



## COUNCIL OF LUTHERAN CHURCHES

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### **Minorities Under Fire: The situation of Christians and other minorities in the Middle East.**

In a full but intimate gathering in the Norwegian Church in London on 17 October 2014, a panel of senior global church leaders gathered to discuss the plight of Christian minorities in the Middle East. Revd Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), Rt Revd Christopher Chessun the Bishop of Southwark, and Very Revd Jan Otto Myrseth the acting Bishop of Bergen, began by challenging assumptions in the question being addressed: Christians in the Middle East, who have been there since the time of Christ and seen empires rise and fall, do not consider themselves “minority” because that implies that they do not belong. Although they may be numerically small, it is important for us to understand and remember how they understand themselves in order for us to be able to stand alongside them and show solidarity.

Accompaniment was a key concept for all speakers as they grappled with how we can best support these communities driven from their ancestral homes, fleeing persecution for their faith and heritage, in vulnerable situations such as in Iraq and Syria where they are in the crossfire between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims. In these situations they find out what it really means to be Christian and carry their cross. So too we must stand in solidarity and share in carrying the cross. However, in this crisis an unexpected hope and resilience comes forth, a witness and a firm stand to believe and live a non-violent solution.

We must recognise that the present conflict was not only borne of local influences but also international, Western powers and pressures – and as the WCC warned at the start of the Iraq war to topple Saddam Hussein, Christians are paying the price. So the solution also will not be left to Middle Easterners alone but must involve the rest of the world; and while it may be that the Western concept of the nation state does not sit comfortably in the Middle East, it will be there for a time, even while tribal, ethnic or faith loyalties exert their pull. But “solutions” cannot be imposed by outside forces: while there is undeniable humanitarian need and a security crisis which must be addressed immediately, the long term solution must be a political vision shared by locals, neighbours, and the wider world.

It is important to share the vision: as the Coptic Pope Tawadros said, the worst outcome would be to develop or entrench anti-Muslim feeling, in East or West – so it is good that Muslim scholars wrote a statement not only stating that IS was not representative of Islam, but also that it is a Muslim obligation to protect Christians, fellow *ahl al kitab*. It is good that in Norway, following Anders Behring Breivik’s



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attacks in 2011, Muslim groups immediately contacted the churches (while suspicion fell on Islamic fundamentalists) so that Muslims and Christians stood side by side condemning extremism. It is good that Jews in Bosnia Herzegovina recall how Muslims cared for the Jewish community for centuries. It is good that Kurds have provided sanctuary to Christians, Yazidis and other minority groups fleeing IS towards Europe. In Arbil they did not have the luxury of focusing on divisions, and now we like them must stand side by side with the people whom God loves, to condemn man's inhumanity to man. Our solidarity is to the poor and oppressed, and not limited to our Christian brothers and sisters.

In the midst of these crises, hope was a theme picked up by Revd Dr Leslie Nathaniel who mentioned a recent statement by Archbishop Justin Welby calling for us to hold onto hope, build on it and support it. CLC Trustees Revd Mark Steadman and Very Revd Michael Persson, who had visited Jerusalem and Bethlehem with CLC's Chairman Revd Torbjørn Holt and trustee Revd Eliza Zikmane, conveyed the hope of the Christian leaders there even while many of the ordinary people do not see a clear, peaceful or prosperous future and so try to emigrate (even if they are not actually being driven out). While Eastern Churches have a more elevated sense of place, the importance of the holy places and of all three faiths being in Jerusalem to make for peace, all the Church leaders called for support for the living stones, their people. So they invite us all on pilgrimage, to walk with them (as well as walking in the steps of Jesus) in solidarity. How else can we support those communities, as well as in prayer? Support and build their identity as an indigenous people; support education for sustainable communities and to reinforce their identity; empower the disempowered, mix men and women, Muslim and Christian (as the Christian schools do), and always educate, and keep their identity – otherwise the region is subject to all sorts of influences which makes for chaos and no peace.



*Very Revd Jan Otto Myrseth the acting Bishop of Bergen, and Rt Revd Christopher Chessun the Bishop of Southwark*

In addition to pilgrimage, the theology of solidarity and accompaniment is made explicit and practical in the WCC's Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). While the Separation Barrier imposes a peace (temporarily, without justice) by preventing meetings between peoples, and like any enclosing wall affecting both "prisoners" and "prison guards", EAPPI is the only way that many Palestinians can continue to live in their homes. In representing us as sending Churches and in photographing, writing articles and blogs while in the West Bank or visiting Israeli peace movements, and speaking out on their return, EAs are our eyes and

ears as well as accompanying feet. Any of us can volunteers as EAs, and EAPPI enables us all to better understand the complexities of Israel, Palestine and the situation viewed through the eyes of those that live there, and to move from unquestioning support of one perspective to a nuanced view building to a peace with justice.

Peace is not just the absence of war: the Oslo accords were helpful for immediate cessation of hostilities at the time and establishing a framework with good intentions, recognising that at the time there was a real willingness to talk face to face, and a belief that there was a practicable solution. However it left out the religious leaders, and since 1995 the good intentions have evaporated, annexations and the separation barrier have been built, and tensions increased again. There will never



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be a permanent solution without the involvement of religious leaders and an understanding of the religious questions at the highest political and diplomatic levels. At the same time it is ironic that the country which claims to be the only democracy in the region ignores several international laws, and noteworthy how much attention ordinary people pay to UN actions and to international law. EAPPI, ChristianAid and the ACT Alliance, and other international advocacy initiatives stand up for the rule of law and on behalf of our Christian brothers and sisters.

CLC will continue to work with these diaconal groups and others supporting religious freedom such as the Free Churches Group, and investigate providing extra appropriate training for diplomats if required. We are organising a pilgrimage to visit the Holy Land and its living stones from 20 or 23 February to 2 March 2015 and all are welcome – contact James Laing for more details ([jl@lutheran.org.uk](mailto:jl@lutheran.org.uk)). The ACT Palestine Forum, of whom the Lutheran World Federation and ChristianAid are members, convenes a virtual, global prayer vigil for the peace of Jerusalem, Palestine, Israel and the world, on 24<sup>th</sup> of each month (see <http://actpalestineforum.org/vigil/>). Let us stand with them, pray for them, and visit them. Justice and peace belong together as aspects of the Kingdom of God, as aspects of being together as Churches, not particularly political or humanitarian or diplomatic, but of spiritual importance wherever we are called as Church and as Christians.



*Discussions after the meeting*

### **ABOUT THE EVENT: Minorities Under Fire: The situation of Christians and other minorities in the Middle East.**

The Norwegian Church in London and the Council of Lutheran Churches hosted an audience and panel discussion, chaired by Revd Torbjørn Holt, Rector of the Norwegian Church and Chair of CLC, with

- Revd Dr Olav Fykse Tveit (General Secretary, World Council of Churches)
- Rt Revd Christopher Chessun (Anglican Bishop of Southwark), and
- Very Revd Jan Otto Myrseth (Acting Bishop of Bergen).

The summer of 2014 saw conflict in Gaza and the spread of IS in Iraq and Syria. Minorities, especially Christians are under enormous pressure, and hundreds of thousands were forced to flee from their homes. What is the future of minorities in the Middle East? The event took place on Friday 17 October 2014 at 17:00 – 19:15 at the Norwegian Church, St Olav's Square, 1 Albion St, London SE16 7JB.

For more information, please contact James Laing, General Secretary of the Council of Lutheran Churches, on 020 7554 9753 or [jl@lutheran.org.uk](mailto:jl@lutheran.org.uk)