The Middle East and Jerusalem

10/12/1975 | Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches

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The Middle East

1. The World Council of Churches has expressed concern regarding the situation in the Middle East on previous occasions. Events which have occurred in the area during the meeting of the Fifth Assembly in Nairobi have demonstrated anew that tensions persist there unabated.

2. We are concerned at the continued escalation of military power in the area which can only aggravate the threat to world peace from the unresolved conflict; and stress the necessity for the great world powers to cease furnishing the arms which maintain and aggravate the tensions.

3. We recognize that an international consensus has emerged as the basis for peaceful settlement on the following:

a) Withdrawal by Israel from territories occupied in 1967.

b) The right of all states including Israel and the Arab states to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries.

c) The implementation of the rights of the Palestinian people to self determination. We are encouraged that the parties to the conflict seem to be progressively willing to accept these principles.

4. We recognize the Second Sinai Disengagement Agreement as a means of reducing tension between Egypt and Israel. However, since it is not addressed to the fears and distrust among Israel, other neighbouring states, and the Palestinian people, this Agreement must be followed soon by resumption of the Geneva Peace Conference for reaching a total settlement on the basis of the principles mentioned above. The Geneva Conference should necessarily involve all parties concerned, including the Palestinians.

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5. We note that some Arab states have recently declared their readiness, with the participation of the Palestine Liberation Organization, to seek agreement with Israel based upon these principles.

6. Although the parties have not trusted one another sufficiently until now to engage in dialogue, full mutual recognition by the parties must be seen not as a precondition to, but rather as a product of, the negotiation. We call upon all parties to take those steps essential to negotiations with hope for success. Among these steps, we emphasize the cessation of all military activity, both regular and irregular, including terrorism.

7. Peace in the Middle East must be based upon justice and security for all concerned. The well-being of each party depends upon the well-being of all other parties. We urge the churches to help their constituencies to have more accurate information on and more sensitive awareness of the various discussions of the Middle East conflict. The churches could thus help to promote natural trust among the parties and to develop a responsible involvement in peaceful solution on the part of their members and the government of their countries. This opportunity is open to churches within the area and the churches outside the area.

Jerusalem

1. For many millions of Christians throughout the world, as well as for the adherents of the two great sister monotheistic religions, namely Judaism and Islam, Jerusalem continues to be a focus of deepest religious inspiration and attachment. It is therefore their responsibility to cooperate in the creation of conditions that will ensure that Jerusalem is a city open to the adherents of all three religions, where they can meet and live together. The tendency to minimize Jerusalem''s importance for any of these religions should be avoided.

2. The special legislation regulating the relationship of the Christian communities and the authorities, guaranteed by international treaties Paris 1856 and Berlin 1 87X) and the League of Nations and known as the Status Quo of the Holy Places must be fully safeguarded and confirmed in any agreement concerning Jerusalem. Christian Holy Places in Jerusalem and neighbouring areas belong to the greatest extent to member churches of the WCC. On the basis of the Status Quo none of the church authorities of a given denomination could represent unilaterally and on behalf of all Christians the Christian point of view, each church authority of a given denomination representing only its own point of view.

3. Many member churches of the WCC are deeply concerned about the Christian Holy Places. However, the question of Jerusalem is not only a matter of protection of the Holy Places, it is organically linked with living faiths and communities of people in the Holy City. Therefore the Assembly deems it essential that the Holy Shrines should not become mere monuments of visitation, but should serve as living places of worship integrated and responsive to Christian communities who continue to maintain their life and roots within the Holy City and for those who out of religious attachments want to visit them.

4. While recognizing the complexity and emotional implications of the issues surrounding the future status of Jerusalem, the Assembly believes that such status has to be determined within the general context of the settlement of the Middle East conflict in its totality.

5. However, the Assembly thinks that apart from any politics, the whole settlement of the inter-religious problem of the Holy Places should take place under an international aegis and guarantee which ought to be respected by the parties concerned as well as the ruling authorities.

6. The Assembly recommends that the above should be worked out with the most directly concerned member churches, as well as with the Roman Catholic Church. These issues should

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also become subjects for dialogue with Jewish and Muslim counterparts.

7. The Assembly expresses its profound hope and fervent prayers for the peace and welfare of the Holy City and all its inhabitants.

* From: Breaking Barriers, the official report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Nairobi, 23 November-10 December 1975. London. SPCK. and Grand Rapids, Wm B. Eerdmans. 1976. pp. l62-165.

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