



The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL)

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A word of Greetings from Rt. Rev. Dr. Munib Younan, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land and President of the Lutheran World Federation

[**Ephesians 4:1-6** I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.]

Your holiness, your eminences, your excellencies, I bring greetings to you from Jerusalem, the city of our Lord's suffering and death, the city of his resurrection and ascension, the city of Pentecost and the birth of the church. The Apostle Paul calls us in Ephesians 4:3 to "make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." And so I stand here "with all humility and gentleness" speaking to you about our common concerns for the body of Christ.

On October 21, 1999, in Augsburg Germany we came together to sign the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification—a historical event that lifted former condemnations and set a course for our common future. It is good that the relationship between Lutherans and Catholics has developed in such a way and is still progressing. This past summer when the Lutheran World Federation met in Assembly in Stuttgart, Germany, our theme was "Give us today our daily bread." We share the same loaf, we share the same responsibility for a hungry world, hungry for spirituality and hungry for justice. We share this responsibility in securing food, eradicating poverty, and combating deadly diseases.

In particular I want to stress the good relationship between the ELCJHL and the Catholic Church in Palestine, Israel, and Jordan, and the whole Middle East. I am blessed to have collegial and fraternal relationships with all the Catholic Bishops and prelates in Jerusalem. This must continue for the welfare of our people and for a common witness.

I also offer a word of gratitude for your initiative in caring for Christians in the Middle East through this synod. The Middle East is the cradle of Christianity. It would be tragic if after two thousand years this witness were to vanish. I ask you: What would the Middle East be without Christians?

We share this common concern. However, I do not want to dwell on the problems. I will only mention three only briefly: the unstable political situation, the lack of jobs because of the economic situation, and the growth of extremism—both political and religious extremism—that unsettles the region and leads to emigration. For me the future of Christianity is dependent upon peace and justice in the Middle East. How can we together

offer a living and dynamic witness? It is essential that we not concentrate only on a confessional witness, but that we speak with one voice in a common witness.

Our grassroots are expecting to see us acting together, witnessing together, living together, and loving together. For this reason, it is essential that we strengthen our ecumenical relations both in Israel-Palestine and in the whole Middle East.

How can we do this? First, the Middle East Council of Churches is the only body in the world which gathers the four families of churches: Catholic, Orthodox, Oriental, and Evangelical. We are currently not walking vigorously as we should, but rather limping along. I appeal to you to help us revive this ecumenical framework where we all can work together.

Secondly, we have to act together in creating jobs, in providing safe and affordable housing, in improving schools, and in strengthening all Christian institutions because they serve everyone regardless of gender, ethnicity, politics, or religion. Our Lutheran Schools, for example, educate an equal number of Christians and Muslims, boys and girls, side by side, creating a climate of mutual respect. This is our strength. We must continue our efforts so that Christians may remain steadfast in their own countries, as an integral part of the fabric of their own societies, working for the good of all and witnessing for all.

Thirdly, the common witness of the church—despite decreasing numbers—is essential for building a modern civil society, which is democratic, respectful of human rights, and promotes freedom of religion, a conscience for the entire Middle East, for the Arab and Muslim world, for Israel and Palestine. Over the course of these two thousand years, Christianity has not played a dominant role in governing this region, but we have always presented a living witness as the leaven in the dough of our societies. Our church is not timid and hiding, afraid of its own survival, but confident in the strength provided by the Spirit to be prophetic, to speak truth to power, and to promote justice for all with peace, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

Fourthly, our ecumenical witness shows itself in active interfaith dialogue. This must occur on several tracks. One is the promotion of better Muslim-Christian relations. We hold up with appreciation the 2007 open letter by Muslim leaders, ***A Common Word***, which speaks about the core of religion as ‘Loving God and loving neighbor’. As in the 2005 **Amman message** of King Abdullah II of Jordan, we must support those embodying the real Islam and combating extremism. I endorse his proposal last month to the United Nations for an annual ***World Interfaith Harmony Week***. Where better than in Jerusalem should we Christians present a paradigm how to live and dialogue with Islam.

The second track of interfaith dialogue promotes Muslim-Christian-Jewish relations. The Council of Religious Institutions in the Holy Land brings together Jerusalem leaders of all three faiths to jointly promote coexistence, discover common values, combat extremism, and seek solutions to societal problems. Currently academic consultants are studying hundreds of text books from Israeli and Palestinian schools in an effort to uncover and eliminate discriminatory and derogatory statements. This project is the preferred way to prepare fertile ground for justice, peace, and reconciliation.

The council is also composing a document as a foundation for future interfaith discussions, a simple statement about the common spiritual home of all three religions. The question is this: Why is Jerusalem is holy for Muslims and Jews, as well as Christians?

Our challenge is nothing less than loving our neighbors as ourselves. Many confess to loving God, but how can they love God whom they have not seen, when they do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen? (1 John 4:20)

We Lutherans are committed to work together with you Catholics, as also with the Orthodox churches and other mainline Evangelical Churches, for the sake of our common witness in the Middle East.

And so we commit ourselves to “making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

May God bless you all.