

**Peace:
Starting from Jerusalem, Spreading to the World**

A Pastoral Statement by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA

**Christian Unity Gathering
May 20, 2014
Washington, DC**

The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA has been, since its inception, an advocate for peace. In moments of crisis in our society and in our world, the collective voice of the communions that comprise the NCC have been clear and strong in calling for policies and actions to prevent violence, to cease hostilities when they occur, and to foster reconciliation as a means of transforming conflict and injustice into justice and peace.

As the NCC member churches and the wider ecumenical family gather at the first Christian Unity Gathering following the organization's restructure, we affirm that peace remains central to our mission. Indeed, as the mission statement of the "new" NCC affirms: "The NCC is a community of communions called by Christ to visible unity and sent forth in the Spirit to promote God's justice, peace, and the healing of the world." To focus our energies as we move forward from this time and place, with one another and together with our neighbors of other faiths, we have named the imperative to work for peace in the context of our interfaith relationships as one of our priorities.

Conflict, of course, has no physical or religious boundaries. In all regions of the world today political, military, economic, ethnic and/or religious violence is occurring. And no religious community is immune from this violence, whether its adherents are numbered among the victims or among the perpetrators. While we are in solidarity with all communities of faith impacted by violence, we are particularly saddened when this violence impacts our sisters and brothers in Christian communities around the world.

There are very few places in which such violence is more visible than in the Middle East, the region where our faith began and all of our respective churches are ultimately rooted. It was there that God was revealed in the experience of the Exodus and Sinai; that the Son of God was born, lived, was crucified, and resurrected; and that the Spirit of God inspired the first Christian believers to proclaim the gospel. It was there, in Antioch of Syria, where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians. It was there that the Church began to spread, not only throughout what is now Israel and Palestine, Egypt, and Syria, but also in Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, and other lands near and far. And it is there that the churches of the Middle East, the heirs of those first Christian communities, continue to live in fellowship and ministry. It is these same churches in the Middle East that the US churches and the US and worldwide ecumenical community have accompanied, through prayer, humanitarian assistance, and advocacy, for decades, and indeed longer.

In these countries today, conflict abounds. While the qualitative presence of the Christian communities is robust, as they fulfill their ministry, offer social programs, foster interfaith relations, and support peacemaking efforts, they are nonetheless impacted by such conflict. We therefore remain steadfast in our solidarity.

In Israel and Palestine, a solution to the decades-long conflict has not been found, leaving many Israelis and Palestinians to live in fear of the other. It leaves Jews, Christians and Muslims vulnerable to the words and actions of extremists within each of their communities. And, in particular, it leaves Palestinian Christians of all churches vulnerable, especially as their numbers wane due to these pressures. This is why the NCC supports the aims of the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel, and other programs by our member churches that similarly provide solidarity with our church partners there ***The National Council of Churches calls upon relevant parties both inside and outside Israel and Palestine to seriously engage, despite ever-present setbacks, in the search for a peace agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians, as a way toward ending this conflict.***

In Egypt, the promise of the Arab Spring has given way over the last three years to social unrest and violence. The youth of Egypt still have little in terms of an economic future and governmental structures are still in flux. While this situation affects all Egyptians equally, some religious tensions between Muslims and Christians are exacerbated by such upheaval and leave the Christians, perhaps most notably the Coptic Orthodox Church, the largest and most visible Christian community, vulnerable to more and more violence. This is why the NCC has long upheld the rights and well being of all Christian communities in Egypt. ***The National Council of Churches calls upon all relevant parties both inside and outside Egypt to foster respect for, and ensure the security of, all religious communities in Egypt, and to return to constructive civil engagement as a way toward ending this unrest.***

In Syria, three years of civil war has torn society apart . Hope for peaceful reform yielded to violent actions and reactions, including the use of chemical weapons. Interreligious harmony degenerated into sectarian strife. Ancient cities have turned out thousands upon thousands of refugees from the families that have lived in them for generations. People in all of the religious communities there are affected by the crumbling of their society; Christians, in particular, have suffered gravely, if not disproportionately. This is why the NCC has lifted up the needs of Syria's Christian communities, the plight of two Orthodox bishops who were kidnapped a year ago while doing humanitarian work, and the destruction of Armenian villages in a recent rebel attack. It is also why we so fervently pray for the ministry of our friend and colleague, His Holiness Moran Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, who has long served on the NCC governing board and who now assumes the mantle of leadership as Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East. ***The National Council of Churches calls upon all relevant parties both inside and outside Syria to identify appropriate means for ending the armed conflict in Syria, so that peace may be established, and so that the nearly 45% of the population that has been displaced, internally or as refugees in neighboring countries, can attempt to reconstitute their lives with a sense of security and hope for the future.***

We, as Christians in the United States, in ecumenical fellowship with one another, reaffirm our solidarity with our Christian brothers and sisters in the Middle East. In interfaith partnership with our brothers and sisters in other US religious communities, and with the majority of people in all faith communities in the region, we recommit ourselves to actively seeking peace with justice, and reconciliation among all, recognizing that the conflicts in

the Middle East are rooted in economic, political and social structures that deny the fullness of life, and that sectarian strife is an undeniable reality and often a symptom of other ills. In civil partnership with our elected leaders, we renew our pledge to be constructive agents of change in the face of continuing conflict, violence, and destruction, building a future where all people may pursue their hopes and aspirations. **The member communions of the National Council of Churches call upon one another and our respective congregations to continue to pray, advocate and work for peace.**

When our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, approached Jerusalem, on his way to his passion, he cried over the city. As Luke reminds us: "As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!'" (Lk 19:41-42a, NRSV). Together with our Lord, our hearts are grieved when peace eludes not only the City of Jerusalem, but all of the Holy Land and the surrounding region. With trust in this same Lord, we witness to the things that make for peace. And with hope in him, we look forward to the "new Jerusalem" where "death [and] mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (Rev 21:4) and from which the river of life will spread God's blessings and peace to all the world.