

## **Muslim leaders speak for the Christians of the Middle East**

### **Imam Yahya Hendi, President of Clergy Beyond Borders**

For more than two thousand years, Christian communities have lived all over the Middle East and have been an integral part of it. These Christians have contributed in myriad ways to the vital stability of the region politically, financially, and educationally. Middle Eastern Christians have also helped shape their particular nations, tribes, and Arab and Muslim cultures, enough so that many call themselves religiously Christian and culturally Muslim. Regrettably, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Middle Eastern Christians are leaving to new continents, leaving behind a world they helped shape.

This exodus and its causes, ignored in both the East and the West, create a growing crisis with moral, humanitarian, and security implications. Unfortunately, some in the West are encouraging the emigration of Christians without knowing that they are hurting Christianity, not helping it. The United Nations Committee for Refugees recently estimated that 850,000 Iraqi Christians have left since 2003. This is an enormous loss for those who stay, as well as for regional culture, diversity, and politics. The number of Arab Christians in the Holy Land has dropped from 17 percent of the population in 1894 to 7 percent just before the creation of Israel in 1948, and less than 1.7 percent today. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, and the “Arab Spring” exacerbate the struggles of Christians in the Middle East.

The current situation is more catastrophic and heartbreaking because Christianity has its original roots in the Middle East. In Israel, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt, Christians were much bigger in numbers and now the numbers are decreasing rapidly.

As an Imam, I find it depressing that so many of the Christian Arabs have left looking for better a life and more opportunities in other countries. It is critical that Muslims not only reject violence against Christians, but also actually promote civil harmony and religious freedom in their societies. Muslims must become a voice for their Christian neighbors.

We, Muslims, cannot stand silently by. We must present a united voice of justice and unconditional love for religious minorities among us, with Christians in the forefront. Muslims must treat others, as they would like to be treated and must live the core values of Islam, which call on us to live in light of a politics of justice, an economics of equity, and a covenant of community.

Hence, I call on all Muslims to commit themselves to the following principles:

1. Our faith is built on mercy, compassion, peace, and justice, not violence. Hence, we speak for a faith that does not condone violence against our Christian neighbors or their churches.

2. We, Muslims, must be united with a common action and a common call for a culture of passion for compassion that reaches out to all inhabitants of the Middle East.
3. We speak against all forms of violence and attacks on Christians in the Middle East.
4. We will not sit still as long as any people of faith are undermined or deprived of their basic rights to survive and flourish.
5. We declare Jerusalem as the "Spiritual birthplace" of the Church, which can never be emptied of the followers of Jesus as equal citizens of the city.
6. We insist that Christians remain in the Middle East, not simply as minorities, but as citizens enjoying full equality under the law, and therefore in a position to continue to contribute to peace, justice, and stability.
7. Governments and the United Nations are urged to promote Article 18 of the Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees freedom of belief and expression. This element of international law must be promoted, and all states should be expected to adhere to it.

This April I am leading a delegation made of mainly Muslim leaders accompanied by Christian leaders to travel to the Middle East to celebrate Easter in Amman, Jerusalem, Nazareth and Bethlehem. The delegation will meet with religious leadership in both Jerusalem and Bethlehem to show solidarity during with Christians during High Holiday services in the central churches of Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth. Join us. Spread the word.