



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

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Pori Finland

Reconciliation in the Middle East

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Dear friends:

It is a great privilege to address you today. It may seem strange that someone from one of the most troubled areas of the world is talking to you about reconciliation. But where there is trouble, there is opportunity for reconciliation. And I must say that I am pleased by the degree of cooperation that exists among faith leaders in the Middle East. It is one contribution that we, though few in number and lacking in power, make to the world.

I am the bishop of Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. Much of my time is spent working with leaders of the Muslim and Jewish communities in Israel-Palestine. I am here to talk to you about the role that the Christian church can play in bringing peace to the land called holy.

But I want to make it very clear that the dispute in my homeland is not a religious but a political one. It is a conflict about land. Some would like to characterize it as a religious problem in an effort to stir up “fear, but religious” wars throughout history show us what a tragedy that would be. So I am careful when speaking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

And while it is a political problem, that does not mean it is only up to the politicians to solve. We faith leaders firmly believe that religion can be an important voice for justice, coexistence and reconciliation in the Middle East. Faith leaders cannot make peace in the Middle East – but a just peace cannot be realized without the faith leaders of Palestine and Israel.

Further, the implementation of a political solution will not automatically result in peace. Our people need to know how to live with one another. This is the task to which faith leaders in the Middle East are called – to work today to prepare for peace tomorrow.

We Palestinian Christians believe this work of reconciliation is the very heart of our faith tradition. It was the work of Jesus – God become human – during his public ministry in ancient Israel. It was the mission he gave to us when he returned to God.

Allow me to present what I believe are ingredients and marks of true reconciliation before telling you more about the reconciliation work going on in Israel-Palestine today in four points.

1. Genuine reconciliation can grow only in a culture of truthfulness. People today have been deeply wounded and paralyzed by fear, oppression, racism, violence, terrorism, occupation and hatred. Healing must begin with truth-telling, with breaking the silence that hides the suffering of those who are vulnerable and violated. Only such a start will allow for healing with justice and forgiveness. Only when the light of truth exposes the lies that have been used to inflict suffering on innocent people can the seeds of reconciliation take root.

How many wars and conflicts have been justified in the last years for the sake of ideology or narrow partisan politics, masquerading as security concerns, or using eschatological scenarios and holy writings to justify killing or occupation? None of this is built on truth. As a Christian, I believe that truth is the nature of God. The truth liberates and does not burden. Politicians and governments need to free themselves and liberate their peoples by telling them the truth. The conflicts in the Middle East show us how sick ideologies, lies and propaganda can demonize and create hatred, a spiral of violence and destructive extremism. Truth-telling, respect for human rights and international law must be the basis for healing our broken societies and ending our conflicts.

This of course begs the question: whose truth? Israelis and Palestinians each have their own histories. Neither of us will relinquish our memories easily, as they are such a part of our identities. However, we must not allow ourselves to be so rooted in our own stories of pain and suffering that we cannot or will not understand the suffering and grief of the other. We must each learn to acknowledge the validity of the other's truth. It is far easier to show respect for the history of others when they are showing respect for yours. In acknowledging another's history, even though you view it through a different lens, you lay a foundation for mutual respect.

But this requires people to realize that absolute divisions between "us" and "them," "good" and "evil," are fundamentally flawed. It requires people to face the mistakes in their past.

The late Pope John Paul II gave the world a beautiful example of this when he confessed the sins of some members of the church in their persecution of the Jewish people throughout history. Nations, politicians, governments and faith leaders need to learn from him and act with his courage. Palestinians and Israelis need to be honest about the hate and injustice that divide us. We need to be honest about the injustice that has been done to the Palestinian people and the fear that has been imposed on the Israeli people. The time has come for hearing one another's truths because it is essential for healing and reconciliation.

2. Reconciliation is built on justice, and the fruit of justice is peace.

More and more Israelis understand that it is for the sake of both peoples that the truth about the injustice of the situation must be acknowledged. You cannot imprison and punish a whole people for the acts of a few and call it justice when it is indeed collective punishment. You cannot build a wall through the middle of people's communities and land, tearing apart their families, and expect it to bring security. You cannot occupy someone else's land for more than 40 years and not suffer the consequences of fear and dehumanization.

The pursuit of peace with justice was the role of the ancient Hebrew prophets. Texts revered by Jews, Muslims and Christians alike call for justice: "What does the Lord require of you," Micah cried out, "but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8) And the psalmist writes that justice and peace will kiss (Psalm 85:10b).

Palestinian Christians believe God still calls us to speak boldly and truthfully for peace with justice and healing for all involved. We continue to believe that justice is possible, defined as:

- Two states, living side by side, in justice and peace, along 1967 borders. The Palestinian State is to be viable, vital and contiguous.
- A shared Jerusalem with open access to all holy sites

It is a vivid sign of hope that Jerusalem is not only the concern of those of us who live here but of all Christianity. Our common love for the holy city is a profound part of our shared identity. Our vision is one of a shared future in a shared city. We reject any claims of exclusive access to Jerusalem by any religion. Each must have its own identity and free access to its holy places. This is only possible if it is truly shared the way God intended.

The Patriarchs and Heads of Local Christian Churches in Jerusalem have recognized that Jerusalem must be shared by three faiths – Jews, Christians and Muslims – and by two peoples, Israelis and Palestinians. It must be a capital for Israel and the future Palestinian state.

This is the reason that, in October 2006, the Patriarchs and Heads of Local Christian Churches in Jerusalem issued a statement on the status of Jerusalem, listing elements they deem necessary for a lasting peace in Jerusalem:

- ✓ The human right of freedom of worship and of conscience for all, both as individuals and as religious communities.
 - ✓ Equality of all her inhabitants before the law, in coordination with the international resolutions.
 - ✓ Free access to Jerusalem for all, citizens, residents or pilgrims, at all times, whether in peace or in war. Therefore Jerusalem should be an open city.
 - ✓ The rights of property ownership, custody and worship which the different churches have acquired throughout history should continue to be retained by the same communities. These rights, which are already protected in the “Status Quo” agreement, should continue to be recognized and respected.”
 - ✓ The various Christian holy places in the city, wherever they are, must remain united in geography, whatever the solution envisaged.
- A Political solution for the right of return for Palestinian refugees
 - An end to all settlement activity
 - The equitable sharing of natural resources
 - The regional cooperation for the Middle East:
We need to learn the lesson of Europe. After 500 years of war and problems, they developed the EU which has embraced 27 of the nation states of Europe. Why can't we learn from them and develop some kind of ME Union. That would be a blessing for the whole Middle East. Of course, such a thing could only start when there is justice in both Israel and Palestine.

We believe this is possible. The Israeli-Palestinian relationship is symbiotic. The security of Israel is dependent on freedom and justice for Palestinians; simultaneously, freedom and justice for Palestinians is dependent on the security of Israel. This formula is the one that seeks true peace and healing for both people, but, at the same time, allows both peoples to live in their own viable states according to international standards of justice, equality and equitable sharing of resources.

Recognizing this is the key for any just peace and reconciliation in this land. I continue to urge the Israelis to see that justice is essential for the survival of both peoples. As former Israeli Knesset

Speaker Avraham Burg said, "Israel cannot survive without justice." And I would add, "Neither can Palestinians survive without justice."

But peace can come only when we have leaders who will act and not just talk about implementing justice. This is why we found much reason for hope in U.S. President Barack Obama's recent speech in Cairo. But also we believe that such a vision does not need more processes. It needs implementation and we pray that God may open the heart of our present politicians in the Middle East and the world to be charismatic. To dare to take a decision. To dare to implement. But if the church and people of conscience remain silent or indifferent, then I am afraid that extremists from either side will be able to hold justice and peace hostage in the Middle East.

So, I encourage my people, the Palestinians, to continue to carry out strategies of non-violence, observe the rule of law, work to bridge disagreements and unite around a joint political strategy, in order to achieve justice in the form of our own democratic, viable, modern, civil society. For we believe that the divisions of the Palestinians will only delay justice in our land. For this reason, I have called our political factions to unite on one strategic political program that ends the occupation and makes justice possible.

3. For true reconciliation to occur, we must be willing to forgive.

The late Pope John Paul II said it well: "No peace without justice and no justice without forgiveness." But can Palestinians forgive Israelis? Can Israelis forgive Palestinians? Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love."

Forgiveness does not mean ignoring the other, but healing and rebuilding troubled relationships. Forgiveness does not mean forsaking justice or giving up legitimate rights, but regarding the others' rights equal to your own. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, but learning how to live with the past and create a shared memory with the other. Only when we forgive can we create a shared vision of justice. The late Archbishop William Temple said: "Justice is the first expression of love that must be satisfied before the other higher expression can rightfully find their place".

I always urge Israelis to see God in the Palestinians and urge Palestinians to see God in the Israelis. I urge both to accept each other's humanity, with all of its pain and suffering. If we do so in the spirit of forgiveness and recognize each other's human, civil, religious, national and political rights, only then will the holy land become a promised land of milk and honey for both Palestinians and Israelis. Now, let me tell you about some of the reconciliation efforts taking place in Israel-Palestine.

4. Religion must be a driving force for justice, peace and reconciliation and forgiveness in the Middle East:

4.1 In 2007, 138 Muslim scholars from different schools of Islam all over the world signed a document called "*A Common Word between Us and You*" that asserted that Christianity and Islam are both founded on common values of love of God and love of neighbor. This was a response to Pope Benedict's Regensburg lecture, in which he spoke disparagingly of Mohammed and Islam.

I believe the approach taken in this document is a healthy trend in interfaith dialogue and relations between religions. Instead of focusing on the differences in doctrine and "comparative religion,"

leaders are lifting up and building on common positive values, such as peace, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation. In this approach – which I call dialogue for life - it is important that each religion speaks to its own adherents and seeks to define itself, rather than being labeled by the other. This also promotes important dialogue within each faith as well, since there are many faces of each religion, and I am afraid the extremist voices are getting stronger and trying to claim they are "the true voices" of their religions.

We moderate Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders in the Middle East are working closely together to raise our voices against this current explosion of extremism. We would agree with Dr. Charles Kimball in "When Religion Becomes Evil" that

"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."

It is so interesting to me that sometimes the people who call themselves fundamentalists – in any religion – have often abandoned the most basic fundamental of all: "love God and your neighbor as yourself."

God created all human beings and nations equally, all deserving of the same human rights and dignity. Interfaith dialogue for life must call us to see God in one another, and to understand the other as they want to be understood. When we understand the God-given intention that all be fully human yet rich in cultural diversity, we will be more open to one another, and religion can help to bring us together rather than condemning one another for our differences. Our faith teaches us to accept and affirm the humanity of the other and to mutually recognize and affirm each other's basic human rights.

Who else is speaking out for compassion and the hard choices that would lead to justice as the only path to true peace and reconciliation? I worry that the dominant culture of commercialism, secularism and militarism has stripped our world of communal values and replaced them with a preoccupation for narrow self-interest to be achieved through violence. It has become fair game for those in power to attack anyone they perceive as a threat to them. A dialogue for life will be based on what gives life and not what destroys it. It must be based on non-violence and religious leaders must have the courage to challenge their own faith leaders who are calling for violence, dehumanization and hate. The current growth of extremism is alarming but not surprising, given that current world policies are creating the very environment in which this extremism thrives. The world is crying out for a different vision and inspirational leadership to transform our increasingly violent, extremist and militarized world into a world community working for one another rather than against one another. This is the reason that this common world document is but a way to combat extremism, build reconciliation and build a future of mutual recognition.

4.2 The Amman Message

In the fall of 2004, His Royal Highness King Abdullah II initiated The Amman Message with Muslim leaders from the Middle East to try to do exactly this within Islam. The Amman Message asserts that Islam is a moderate force that advocates peace and justice and that moderate Muslims must reclaim it from those extremists who justify violence and fanaticism with religion:

On religious grounds, on moral grounds, we denounce the contemporary concept of terrorism which is associated with wrongful practices wherever they come from – including assaults on

peaceful civilians, killing prisoners and the wounded, unethical practices such as the destruction of buildings, and ransacking cities. These despotic attacks on human life transgress the law of God, and we denounce them. As the Qur'an says:

Take not life which God hath made sacred, except by way of justice and law. (Al Anaam:51)

No human whose heart is filled with light could be an extremist. We decry the campaign that portrays Islam as a religion that encourages violence and institutionalizes terrorism.

The Kingdom of Jordan and the Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center (JICRC) should be commended for this courageous initiative and for their ongoing work that builds trust and forwards the cause of reconciliation.

4.3 An Agreement to Promote Co-Existence between Middle East Christians and Muslims

In the aftermath of the Cartoon Crisis here in the past few years, the Church of Norway and the JICRC worked together to gather Christian and Muslim leaders from all over the Middle East to sign a similar document in January 2008.

We believe God has commissioned us to the common work of building societies of freedom, respect for the rights of others and human dignity for all. At this difficult time, we, believers in the One, Holy God and heirs of co-existence in the region, commit to build together our common society in the spirit of common stewardship in order that there will be a lasting and comprehensive peace through justice in our region and throughout the whole world.

In order to implement this, we pledge and commit ourselves to uphold the following:

- *Respect for all religions and freedom of religion and doctrine;*
- *Respect for all prophets and holy writings of all religions;*
- *Respect, security and free access to all holy places;*
- *Respect for responsible freedom of expression that does not harm the beliefs or sentiments of another;*
- *Initiation of dialogue and continued human cooperation in order to achieve justice, peace, development and human dignity for all;*

4.4 Council of Religious Institutions in the Holy Land

In Jerusalem, the heads of thirteen local churches, the chief rabbinate and the chief judge of the Islamic court have formed a **Council of Religious Institutions in the Holy Land** to dialogue about important issues of faith and life and to intervene as possible on the ground to mediate and diffuse potential problems.

In the fall of 2007, we were invited to Washington ahead of the Annapolis Peace Process to discuss what we are doing and to say that when religious leaders are not a part of the peace process it is self-defeating and destined to failure. We issued a joint statement in which the chief rabbis admitted the Palestinians' need to be free from occupation and the Churches and Muslims recognized the need for Israelis to live in security.

- The Council of Religious Institutions in the Holy Land, current achievements include:

1. We have set up a hot line to monitor what religions are saying about the other, and developed a hotline monitor any derogatory remarks by clergy, imams and rabbis about other faiths. We have hired a Palestinian communication company in Ramallah and another Israeli communication company in Tel Aviv that are monitoring every day insults against the other. Sadly, what we get is really shameful. And we are finding that no religion is free from teaching hatred.
2. One of our main goals in the next years is to try to foster the development of a joint curriculum of tolerance to be used in both Israeli and Palestinian schools. We are working with our schools and those already engaged in this process, but will lend religious affirmation by the political and religious leaders. It is crucial that our people hear from us voices that counter the religious extremism and fanaticism that is so rampant and the alternative belief that religions are based on common values of peace, reconciliation, justice and love of neighbor.

As I said to US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice, "You cannot fight extremism with weapons. You can only overcome it with education and interfaith dialogue."

We in the ELCJHL believe that education – of Christians, Muslims and Jews – is a key to building tolerance and co-existence. In our 4 schools and 4 additional educational programs, approximately 45% of our students are Muslim. We do not seek to convert the children but to educate them to live together in peace with mutual respect so that they may come to understand the other as the other wants to be understood. We are preparing future leaders – both Muslim and Christian – to help build together a modern, democratic civil society.

3. Discussing the significance of Jerusalem, which is the spiritual home of all three religions.

We in the council want to assure that religion is a leading force for justice, reconciliation and coexistence in the Middle East. But at the same time, we want to start the process of reconciliation now. For peace cannot be obtained by signing agreements among the politicians. It is obtained by the reconciliation of the grassroots, and religion is capable of that.

It is my fervent hope that my children and grandchildren will live one day side by side with their Israeli neighbors in just peace and reconciliation. As you can see from this sampling of interfaith efforts, Jewish, Muslim and Christian leaders in my homeland share this hope and this urgent task to transform animosity into community, occupation into freedom, injustice and revenge into mutual trust, night into day.

There is a Jewish midrash (commentary) that tells of a rabbi who asked his students how one knows that the night is over and dawn has come.

One student answered, "Is it when, in the first rays of morning light, you can tell a dog from a sheep?"

"No," said the rabbi.

"Is it when we can distinguish an olive tree from a fig tree?" said another.

"No," the rabbi said.

“So when is it that we know the night is over?” the students asked.

The rabbi answered, “We know the night is over when you can look in the eyes of another and recognize your brother or sister. Then truly the night is over and a new day has dawned.”

My sisters and brothers, as we unite in the cause of peace, we stand in the light of a new dawn. We will continue to work for justice until the dawn of reconciliation will become a reality in Palestine and Israel.

May God bless you.