



CLERGY BEYOND BORDERS:

MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RECONCILIATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

A Muslim Call for Support of Christian Communities in the Middle East

by Imam Yahya Hendi,
CBB President

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 politically, financially, and educationally to the vital stability of the region -- and to what became mainly Muslim communities close to 1400 years ago. Middle Eastern Christians have also helped shape their particular nations, tribes, and Arab and Muslim cultures, enough for many to call themselves religiously Christians and culturally Muslim. Regrettably Middle Eastern



*The CBB delegation: Nourjannah Hendi, Imam Abdul-Rasheed Mubammad, Elisabeth Martin, Rev. Steven Martin, Tabera Ahmad, Imam Murad, Imam Yahya Hendi, Fr. Nabeel Haddad, Fr. Adam Bunnell (not pictured)
Al-Bashara Catholic Church of Amman, Jordan*

Following up on Imam Hendi's call for support of Christian communities in the Middle East, a Clergy Beyond Borders (CBB) sponsored team traveled to Jordan, Palestine, and Israel over the Easter holy day period from April 13-21, 2014. This initial delegation included Muslim and Christian clergy and young people. This program was the first stage of an effort to promote wide international support of an unprecedented "Fatwa" proclaiming Muslim support for Christians. The Fatwa will be announced and signed at a major interfaith gathering tentatively scheduled to take place in Lebanon in 2015. Clergy interested in participating in this effort are encouraged to contact CBB (clergybeyondborders@gmail.com) For the program to have maximum participation, individual and corporate donations (tax-deductible) are urgently required and may be made through the website, clergybeyondborders.org.

Christians are leaving to new continents and worlds, leaving behind a world they shaped. 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. 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 Arab-Israeli conflict, and recently the "Arab Spring" have been challenging for Christians in the Middle East. The loss of Christianity would fundamentally alter a rich and varied Arab culture, and could end up being a full blow to hopes of democracy in the region. Therefore, it is critical that Muslims not only reject violence against Christians,



(above) The CBB delegation joins the Fr. Louis Hazboun Immaculate Conception Parish Church, Birzeit, Palestine

Elisabeth Martin



"Alongside my father, his partners, and Nourjannah, I traveled to show, as one in the next generation of leaders, that interfaith relationships are life changing. I truly believe that I am a stronger Christian, a better person, and a better member of society as a result of my experience."



Nourjannah Hendi



"We traveled overseas to show the world that inter-religious connection and dialogue are possible, mind-altering, and necessary for the future of the world that God built with all of its differences, and much more importantly, its similarities."

but also promote civil harmony and religious freedom in their societies. Muslims must become a voice for their Christian neighbors. For their part, Christians in the Middle East should hold fast to their ancient homelands, maintain their historic presence, and not flee to the West. They must continue their witness, and permit their difficulties and suffering to be a sign of hope and peace for their fellow citizens.

We Muslims cannot stand silent and must present a prophetic voice of justice and unconditional love for religious minorities among us, with Christians being in the forefront. Muslims must treat others as they like to be treated and must live the values of Islam, which call on us to live in light of the politics of justice, economics of equity, and 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. Muslims of the Middle East must express thanks for Middle East Christians who continue to bless the region with their presence and witness to the Almighty God. The Middle East is more beautiful and stronger in its diversity and pluralism, and is not a region for Muslims only.
3. We will not sit still as long as any people of faith are undermined, deprived of their basic rights to survive and flourish, or forced to live as fugitives or refugees.
4. We declare Jerusalem is also a "spiritual center" of the Church, and should never be emptied of the followers of Jesus as equal citizens of the city.
5. 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.



Fr. Hasboun embraces Imam Hendi after sermon during mass (Birzeit)



(Left to right): Imam Hendi, Greek Orthodox Patriarch Archbishop Atallah Hanna, Imam Abdul-Rasheed, Rev. Steve next to Church of Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem



Pastor Mitri Rabeb, Imam Hendi
Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church
Bethlehem, Palestine



CBB delegation, Jordan Denari with Fr. Nabeel
Haddad at Melkite Catholic Church
Amman, Jordan



CBB Delegation, Hanan Ashrawi
Ramallah, Palestine



Imam Hendi, Fr. Hazboun at Immaculate
Conception Parish Church
Birzeit, Palestine

Reflections

by Reverend Steven D. Martin, *CBB Vice President*

What did we learn?

During the week between Palm Sunday and Easter, the time Christians almost universally call "Holy Week," a delegation made of seven persons, three Christians and four Muslims, traveled to Jordan and the Palestinian Territories on a journey of solidarity visits and fact-finding. Speaking with government officials we heard that the state of Muslim/Christian relations is just fine, that there are no problems whatsoever. In a more candid conversation with Evangelical Christian leaders, we learned that while Christians and Muslims are united in resisting the occupation, there is tension just below the surface. "They will sometimes say to you, 'After Saturday comes Sunday.'" I looked quizzically, not understanding him. "It means after they (presumably the Islamists) defeat the Jews (Israelis), they will come for the Christians." Amid such tensions comes the constant reminder by everyone we spoke to: Muslims, Jews, and Christians lived together in harmony in the region for centuries before the current problems.



Imam Hendi marching alongside Rev.
Ibrahim Al-Shomali
Beit Jala, Palestine

"Address the Causes, Not Just the Symptoms."

I will briefly list some of the problems associated with the occupation that we experienced in a short period of time, the one week we were in the region. Tahera Ahmad, Muslim chaplain at Northwestern University, was detained for four hours at the Allenby Bridge as we entered the Palestinian Territories. Yahya Hendi, the leader of our delegation, and his daughter Nourjannah, got their entry visas at 5:30pm on Friday, too late for them to participate in our delegation's program. We spoke to many who had been prevented from traveling to Jerusalem, only a half-hour's drive away, for decades. Each time we crossed a checkpoint between Palestinian and Israeli areas we jumped to make sure we had our seat belts on. If passengers are found without them, Israelis are fined \$100. Palestinians are fined \$500. Just one more reason to throw up your hands and leave if you have anywhere else you can go to live. After these incidents and observations, we took seriously the advice given to us: as we seek to build bridges between Muslims and Christians, "address the causes of disunity, not just the symptoms."

One pastor encouraged us to engage extremist groups like Islamic Jihad. With them we might make a difference, he suggested. But US State Department laws prevent US citizens or groups from speaking with those that have been labeled as terrorists. So if no one can come to talk peace, no appeal to conscience or fundamental principles of humanity can be made, no alternative to division and violence can be offered.

Powerful Symbolism

In spite of the obstacles we encountered, the powerful symbolism of our work remained. And it was noticed. Greek Orthodox Archbishop Atallah Hanna, Patriarch of Jerusalem, was on our short list of contacts to make while there. After a grueling day of delays at the Allenby Bridge, we went to Ramallah to enjoy a meal with Yahya's family. Just a few minutes later this humble man, responsible for much that would unfold at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the days that followed, appeared at the home where we dined. This would be the first of three powerful meetings with him in which he traveled out of his way to encourage us in our mission.

Among the houses of worship visited by the delegation in addition to the Church of the Nativity and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre were Catholic churches in Bir Zeit and Amman, a Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, and the Mosque of Omar and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Consultations with leaders were held at the Royal Court in Jordan (H.E. Fayez Tarawneh, former Prime Minister and Chief of the Royal Court), the Ministries of Awqaf (Religion) in Jordan and Palestine, the University of Jordan, as well as consultations with the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, H.E. Archbishop Attallah Hanna and Palestinian parliamentary leader Hanan Ashrawi.

On Good Friday we joined the processional down the Via Dolorosa, retracing the steps of Jesus as he walked toward his crucifixion. Imagine the sight of Muslims joining this processional, an act that many in the world would deem anathema to one of the tenets of Muslim faith. In joining with Christians on Good Friday, our Muslim friends were not forsaking their own beliefs, but showing deep respect for those of their Christian counterparts.

Somehow, through so many obstacles to progress, we made our way to the Mosque of Omar which sits beside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Mosque of Omar was our final destination because of its symbolism. When the Caliph Omar conquered Jerusalem he was invited to pray at the church. He refused because he feared that if he did, someone would later demand that the church be turned into a mosque. Instead he prayed next to the church where the Mosque of Omar now stands. We Christians joined in prayer at this mosque too, affirming the vision constantly articulated so simply and yet profoundly by Clergy Beyond Borders' president Yahya Hendi: "We are all in this together." By visiting this mosque, we recalled the strong tradition of pluralism and inclusiveness within Islam, a statement to those in the world who believe the world is better off with only Christians, or only Muslims, but not both. We stood on the ground that my faith is better when it encounters your faith, and that your faith grows when you encounter mine. By Muslims honoring Christian traditions we affirmed that the Middle East is better off with a vibrant Christianity.

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CBB Middle East Trip in the News



Imam Hendi on Jordanian Radio
April 14, 2014



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يشمل أئمة مسلمين وقساوسة..
وفد أمريكي يزور الشرق الأوسط للدفاع عن المسيحيين في العالم العربي
الأحد، 13 أبريل 2014 - 18:26
كتب رباب الفحي

Al-Yowm As-Sabi': "US delegation visits Middle East to protect Christians in the Arab world"

أخبار محلية local news



القدس: وفد إسلامي مسيحي أمريكي
يشترك بسبت النور
موقع بانيت وصحيفة بانوراما
إضافة تعليق
نقر
10:00:42 20/04/2014

Panet: "Jerusalem: American Muslim-Christian delegation participates in Holy Saturday"

