



# THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

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*President*

Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan

The Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land  
The President of the Lutheran World Federation

## Ecumenism is Reconciliation – in the Middle East and in the World

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1. The topic that you have called attention to for my address is the meaning of ecumenism in connection with reconciliation, particularly in the context of the Middle East. In the following, I shall first share with you some thoughts about ecumenism, both with regard to the Middle East and globally. I will then expand the perspective and share with you some developments in and reflections on interfaith relations.
2. One note, there are those who would like to extend the notion of ecumenism itself to include interfaith relations. I do not recommend this, for the motivation behind ecumenism in the Christian context is inseparably connected with the gospel of God's work in Christ by the Holy Spirit. But we are bold enough to believe, at the same time, that the meaning and values we see in ecumenism can also stimulate and guide our engagements in interfaith relationships.

### **ECUMENISM AS INTEGRATION OF FAITH AND LIFE**

3. Ecumenism comes from the Greek term *oikoumene*, which refers to the inhabited land of the earth, where people have their houses (*oikoi*) – their homes – and where, by implication, they seek to fulfill their needs and their aspirations. It is a comprehensive term, which provides a holistic perspective on human nature, human living conditions and human society. As a Christian concept, it is used especially with regard to the universal Christian church and the search for its unity. But even in this Christian meaning, we maintain also the broader understanding of ecumenism.
4. We consider the life of the church in relation to our common human life in the perspective of the inner unity of the Holy Trinity, into which we are included by grace and faith. Just as the Triune God is the all encompassing One—a differentiated, divine unity—human life is shared life in the setting of divine reconciliation. The community

of the church, which is human life in a complex God-given unity, is not only a unity in diversity, but a unity in *reconciled* diversity.<sup>1</sup>

5. What do I mean by saying that “ecumenism *is* reconciliation?” The answer is as simple as it is true: Ecumenism happens when, and only when, there are partners who intentionally seek to establish or further pursue relationships aimed at increased mutual communication and understanding. Such processes presuppose a) a certain level of commonality between the partners. They also presuppose b) the existence of differences. These differences normally constitute the focus of dialogue and the challenges in relations. An important third factor is c) the motivation to pursue an ecumenical process with a view to overcoming divisive factors, i.e. with a view to reconciliation. Fourthly, d) ecumenical dialogue is led by the Holy Spirit, who works in us to see Christ in the other and to achieve convergences. Finally, as always, there is a blend of theological and historical factors at work in the development of ecumenical relations.
6. In the history of the ecumenical movement, we have continuously struggled with the relationship between the spiritual and the human dimensions of the church. Take the two movements that developed during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: *Life and Work*, and *Faith and Order*.
7. The *Life and Work* unit was established first in 1925 under the theme "Doctrine divides but service unites." When the *Faith and Order* unit was established in 1927, it was done so in order that it might complement the *Life and Work* unit in providing a platform for joint theological discussions and efforts within the church on matters of faith, order and worship for the sake of common mission. Because of their complementary work and mission, these two units merged in 1948 to become the World Council of Churches (WCC). In 1961, the WCC once again expanded in its ecumenical work, when the International Missionary Council merged with it.

### **ECUMENISM AS THE IMAGE OF RINGS EXPANDING IN WATER**

8. Ecumenism is an essential part of the nature and mission of the church itself. The unity for which ecumenism strives is not apart from the unity that is sought by the church—the unity by which the church wishes to be recognized. The unity established in Word and Sacrament within a single congregation is the same as that which unites the congregations of a church body, and the same as that which drives the pursuit of unity among churches of differing traditions and confessions.
9. As such, Ecumenism can be likened to the image of ever-expanding rings in water. Ecumenism on the local level is a God-given gift in Christ by the Holy Spirit. More often than not, it grows naturally between the churches of a community. It is neither a result of dialogue, nor negotiation, but the result of lives lived together in community, overlapping and interconnected.

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<sup>1</sup> The term is, as we know, especially common among Lutherans, having emerged from the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, and affirmed by the LWF Assembly in Dar-es-Salaam in 1977.

10. Ecumenism on a broader level necessarily enters deeper into issues of theology and doctrine. We praise God for the ecumenical work and agreements that church bodies have come to, especially in the reciprocal recognition of Baptism in the name of the Triune God. Baptism is an expression of God's pure grace, received in faith. It is not a product of human theological endeavor. But Baptism is, certainly, an appropriate subject for ecumenical theological reflection.
11. I am very pleased therefore, that the current phase of the Roman Catholic – Lutheran dialogue, "The Lutheran – Roman Catholic Commission on Unity," seeks precisely to clarify what mutually recognized Baptism means in regard to ecumenism. This is a crucial matter, not only within the professional ecumenical sphere, but also, within the pastoral sphere. For families in which more than one denomination is represented, the Sacrament of Holy Communion becomes a source of pain when members of the same family are not welcomed to the Table, even though their Baptism is recognized. This sacramental discrimination is in opposition to the source of life and hope that is essential to Sacrament.
12. Because of the significance of this issue, an issue that is close to the heart of many Christian families, I raised the issue of Eucharistic hospitality in my address to Pope Benedict XVI when he received the Rev. Martin Junge, General Secretary of the LWF, and myself as part of a small LWF delegation in December of 2010. And I again raised the issue with the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Church in March of 2011.
13. It is my sincere hope that, out of our ecumenical relationship with both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, we will achieve increased openness for mutual Eucharistic hospitality for the baptized who, we believe together, have been incorporated into Christ, as stated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000):

[T]hose who are baptized in [the ecclesial] communities are, by Baptism, incorporated in Christ and thus are in a certain communion, albeit imperfect, with the Church. Baptism in fact tends per se toward the full development of life in Christ, through the integral profession of faith, the Eucharist, and full communion in the Church.

If we are already incorporated into Christ through baptism, what more can be required for Eucharistic hospitality, on occasion, as we await the fullness of Christian unity?

### **ECUMENISM AS RECONCILIATION**

14. I believe it is vital that we, as Lutherans, maintain a clear focus on the theological core of ecumenism, that is, our unity in Christ. For it is only with our unity in Christ at our core that we can properly base our commitment to the ministry of reconciliation, transcend our own boundaries, and engage in mutual acceptance and affirmation.
15. In his treatise "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods," Luther criticizes the "brotherhoods" of his time for being guild-like societies Luther considered exclusivist and self-indulgent. Over and against these so-

called “brotherhoods” Luther describes the sacramental community of the church, which Luther calls the “one spiritual body”:

The significance or effect of this sacrament is fellowship of all the saints ... Hence it is that all saints are one spiritual body, just as the inhabitants of a city are one community and body, each citizen being a member of the other and of the entire city ... This fellowship consists in this, that all the spiritual possessions of Christ and his saints are shared with and become the common property of him [or her] who receives this sacrament. Again, all suffering and sins also become common property; and thus love engenders love in return and [mutual love] unites.<sup>2</sup>

16. Luther further develops the perspective of the unity that follows from offering ourselves with Christ. Such is a real unity of human beings, which emerges from our identification with Christ and Christ’s sacrifice:

When Christ instituted the sacrament, he said, ‘This is my body which is given for you, this is my blood which is poured out for you. As often as you do this, remember me.’ It is as if Christ were saying, ‘I am the Head, I will be the first to give myself for you. I will make your suffering and misfortune my own and will bear it for you, so that you in turn may do the same for me and for one another, allowing all things to be common property, in me and with me.’ [We] must make the evil of others our own, if we desire Christ and Christ’s saints to make our evil their own. Then will the fellowship be complete, and justice be done to the sacrament. For the sacrament has no blessing and significance unless love grows daily and so changes a person that he [or she] is made one with all others.<sup>3</sup>

17. By this interpretation of the Sacrament of Holy Communion, an essential link is realized between Christ’s sacrifice, faith in the forgiveness of sins and the commitment of believers to each other.
18. In light of this essential link, it is important to mention the significance of forgiveness where our own relational history has included condemnations that have inflicted long-standing pain. In an action taken by the LWF Eleventh Assembly in Stuttgart in July 2010, the Lutheran communion formally presented a petition to the Anabaptists repealing the condemnations spoken and written by Lutherans in the time of the Reformation and asking for forgiveness for the persecution and killing by Lutherans at that time. Set amidst worship, this significant moment of confession and forgiveness was not only a very emotional moment for those present at the Assembly, but also a moment of great significance for the present and future relations between Lutherans and Mennonites/Anabaptists.
19. Recall also the actions taken by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church in Augsburg in 1999, when, as part of the signing of the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (JDDJ), the two parties declared that their

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<sup>2</sup> „The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods.“ LW 35 p. 50–51.

<sup>3</sup> The Blessed Sacrament p. 57–58.

historical mutual condemnations in the area of justification were now refuted in the shared understanding expressed in the JDDJ.

20. And finally, we recall the Leunberg Agreement of 1973. Signed by the Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches in Europe, it was the first ecumenical agreement that formally dealt with mutual condemnations from the time of the Reformation. In its signing, the Leunberg Agreement opened the way for ecumenical relationships among Protestants in Europe and beyond.
21. In true confession and honest repentance the way of reconciliation is made possible, and in the journey toward forgiveness our community in Christ is deepened. And when our Ecumenical community in Christ is reconciled through confession and forgiveness, ecumenism truly becomes synonymous with reconciliation.

### **THE REAL PRESENCE AND THE RINGS IN THE WATER**

22. Let me, however, return briefly to the image of expanding rings in water. What is at the center? Who or what is the drop that is the impetus for the ripples? The drop can be none other than the very presence of God incarnate and among us in the Word become flesh, Jesus Christ, in whom we are united by the Holy Spirit through faith. In the same way within our Lutheran tradition, we proclaim the real presence of Christ's body and blood "in, with, and under" the visible elements of bread and wine in the Sacrament of Holy Communion by the power of the Word.
23. In the true presence of Christ received in Holy Communion we are joined with Christ and with the whole Communion of Saints across time and space. And just as the means of grace effected in Holy Communion are not only proclaimed, but visible, so must our own proclamation of the Word of God be tangible in deed. It is this very dichotomy that plays a central role in the apostle Paul's first letter to the congregation in Corinth, where the diaconal practice of the congregation is undermining the unity of the Lord's Supper and, in turn, the unity of the church:

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it... When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! (1 Cor. 11:17-22)

24. And let us also not forget Luther's words quoted earlier: "For the sacrament has no blessing and significance unless love grows daily and so changes a person that he [or she] is made one with all others." In both Paul and Luther the absolute inseparability of faith from service in the life and mission of the church is reiterated.
25. And yet there are some who wish to separate these two dimensions of the Christian life asserting that one (the means of grace) is necessary to the church, whereas the

other (diakonia) is good, but not necessary. Conversely, there are those who will readily affirm and promote the necessity of diakonia and the work of specialized ministries, but are very reluctant to affirm the vital need for Word and Sacrament in the mission of the church. Truly I tell you, both faith and service are necessary and, indeed, essentially interrelated to the mission of the church.

### **TESTING FAITH BY ITS FRUITS**

26. Let us now turn for a moment to Christ's words about the tree and its fruits.

‘Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit... Thus you will know them by their fruits.’ (Matthew 7:15-20)

27. With these words, Christ encourages his disciples to beware of those who claim to represent that which is good. And the judge shall be their fruits—does that which is proclaimed in word made present in practice, so that life is promoted in hope, in love and in community. As with Word and Sacrament, it is only in conjunction with the visible embodiment of the proclaimed word that the message is judged ‘good.’

28. Once again, the unity of faith with diakonia and diakonia with faith is necessitated. And, in this lies the essential relationship between the drop of water and the expanding rings, not only in application to the beliefs and values of individual church bodies, but to ecumenical relationships, interfaith relationships, to human life and community—indeed, the rings expand ever outward to country, to government, to culture, and throughout the world. “You will know them by their fruits.”

29. The true realization of this perspective is essential in the Middle East, even as it is essential everywhere. We have no use for faith without service. We have no use for a tree that fails to produce good fruit. We have had enough of impressive-sounding plans and rationales that fail to bring forth constructive fruit. It is constructive fruit for which we now wait, and by which we continue in hope. And I truly believe that much constructive and ‘good’ fruit is found in the ecumenical movements of the Middle East.

### **CHURCHES AS INSTRUMENTS OF PEACE IN THE ARAB WORLD**

30. **The Ottoman Firman 1852.** The beginnings of the modern ecumenical movement in the Middle East can be traced back to the Ottoman “Firman” of 1852. In this regulation, the Ottoman Sultan defined the rights of pre-eminence to the holy places of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Confirmed by the Treaty of Berlin of 1878, this regulation established the *Status Quo* agreement guaranteeing the rights and freedoms of all Christian church bodies with regards to access and worship within the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

31. **Common dates for ecumenical celebration of Christmas and Easter.** These holy places offer for Christians living here, and those visiting as pilgrims, the opportunity to gather with the great cloud of witnesses who have worshipped in these places for

two thousand years. Yet, long-standing traditions can be a source of tension, making everyday ecumenical life difficult. It is therefore significant that, while I was still a parish pastor in Ramallah, in 1993 the local Christians came together and agreed to celebrate Christmas and Easter ecumenically on a common date. But in Jerusalem, in Bethlehem, in Nazareth, and in much of the world, we continue our celebrations not only separated by our traditions, but by the way in which we each determine the date our celebrations. Conversation as to how we might determine common dates for the celebration of Christmas and Easter have been on the table for a long time now, and helpful proposals have been presented. But a mutually agreeable solution has yet to be found.

32. It is my vision that the Christians in the Middle East, along with the WCC, the Vatican, the LWF and other world church communions will work together to assign Christmas according to the Gregorian calendar and Easter according to the Julian calendar, in following the decisions of the Council of Nicea that called to follow Jerusalem time, so that our common celebration of Christmas and Easter may become a sign of our common witness in a multi-religious and multi-cultural world.
33. **Patriarchs and Heads of Local Christian Churches in Jerusalem.** And yet we have found significant ways in which to work together as the Patriarchs and Heads of Local Christian Churches in Jerusalem. Since soon after the beginning of the first Intifada in 1987 we have come together often to discuss issues of common concern, such as the emigration of Christians, the rise of Christian Zionism, and the relationship between church and state. We have also come together in order that we might, as one, issue joint statements and pastoral letters. Between 1988 and 2008 (the siege of Gaza) sixty-eight joint public statements were issued on the situation of *Christians in the Holy Land*, and especially in Jerusalem. Among the significant statements made have been the 1994 statement on “The Significance of Jerusalem” and the 2006 statement on “The Status of Jerusalem,” a statement on the emigration of Christians, the endorsement of the *Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel* and the endorsement of the “Kairos Palestine Document.”
34. We are in a very difficult phase of our lives in the region generally. And, at times, we struggle as Heads of Churches to achieve results. And yet, the communication and fellowship that exist among us is an important instrument for unity in Jerusalem. Our relationships are ones of trust. And so I want to stress that, even if our fruits are not bountiful or prominent, and even though our common tree is small, I know that tree is good, because our fruits, small though they are, are good. And we hope and pray that growing conditions will improve, and our tree will blossom and grow ever greater.
35. **The issue of Palestinian Christian Emigration.** The most pressing issue facing the Palestinian Church today is Christian emigration, with Christians now numbering less than 1.7 % of the population, a vast decrease from the 10 % prior to the events of 1948. Surveys about this phenomenon have shown the three reasons most commonly given for emigration to be:

- i. the continued unsettled political situation and the absence of a horizon of peace and justice;<sup>4</sup>
  - ii. lack of jobs; and
  - iii. the growth of extremism among both Palestinians and Israelis.
36. We as the church are stressing a number of essential programs in order to face the problems of emigration, such as:
- i. community based education;
  - ii. assistance in finding jobs;
  - iii. the building of affordable and secure housing, such as the Mount of Olives Housing Project; and
  - iv. the strengthening of Christian institutions serving every human being regardless of ethnicity, religion, or nationality.
37. In response to the problem of emigration, my church has also initiated a program to develop leadership skills in young people and seeks to continue to meet the spiritual as well as material needs of its people and its communities in this Holy Land context as it has done so throughout its history. At the same time we appeal to all of our accompanying churches to walk with us to encourage our people not to emigrate.
38. For the Arab Christians are the guarantee of a democratic modern civil society that respect human rights, gender issues, freedom of religion and freedom of minorities in the Middle East, as well as the guarantee that the Middle East conflict will not become a conflict of religion, but remain a political conflict working for peace and justice for all. Truly I ask: what would the Middle East be without a Christian presence?
39. We are very thankful for the special Vatican Synod held in October 2010 on the subject of Christians in the Middle East and for the recommendations that have come from this Synod. My vision, which I shared with Pope Benedict XVI in December when we met is that, from this Synod, out of ecumenical dialogue, the Vatican together with the World Council of Churches and other world church communions will come together in developing a strategy for a concerted effort for Christians in the Middle East.
40. **The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI).** During the second Intifada and incursion of Palestinian lands by the Israeli army with an extreme escalation of violence, we as leaders of local churches called upon the world for help to “Come and See!” (John 1:46). By September 2001, the WCC Executive Committee recommended to “*develop an accompaniment programme that would include an international ecumenical presence,*” would build upon the experiences of the Christian Peacemaker Teams, and would be closely linked to and owned by the local churches, while being administered by the WCC.

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<sup>4</sup> Closures, difficulties in obtaining travel permits, and the 25-foot separation wall are just some of the obstacles for our members under occupation.

41. In February 2002, the EAPPI was officially launched. We had searched for words and actions to embody this call, which would be more than “monitoring”. What we called for in the end was “accompaniment,” which has a broad biblical and theological background—walking together and breaking bread together as Jesus and the Emmaus disciples in Luke 24. Accompaniment seeks justice, shows compassion, and calls for truth-telling that transcends public political rhetoric and rationales.
42. Now after nine years we have been blessed with 39 groups comprised of nearly one thousand accompaniers. These EAPPI members, divided into teams of four or five, have each spent three months living, experiencing occupation, observing, and bearing witness in Hebron, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Jayyus, Tulkarm, and Yanoun. EAs provide a protective presence to vulnerable communities, monitor and report human rights abuses and support Palestinians and Israelis working together for peace. When EAs return home, they campaign for a just and peaceful resolution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict through an end to the occupation, respect for international law, and implementation of UN resolutions. As such, they become an ecumenical human chain working for justice, peace and reconciliation.
43. **The Kairos Palestine Document: A Moment of Truth –A word of faith, hope, and love from the heart of the Palestinian suffering.** The Kairos Document was presented to the world community on December 11, 2009. Kairos is a movement of grassroots Christians, not a document of the Heads of Churches. At the request of our members the leaders have endorsed this statement because it promotes faith, hope, and love and answers the queries of many Palestinian Christians in their reading and interpretation of biblical texts. Its importance stems from the sincere expression of the concerns of the people and their view of this moment in history in which we are living. It seeks to be prophetic in addressing things as they are without equivocation and with boldness, in addition it puts forward an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and all forms of discrimination as the solution that will lead to a just and lasting peace. This document is the first of its kind daring to speak publicly on Non-violence, and teaches the Palestinian people to see the image of God in the Israeli people.
44. **Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.** One of the highlights of our life together in Jerusalem is the celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I know that this is a worldwide initiative, but in Jerusalem and in the Middle East it is truly an ecumenical week with great energy and intention behind it. Each afternoon during the week in January, hundreds of our members of all denominations crowd into a different church to pray and sing, to hear God's word, and to share in fellowship. This year the World Council of Churches and the Vatican Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity requested that the worship materials for the worldwide celebration be prepared by Palestinian Christians in Jerusalem, remembering the first Pentecost, the focus of the week was on the unity through “the Apostles’ teaching, the breaking of bread, fellowship, and prayer” (Acts 2:42).
45. **World Day of Prayer.** Similarly, our women of all denominations take the lead in joining together in World Day of Prayer Services. In 1998 they wrote the program for

women throughout the world. These services play an important role in bringing our churches closer together.

46. **The Middle East Council of Churches (MECC).** Another instrument toward Christian unity is the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) founded in 1974. It continues to be the only platform for full ecumenical cooperation in the region with representatives from all four Christian families: the Oriental Orthodox, the Eastern Orthodox (Chalcedonian), the Catholic and the Evangelical Churches.<sup>5</sup>
47. The MECC grew out of various interchurch developments in the Middle East dating back to a 1902 encyclical issued by the Ecumenical patriarch in Constantinople raising the issue of Christian unity and Orthodox relations with Roman Catholics and Protestants.
48. From the mid-1920s until the early 1960s the mantle of ecumenism was carried by missionaries living and working in the Jerusalem area who worked together in forming the cooperation that became the *Near East Christian Council* in 1956.
49. By the early 1960s the mission agencies ceded their involvement in favor of churches acting as agents of mission, and in 1962 a fellowship called the *Near East Council of Churches* was formed.

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<sup>5</sup> *Oriental Orthodox Churches:*

The Coptic Orthodox Church  
 The Armenian Apostolic Church - Catholicosate of Cilicia  
 The Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and all the East

*Eastern Orthodox (Chalcedonian) Churches:*

Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa  
 Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East  
 Greek Orthodox Church of Jerusalem  
 Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus

*Catholic Churches:*

Maronite Church of Antioch  
 Greek Catholic Melchite Church of Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem  
 Armenian Catholic Church of Cilicia  
 Syrian Catholic Church of Antioch  
 Coptic Catholic Church of Alexandria  
 Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem  
 Chaldean Catholic Church of Babylon

*Evangelical Churches:*

The Evangelical Synod of the Nile  
 Union of the Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East  
 National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon  
 National Evangelical Union of Lebanon  
 Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East  
 Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land  
 National Evangelical Church in Kuwait  
 The Synod of the Evangelical Church in Iran  
 Evangelical Church in Sudan  
 Episcopal Church in the Sudan  
 Presbyterian Church in the Sudan  
 Protestant Church in Algeria  
 Eglise Reformée de France en Tunisie

50. These intensified contacts and dialogues between Protestant churches and Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches in the region brought about significant processes of reconciliation and healing among the churches, and in May 1974 the *Middle East Council of Churches* came into being. And the process of reconciliation continued to grow. In 1990 the seven Catholic churches of the Middle East joined the MECC as its fourth family. Finally, the Middle East Council of Churches was a fully inclusive council.
51. The MECC has continued to bring our churches together in a significant way, and it has opened many doors of communication among members. Currently the MECC is in crisis for various different reasons, including reasons relating to finance and structure, but strong attempts are being made by the local churches to revive it on the basis of its uniqueness and significance. It remains that the MECC is the main framework of ecumenism for the mainline churches in the Middle East, and this crisis has motivated all member churches to work together in claiming local ownership and stake in the MECC. It is my vision that the newly emerging structure of the MECC will concentrate on the Christian presence and witness in the Middle East, promoting ecumenical spirituality and diakonia with a basis in the self-understanding of the local churches, while providing common ground for Christian-Muslim interfaith dialogue.
52. **Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches (FMEEC).** The Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches (FMEEC) is an association of Reformed, Anglican, and Lutheran churches in the Middle East who confess one God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and one Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. They hold the Holy Bible to be the sole foundation for Christian doctrine. They confess justification by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, and good works as the fruit of faith. The objectives of the Fellowship are to strengthen the mission and ministry of the Protestant churches; to promote leadership training and formation of the laity of both men and women; and to bring the member churches to a closer unity through working and learning together.
53. There has been a long tradition of motivation for unity among the Evangelical churches in the Middle East. The Evangelical churches were active in the developments throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century among the missionary organizations, which eventually led to the establishment of the MECC, (cf. above). But the member churches of the MECC are not in full communion. Therefore, the quest for unity remains a priority for FMEEC. In 2005 a proposal, actively promoted by the ELCJHL, was launched which aimed at a formal agreement between the churches of the Reformed and Lutheran traditions in FMEEC. In January 2006 *The Amman Declaration of Lutheran and Reformed Churches in the Middle East and North Africa*, a full-communion agreement between these churches, was signed. This agreement establishes the mutual recognition of Baptism, Eucharist, ministry and ordination, and provides a formal link to the *Community of Protestant Churches in Europe* (formerly the “Leuenberg Fellowship”). The signatory church bodies commit themselves to close cooperation and common witness.

54. **Relations between the ELCJHL and the Anglican Church.** The Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem belongs to the Province of the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and The Middle East. The relations between the Lutheran Church and the Anglican Church have been close since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1841 a joint British Anglican and Prussian Evangelical bishopric was established in Jerusalem, in which the office of bishop alternated between the two churches until 1886. However, one must recognize a difference in focus between the two churches during this early period. Much of the Anglican work was derived from *the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews* established in 1808. Whereas, among the German Lutherans was a strong diaconal focus in education for Arab boys and girls. When the two churches agreed to go their separate ways, Anglicans establish congregations in Jerusalem and to the north while the Lutherans worked in Jerusalem and in areas to the south. Differences between German Lutherans and Anglicans on European soil likely created barriers preventing cooperation in the Middle East. However, by the middle 1970s both the Anglican Church in Jerusalem and the ELCJHL elected Palestinian bishops leading to greater cooperation.
55. However, the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem was not a signatory of the 2006 *Amman Declaration of Lutheran and Reformed Churches in the Middle East and North Africa*, although the Anglicans are an integral member of FMEEC and known as “evangelicals” in the region. This was, however, in keeping with Anglican ecumenical practice globally, whereby Anglican churches only enter into full communion with churches that have an episcopal ministry in apostolic succession. This means that, at the present time, the Anglican and the Lutheran churches do not have formal relations of full communion. This is a paradox in light of the history of the two churches. I believe the way forward is to explore how the two churches can enter into a bilateral relationship of full communion in line with *the Porvoo Common Statement, Called to Common Mission* or the *Waterloo Agreement*. The ELCJHL would then be in similar dual relationships with the local Anglican and Reformed churches as the Lutheran churches in Denmark, Norway, Estonia, Latvia and the ELCA in which, in practice they would act as mediating churches in the relationship between Anglican churches on the one hand and Reformed churches on the other hand.
56. **The importance of international dialogues for our mission.** For the churches in the Middle East the development of international relations between the different Christian World Communions to which we belong is very important. We all see ourselves as members of larger church families in which ecumenical developments among them can be a great stimulus for us locally. It is important that global ecumenical agreements are well received and supported locally. But for this to succeed, such international dialogues should not only concentrate on theological issues, but should also provide proposals and encouragement for local cooperation in mission and *diakonia*. We must also make sure that we do not continue to export our tensions to new places. One example is China. We are happy that the Word of God is being proclaimed and that the churches there are growing rapidly. Denominational differences should not lead to competition there. Rather, we would like to see

cooperation, encouragement, and mutual support. If we begin competing there, we may lose the opportunity of the signs of our times. Ecumenism has always arisen out of concern for the churches' mission. So also should it continue today.

### **CURRENT COINTINUING POINTS FOR ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE**

57. And yet, even with these important ecumenical partners and amidst a Christian population that is so small as ours is in the Middle East, there are still many points of ecumenical dialogue, just as there continue to be important points of ecumenical dialogue in the larger ecumenical sphere.
58. And, as I choose to view them as points of dialogue, rather than points of contention, I do not wish to provide answers at this time, but rather I wish to put forward continuing points for ecumenical dialogue, both local and international, that I believe deserve active and passionate dialogue for the sake of our common mission:
59. How can we put aside our fears of conversion and cross-ecumenical proselytism so that the bridges of ecumenical dialogue can be built strong?
60. How do we approach diversity, both within our own churches and within our ecumenical partnerships? In what ways can our diversity lend strength to our dialogue?
61. For example, can the clear policy of the LWF for the Ordination of Women become an integral point of ecumenical diversity and pluralism within our church—a point that encourages strengthened ecumenical dialogue?
62. How do our language choices continue to impede dialogue? And how can we work to encourage continued dialogue surrounding language choices?
63. For example, when mainline evangelical church bodies are rather referred to as Ecclesiastical Communities by the Vatican what are the implications? How does this affect our ongoing dialogues on the theology of Justification, sacramental theology, ministry, and the Apostolic Succession?
64. How can we better develop a deeper theology of Accompaniment in Accompaniment with our ecumenical partners in the Middle East and throughout the world who witness in a Muslim world?
65. Amidst the growing evangelistic movements in the world, how do we continue to open the doors of ecumenical dialogue?
66. How do we in the midst of ecumenical dialogue, at the same time, take into consideration our call to interfaith dialogue with our brothers and sisters of diverse faiths?
67. And, how do we actively continue to live out our call to mission, even as we work for freedom of religion in our pluralistic world?
68. How can we better address the growing fundamentalism within Christian churches?

69. How can intentional ecumenical and interfaith dialogue provide an alternate way forward to the imposed secularism that threatens to strip our world of public religion?
70. And, finally, amidst these questions of internal ecumenical dialogue, how can we come together—the LWF, the WCC, the Vatican, the Ecumenical Patriarch, etc.—to form a common and overarching strategy of diakonia and cooperation in our work toward the eradication of poverty, toward an end to armament, for the care of creation, as we address issues of justice and gender balance, and lend our hands in moments of great and immediate need?

### **THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

71. In any religious practice, there is always present a dialectic between scripture and tradition and the practical implication and implementation. As theology impacts life, so life impacts theology. As our world becomes increasingly global and pluralistic, the influences of practical life are expanding the religious dialectic in many parts of the world. But this pluralism has been a part of the religious dialectic of the Middle East for as long as humanity has existed, and in this unfolding religious history, issues of conflict and reconciliation have always been present.
72. In the Middle East we do not need dialogues in order to establish interfaith relationships. *We are a region of interfaith relationships.* But that is also the reason why we should have more interfaith dialogue! It is a paradox that even if extremist forms of religion have increasingly played a greater role in the Israeli – Palestinian conflict, established religious perspectives have rarely been taken into account in peace negotiations. In the quest for a just and enduring peace our genuine religious beliefs and our high level of mutual understanding has much to contribute.
73. *Rabbi David Rosen* and others have noted that the failure of the *Oslo Accords* probably has much to do with the absence of religious perspectives. If peace negotiations are to succeed in the Middle East, religion must be brought to the table. If religion is left out of the picture, the whole religious field is easily left in the hands of extremists. And that is how religion becomes more a part of the problem. I believe that religion can contribute significantly. I believe that religion can be part of the solution.
74. So how should we proceed in the interreligious sphere? I agree with *Imam Yahya Hendi* who says that we must in all sincerity ask ourselves the difficult question of whether our politics are consistent with the main tenets and directions of our faiths. We must be willing to be self-critical and to challenge our fellow Christians when they have adopted destructive extremist ideas.
75. We still have a long way to go. We need to recognize, among other things, how religious differences actually play into our ethnic interrelations. We spoke for example earlier of the role of *forgiveness*. This is a concept that is very central and well known to us as Christians. It also exists in both Judaism and Islam, but with different meanings and implications. In the two other faiths, there are certainly strong beliefs in

God's graciousness and mercy. But in Judaism<sup>6</sup> and Islam<sup>7</sup> these beliefs do not take shape in individual or collective forgiveness as we know it in Christianity.

76. As religious leaders we face a major challenge. We face the reality that the general reputation of religion has been seriously damaged as a result of extremist abuses of faith language and faith practices. In my view, the way forward is for the three religions to discuss the common values shared between them. And a natural consequence of this would be that the three faiths open themselves up for critical self-assessment in light of the faith issues in question.

### **MIDDLE EAST INTERFAITH INITIATIVES FOR RECONCILIATION**

77. It is important for me to draw your attention to three interfaith initiatives that have special importance not only for the Middle East, but also for the complex interreligious situation of the world at large.
78. **A Common Word Between Us and You.** The first initiative I wish to highlight is the Muslim document *A Common Word Between Us and You*, first published in September 2007. This is a theologically substantial and moving document in which 138 Muslim scholars from all Islamic countries and regions in the world express what they see as fundamental Muslim teaching and also the main common ground between Christianity and Islam. According to the statement, the most fundamental common values between Islam and Christianity, and the basis with the highest potential for future dialogue and understanding, are shared emphases on the love of God and the love of neighbor. *A Common Word* documents these shared emphases by referencing significant passages in the *Qur'an* and the Bible. Rather than engage in polemics, the signatories have adopted what they see as the traditional and mainstream Islamic position of respecting the Christian scripture and calling Christians to be more, not less, faithful to it.
79. As of October 2010, 71 Christian responses to *A Common Word* had been published. These responses from official church representatives and scholars together represent a very significant documentation of how Christians can speak from different vantage points to many of the same fundamental issues of faith – in Christianity, and jointly with teachings of Islam – in spite of the fact that Christian traditions are at least as diverse within the Christian family as are Muslim traditions. This process is a good example of how interfaith exchanges—a kind of dialogue—help to bring about a renewed consciousness on fundamental tenets of faith both *within* and *between* religious families.
80. **The World Interfaith Harmony Week.** The second initiative is the *World Interfaith Harmony Week*, proposed by King Abdullah II of Jordan and adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in October 2010 to be recognized each year in the first

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<sup>6</sup> On the issue of forgiveness of sins in Judaism I refer you to Rabbi David R. Blumenthal's illuminating piece "Repentance and Forgiveness" (<http://www.crosscurrents.org/blumenthal.htm>).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the piece adapted from Tide of the Supernatural by Kundan Massey ([http://www.leaderu.com/isr/articles\\_resources/forgivenessofsin.html](http://www.leaderu.com/isr/articles_resources/forgivenessofsin.html)).

week in February. When Prince Ghazi of Jordan, Special Adviser on Religious Affairs to King Abdullah, presented the initiative before the UN General Assembly, he stated: “The misuse or abuse of religions can ... be a cause of world strife, whereas religions should be a great foundation for facilitating world peace. The remedy for this problem can only come from the world's religions themselves.”

- 81.** I call on all the churches in the world to recognize and assign the first week of February to be the *World Interfaith Harmony Week*, in order that we may together combat all kinds of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, Christianophobia, or Xenophobia, in order that religion will be the true source of forgiveness and reconciliation in every civilization and culture.
- 82. Council of Religious Institutions in the Holy Land.** The third initiative I wish to highlight is the *Council of Religious Institutions in the Holy Land* (CRIHL, <http://www.crihl.org>), established in 2005. For several decades there have been a number of attempts to bring together a three-way discussion of Jews, Muslims and Christians. We are now seeing some success. The council gathers together distinguished leaders of all three religions into one forum. These include The Chief Rabbinate of Israel (including both Ashkenazi and Sephardic Chief Rabbis), the Heads of the Local Churches of the Holy Land (including also the Lutheran church), the Ministry of Islamic Waqf at the Palestinian Authority, and the Islamic Shariah Courts of the Palestinian Authority. And, to assist as facilitator and convener, we are thankful to the Church of Norway for sending the Rev. Dr. and Canon Trond Bakkevig. Taking into consideration the volatile political situation, I consider this council to be a modern miracle of our Lord.
- 83.** This council’s mission statement shows its foundation in the core values of love of God and love of neighbour. It says:
- “As religious leaders of different faiths, who share the conviction in the one Creator, Lord of the Universe; we believe that the essence of religion is to worship G-d and respect the life and dignity of all human beings, regardless of religion, nationality and gender.”
- 84.** The mission statement also shows that the commitment of these leaders goes beyond the mere theoretical and moves into the realm of action:
- “We accordingly commit ourselves to use our positions and good offices, to advance these sacred values, to prevent religion from being used as a source of conflict, and to promote mutual respect, a just and comprehensive peace and reconciliation between people of all faiths in the Holy Land and worldwide.”
- 85.** In particular the council has undertaken three initiatives. The first initiative is in media monitoring. Whenever derogatory and inciting statements by religious leaders are identified in the mainstream media, they are brought to the council for evaluation and, when necessary, for a response. Sometimes concerns are handled in a discreet, private way, and at other times public responses are made, depending upon the case. Members

of the council have expressed appreciation for this means to put a check on verbal abuses and thus provide for relationship building.

86. A second initiative is the Israeli-Palestinian Schoolbook project. A United States—Department of State grant helped launch their program in August 2009 under the leadership of Dr Bruce Wexler of Yale University. A joint research team of one Israeli professor, one Palestinian professor, and seven research assistants, all fluent in both Hebrew and Arabic, have been studying 700 Palestinian and Israeli textbooks in order to analyze how “the other” is portrayed in each group’s educational materials. The goal was to complete the study by the end of 2010 and to present the findings to the council in 2011. The study has taken more time than originally anticipated, but the council looks forward the opportunity to analyze the findings, and when this has been done, their findings will be forwarded to the educational ministries of the Palestinian Authority and Israel. Depending on the findings, the council will decide what actions may be necessary to correct negative portrayals and to promote accuracy in depicting the other. This is an essential step in laying the foundation of reconciliation at the very the grassroots of our societies—in and for our children.
87. A third initiative is our ongoing discussion concerning the significance of Jerusalem in all three religions. In only a short time, the CRIHL has made impressive progress in building relationships and understanding among the religious leaders of Jerusalem and also programs that greatly impact the general public. After building a relationship of trust, we are now approaching a discussion concerning the significance of Jerusalem in all three religions. We are asking: Why is Jerusalem dear to the three religions? What do we agree on? What do we disagree on? How do we reach agreement on the main religious issues regarding the Holy City? Perhaps now you can understand why I refer to this as the miracle of Jerusalem.

## CONCLUSION

88. Let us not underestimate the importance and potential of these developments in interfaith relations. Let us at the same time realize that these developments are merely the beginning. As our history of ecumenical dialogue and relationship shows us, the journey is long, but the way toward reconciliation is possible. In order to have the desired effect for reconciliation and peace in today’s world we must be willing to walk the way of confession and repentance, reconciliation and forgiveness together in openness.
89. May we be truly open to meaningful dialogue—a dialogue that holds the power to reshape and reform us all—rooted in the faith and diakonia Jesus calls us to live out as one in God by the power of the Holy Spirit.
90. For this is Christ’s prayer for us: “That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us... That they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17.21, 23).