understanding already exists,” they say. “It is part of the very foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God, and love of the neighbour.”² We are called to stand shoulder to shoulder with Muslims, Jews, and all persons of good faith who seek these goals.

Constructive interreligious engagement is an effective antidote to extremism of all forms. One expression of engagement is the Council of Religious Institutions in the Holy Land (CRIHL). Founded in 2005, the CRIHL is the first consultative body representing the highest official religious authorities in the Holy Land. One of our recent projects has been support for an analysis of Palestinian and Israeli textbooks to see how they depict the neighbor. The 2013 publication of “Victims of Our Own Narratives: Portrayal of the

¹ Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 47.

² “A Common Word between Us and You,” 5-Year Anniversary Edition (Amman, Jordan: Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012), 53.

Other in Israeli and Palestinian School Books” was a watershed moment in the parallel narratives of the Holy Land. It is one of the miracles of the modern Middle East that we are able to meet about and seriously discuss these problems. That the CRIHL—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders together—is cooperating in this goal is a sign of religious contributions toward accepting the value of living with neighbors who are different, the basis of peace based on reconciliation.

Addressing Israel and Palestine

I will now turn to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) is called to carry the Gospel of Love. This love emanates forth in a message of moderation and peacebuilding. For the ELCJHL, these commitments are shown most clearly in our schools. Our schools and education programs pursue the mission of providing a happy, productive, and safe environment for students, teachers, administrators, support staff, and parents. We are proud of having boys and girls, women and men, Muslims and Christians together empowered in a mutual system of equality. Our evangelical ethos helps us mold a Palestinian identity that promotes living with persons of other religions. Our commitment to peace education means that we actively oppose any kind of hatred against our neighbors. Whether it is anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, Christianophobia, or general xenophobia, we seek to transform people from being extremists to seeing the image of God in the neighbor, no matter their culture, ideology, gender or religion.

The positive investment we make in Palestinian society through the ELCJHL schools is directly related to my church’s contribution toward peacebuilding in Israel and Palestine. These steadfast commitments will hold, even if meaningful steps toward resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continue to not succeed. We all know that no framework of final status agreement can succeed without willingness. All of us in Palestine and in Israel must ask ourselves how much we want peace. Through our educational efforts, we are helping form generations of leaders who faithfully seek peace. If we take faith in our One God seriously, the answer from every person in Israel and Palestine should be a resounding “yes.”

What sort of peace do we seek? I speak here in terms of Lutheran commitments toward peace. This is not my perspective or the ELCJHL perspective alone. Through many years of successive meetings of the Lutheran World Federation Council and in various assemblies, our global communion has made many important statements on the Israeli-Palestinian situation. Each one of these statements has been informed by commitments to justice and compassion, leading us toward a more peaceful future. Lutherans advocate for a two-state solution based on 1967 borders. We believe that Jerusalem should be shared by the three religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—and two peoples, Israelis and Palestinians. We seek a viable political solution to resolve the right of return of refugees.

We strongly believe that Israeli settlements built on land confiscated during and following the 1967 war are illegal, not just inconvenient or unhelpful. Politicians and public figures have consistently observed that Israeli settlements on Palestinian land are a major obstacle to peace. Churches around the world have taken notice. Some are asking producers and sellers to clearly identify products made in Israeli settlements because they do not want to support a colonial economy. These Christians are serious in wanting the success of a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders. Let us be clear: these churches are protesting the settlements alone, not the State of Israel as such. If settlements are indeed an obstacle to peace, the US government should have the courage to call them what they are: *illegal*.

If there is to be peace, Palestinians and Israelis must learn to share natural resources, especially water. The sharing of resources can be the foundation of economic growth and prosperity through further regional cooperation. What would this look like? It is self-evident that neither Israel nor Palestine can exist alone. While they can be independent states, they will be side by side, interdependently prospering through collaboration on resources and infrastructure development. If we truly honor the human dignity of every person in the region, then we must work to have regional cooperation.

Regional cooperation is essential if we are seeking the flourishing of all communities in the Middle East—Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike; Israelis, Arabs, including Palestinians, alike. For the Arab and Muslim countries, the core conflict in the Middle East is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Once this conflict is resolved, the way will be easier toward regional cooperation, based on the Arab Initiative of 2002. In that declaration, the existence of a sovereign state for Palestine would result in 57 Arab nations formally recognizing Israel's right to exist. Fifty-seven nations, including Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. This may sound too good to be true. But that offer is still on the table. Attention being paid to expressions of extremism in the Middle East is distracting from the goal of establishing a two-state solution. This offer is the basis of the French government's efforts to promote action through the UN Security Council.

Jerusalem should be a shared city for the two nations and the three Abrahamic religions; settlement activity should end; there should be a just political solution for Palestinian refugees; resources should be shared and regional cooperation should flourish. We continue to believe in these principles, but political realities do not often seem supportive of that vision. This is the reason I appeal to both Palestinians and Israelis to give peace based on justice a chance. While the present situation is very dangerous, peace based on justice is good for Palestinians and Israelis alike. It is a win-win situation we should pursue with all our might. If there is to be peace in the Middle East, it will start in Jerusalem and spread to the farthest reaches of the Holy Land and beyond. There will not be peace in the Middle East without peace in Jerusalem.

All communities in the Middle East deserve security and freedom. Israelis and Palestinian are the same in this regard. As a church, we want security for the State of Israel. We recognize, however, that security for Israel depends on freedom and justice

for Palestine. At the same time, freedom and justice for Palestine are dependent on security for Israel. These are symbiotic realities. It is my dream that one day Palestinians will see the face of God in the Israelis and that the Israelis will see the face of God in us Palestinians. When we see the face of God in the Other, we will be recognizing one another's humanity. This recognition of human dignity will lead us to mutually recognize and promote one another's human, civil, religious, and political rights. Only then will the Holy Land become a land flowing with milk and honey for both Palestinians and Israelis alike.

What Can Be Done?

People often ask me how they and their churches can help us in Jerusalem. How can we help you? What statement can we issue or resolution can we pass that will bring benefit to your people? These are generous questions. Although we cannot advise you directly on every topic, please allow me to suggest three things that can be helpful:

- 1) First of all, I ask that you support the mission of the church in the Holy Land, including my church, the ELCJHL. Do what you can to support our goal of becoming fiscally strong and financially self-sufficient. While it is good to speak with a collective voice, I hope that you will avoid the temptation to make statements that are only good for the files but that are intended to strengthen the roles of Christian communities as an integral part of their societies in the Middle East. This begins with strengthening the churches, and their related institutions. Keep in mind, however, that I am not promoting benefits for Christians alone; when you assist Christians, you are benefitting the entire society. I appreciate the Disciples' specific interest in both our educational ministries and in our ministry at the Baptismal Site of Jesus, recognized just two weeks ago as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- 2) Secondly, I appreciate that you have studied the Kairos Palestine document. This document must be supported for one main reason: it is the first document promoting nonviolent struggle; it gives appropriate responses to Palestinian Christians so they can interpret their lives and circumstances through sound theology, a theology of loving the enemy and accepting that the Holy land is for the two nations and three religions. The theology of the Kairos Palestine document gives us optimism that the two peoples and three religions of Israel and Palestine can indeed live together. The Kairos document helps Palestinian Christians understand the Bible and the events happening around them in a profound way. What we seek in the Bible is Jesus, and him crucified, not a political solution.
- 3) Finally, I call your attention to the wisdom of Proverbs 31:8: "Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute." Some in the United States have recently argued that because Christian leaders in Jerusalem cannot always speak and act freely, that their voices should be even more cautious and quiet.

This is not the case. The church should instead be prophetic. When it is prophetic, the church looks for the place, as Psalm 85 puts it, where “love and faithfulness will meet,” where “righteousness and peace will kiss each other.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young German pastor who led resistance efforts during the Third Reich, suggested that the church acts as the conscience of the state since “the church is what leads government to an understanding of itself.”³ Allow your Christian conscience to speak against any kind of injustice, or oppression, or occupation for the sake of humanity, for the sake of both occupier and occupied, oppressor and oppressed. This will not be the safest and easiest possible route in relation to Israel and Palestine, but it will be the path toward peace based on justice.

Challenging the occupation means not only finding the right tactics, but addressing the cultural and theological underpinnings of Israel’s settlement enterprise, both the Jewish extremism of the settler movement and the Christian Zionism found in many western countries. You cannot simply wait for Palestinian Christians to tell you what to do. Most certainly, you cannot hide behind us as if you have no minds of your own. Together, we must engage in prophetic leadership, both in Palestine and around the world.

Our responsibility is to accompany one another like the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Even if we are confused and despondent, we will encounter Christ in the Eucharist and in our burning hearts. And in Christ, our witness will be strengthened, sending us out as ministers of reconciliation, brokers of love, and apostles of love. For this reason, I am very grateful for the Middle East Initiative being launched through Global Ministries.

I call on you to speak out for what you know is right, to know that peace based on justice and reconciliation based on forgiveness are possible when ordinary people unite to make extraordinary change. Peace starts in Jerusalem, it is true, but the fire of peace is kindled in the hearts of her inhabitants—a fire that burns brightly for the world to see. As the prophet Isaiah proclaimed, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”

We thank you for your fervor and zeal for our land, for Arab Christians, and our people. Our mission is your mission, and yours is ours. Do not leave us alone. Together, we implant the Gospel of Love in our broken world.

May God bless you.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “A Theological Position Paper on State and Church,” in *Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940–1945: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 16*, English ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 522.