

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

*The Truth Shall Set You Free:
The Transformative Power of Education in the Middle East*

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Greetings and Good News

I am blessed to be in your midst at this conference here in Brisbane, and I am especially grateful to The Lutheran Church of Australia, the Australian Lutheran Conference of Lutheran Education organizing committee, and especially Executive Director Sue Kloden for the kind invitation to come and dialogue with you about the transforming power of education.

I bring greetings from the Lutheran World Federation and from its 142 member churches who continue to be in conversation and fellowship as we put it in our strategy: “Passion for the Church, Passion for the World.”

The LWF Council met this June under the theme, “Called to be Disciples in Today’s World.” Our discipleship is rooted in lifelong relationship initiated by God. This discipleship is the foundation for the relationship with the living Christ made visible in the world by the good works done for and with the neighbor. In this relational dynamic, the discipleship of equals provides opportunity for women and men, fallible followers of Jesus Christ called to humbly relate to one another as equals, with respect and mutual dignity. They find each other equal in the Gospel. With St. Paul, they say, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Disciples put their gifts to work contextually and respond to the urgent needs of people. They give space for proclaiming Jesus Christ as the center of their message and renew relations by investing in seeking peace with justice. They speak of hope lived out through healing relations. They pay attention to the different and meaningful life stories in order to witness to their faith. They use the liberating power of the gospel to educate people and transform lives. In short, disciples bear the hope of Christ to the world.

We realize how much we need constant renewal through the Holy Spirit in order to remain faithful disciples amidst the many changes and challenges in our world today. Churches have borne witness to the reforming work done by God through the Holy Spirit. I believe you too have lived through your own reformation journey and seek to boldly respond to the challenges in different times and situations, through shaping and transforming the minds of Australian youth. Your ministry of education, is a living and strong witness affirming that the Reformation did not stop in the Sixteenth Century but continues through the Holy Spirit who mold us to live out our discipleship.

The LWF is seeking to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in three ways:

- It is a global celebration as the density of Christianity has spread from the Northern to Southern hemisphere. Since the Reformation, Christianity shifted to the four corners of the earth. We celebrate the globality of the Gospel.

- It is an ecumenical celebration. We celebrate the fifty years of dialogue with our partners. With our partners, we have signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in 1999, a document marking the historical convergence between Catholic and Lutheran Christians. We have thirty years of dialogue with the Orthodox family as well as with Anglicans, Mennonites, Baptist, Reform and other church bodies.
- Thirdly, this celebration reminds us that *Ecclesia Semper Reformanda* – reformation is always reviving the church through the work of the Holy Spirit.

As part of the process towards 2017, the LWF commends to member churches the report of the Lutheran–Roman Catholic Commission on Unity: “*From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017.*” This important document provides valuable perspectives for how we relate to one another and find new ways to live out our Christian calling. The document invites Christians of different confessions to critical study and prayers for the realization of full, visible unity that Christ prayed for. This invitation carries a special commitment for follow up, as it shapes our individual and collective identities as Christians and human beings. I hope you will take time to read this document, as it bears witness to the truth of our Lutheran understanding of the gospel and its power to transform lives from despair into hope. I hope that the churches and schools of Australia will join us in celebrating the 500th jubilee anniversary of the Reformation.

Identity and Context

I also bring greetings from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land and its member churches, schools, and diversity of ministries. May I now introduce myself:

I am an Arab Palestinian Christian Evangelical Lutheran. This is my multi-layered identity. Most people would not understand such a combination of identities because the common perception is that all Arabs are Muslims and that Arab Palestinians certainly are Muslims. But that is not true. I am an integral part of my society. There are five premises that shape my identity:

First, as a Palestinian Christian, my identity is deeply rooted in the incarnation. Palestine, the land of my birth, is also the place where God chose to transcend the boundaries between the human and the divine. This land where Jesus lived, breathed, was killed and rose again is my land, and Jerusalem is the birthplace of the Christian church. It was here the Holy Spirit came in great power upon the followers of Jesus and enabled them to preach the Gospel. The early church was a multicultural church. The gospel was also preached in Arabic (Acts 2:11) and the apostles and believers were called to witness to Christ in Jerusalem, Palestine and all parts of the world. This, my homeland, is where Jesus taught us to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger and liberate the oppressed. Christ taught us that the incarnation was never exclusive, but inclusive, molded by love, forgiveness and reconciliation. My Palestinian and Christian identities kiss each other.

My Palestinian identity is deeply rooted in biblical culture, both Old and New Testaments. If you study current Palestinian culture, you will find many signifiers and markers which come from traditions noted in the biblical text. For example, when a Palestinian puts a roof on a new house, it is still common that a ram is slain and the ram’s blood should touch the concrete of the roof. This tradition is rooted in an ancient biblical tradition of the institution of

sacrifice. Another vivid example is the continuation of the biblical model of hospitality to the stranger and the sojourner.

By contrast, my Christian identity overlaps with my Palestinian identity through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Jesus taught us to be peacemakers, to be light and salt and to share ourselves with others, no matter who they are, to feed the hungry, to welcome the stranger, to care for the sick, to visit the prisoner and to liberate the oppressed.

Incarnational theology defines the manner in which we relate to the divine and to each other. God chose to transcend the boundaries between the human and the divine. God became incarnate on earth. God did not remain in heaven. Christ taught us that the incarnation lent special meaning to the overlapping of Palestinian Christian identities—never exclusive, but inclusive—molded by love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Our relationships on this earth are shaped by the incarnation of our Lord Jesus.

Second, my identity as an Evangelical Lutheran is rooted in the history of Christianity in the Middle East. Is it certain that Lutherans cannot claim a historic tradition in Palestine. We cannot claim that Martin Luther came to visit the Holy Land—thanks be to God! Rather than a staid tradition of Christianity in the Holy Land, the Evangelical Lutheran doctrine brings us the freshness of the Gospel. This means that no nation or land can claim a monopoly on preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments. The circle is continuous – out of Jerusalem to the whole world, but when Jerusalem neglects the freshness of the Gospel, it returns through mission to Jerusalem.

Third, The Evangelical Lutheran tradition has rooted us in the theology of grace. This grace we receive freely from the cross of Christ. We Christians in the Middle East live in an ocean of Islam and Judaism, which means we are steeped in the theology of merit. In both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Qur'an, there is a strong theology of retribution. This theology influences my Arab Palestinian identity. But as Christians living in the theology of grace, we know the love of God in Christ that justifies us freely by faith, a love which extends to all people and sinners, the marginalized, the oppressed and the oppressor. It is the grace of Christ that embraces me and others, drawing me nearer to my Savior. Through *kerygma*, *diakonia*, and mission, the love of Christ is given freely to all and we become the Church of *martyria*, the Church of living witness. This is the freshness of the Gospel.

Fourth, the Evangelical Lutheran tradition has rooted us in the theology of the cross, which is the center of Lutheran identity. This humbles me so that I am not a master in my country, but a servant – a servant not only for my own community but for everyone. The theology of the cross molds my entire identity and equips me for witness, enabling me to take a strong role in mediation and dialogue with other Christian confessions and other religions, or between conflicting parties.

These concepts – the incarnation; the theology of grace and the theology of the cross – are the foundation of the theology and tradition of the early church. They continue today in the Lutheran and other Evangelical churches in the Middle East. They still mold my Arab Palestinian Christian Evangelical Lutheran identity.

The fifth premise that shapes my identity is one of ethnicity. I am an Arab. I speak the Arabic language, the language of the Qur'an. Since the day of Pentecost, my ancestors and I have been praying to *Allah*, the Triune God whom we strive to serve in thought, word, and deed.

This has an impact on my identity. Qur'anic culture may influence my identity. Concordantly, my Arab Christian identity may also influence my Arab culture and can also influence my neighbors. Arab Christians and Arab Muslims share a reciprocity. We deeply influence each other's identity and culture. For our identities are integral part of the fabric of Arab society and culture.

Moreover, I am a refugee—I still hold a UN refugee card from 1948. I hold in my heart the longing for freedom. As such, I identify myself with every Palestinian refugee and every refugee in the world and I understand the injustice of displacement that they feel. Yet I live with hope of a better home, as St. Paul writes in II Corinthians 5, “For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

In my own life, were it not for the many teachers and mentors who taught and nurtured me throughout my life, I would have simply accepted the status of refugee and resigned myself to being a victim, but it was through my education that I learned that victimhood was not God's intention for me. My life was transformed by the Gospel, and I give thanks for those who brought this liberating message into my life. They were educators, like you. They empowered people to realize their full potential, just as you do through your work and vocation. Education is the primary transformative power that can change the world.

ELCJHL Education as Transformative Power in the Middle East

I am compelled to tell you about the most vital ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land: namely our schools. The ELCJHL Schools and Educational Programs pursue the mission of providing a happy, productive, and safe environment for students, teachers, administrators, support staff and parents. The participation of students, families, and staff is essential to creating a true school democracy and a sense of community and ownership by all. Parent and student councils play a key role as we pursue our strategic goals and adapt to the evolving needs of the Palestinian community.

The work of the ELCJHL Schools and Educational Programs is guided by overarching goals that form and shape all that we do. Instead of going through them point by point, I think they can be summarized with a poignant quote from Martin Luther which states “If you want to change the world, pick up your pen and write.”¹ We strive to develop wholesome, creative, and innovative students through a holistic approach to education that addresses their needs and develops their talents, competencies, inclinations, and ability to cope in an ever-changing world. We encourage them to become articulate and multi-lingual.

Many times in the past, members of my synod have suggested that we consider closing our schools due to the financial deficit of our church organization. My response is always to emphasize that the direct mission of the Church is accomplished through the schools. Our church was established because of the schools—not the opposite as many would assume.

The goal of education is met through teaching the Evangelical ethos in a Palestinian context. This means in practice:

¹ Becker Seigneur, Cornelia. "If You Want to Change the World, Pick up Your Pen and Write | Faith and Culture Writers." *Faith and Culture Writers*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Aug. 2013. <<http://faithandculturewriters.com/if-you-want-to-change-the-world-pick-up-your-pen-and-write/>>.

1. We mold the Palestinian, Christian, and Lutheran identity of our youth.
2. We teach our youth to live with other faiths, especially Islam and Judaism as they are our neighbors.
3. We provide peace education. We teach our children non-violence as a means of resistance and dialogue as a means of pursuing peace with justice.
4. We promote the role of women in society.
5. We give children a quality education that equips them for life's many challenges in a dynamic world.
6. We teach them the value of pluralism through maintaining a civil society.

Today, our four schools are serving 3,000 students, and we emphasize opportunity for all students regardless of gender. Gender balance and equality continues to be a strong emphasis of the ELCJHL Schools, with all schools learning together in a co-educational framework in which 44% of students are female and 56% of students are male.

Muslim and Christian populations in ELCJHL Schools reflect closely the populations of their communities. On the whole, 53% of ELCJHL students are Christian, and 47% of students are Muslim. Do we seek to convert the Muslims and other Christians in our schools? No. Our evangelical mission is to convert our students from extremism to moderation in a Middle East that is drowning in extremism.

The ELCJHL is diligently working to provide a means by which people of all ages. Our motto is to educate them from womb to the tomb. We teach them to think critically, discern truth, and live in the hope of a future with peace coexistence between people of differing ethnicities and religious backgrounds. Though the ELCJHL is a relatively small in the Holy Land, *one out of six* Palestinian Christians shape their thinking in one of our schools or programs. We are small, but we are having a vital impact on the future of Palestinian Christianity. Sometimes I ask if larger church bodies can even have the same impact as us, given their relative place in their cultures.

Coexistence is Our Only Hope in the Middle East

You may be wondering how this message of hope for the coexistence of religions and nations works in the Middle East. Today it is no secret that my region is being torn apart by violence. Many outside observers notice that many of the people who are fighting are extremist religious people—their struggle for human dignity is sectarian in nature. There is a tendency, then, for some to assume that what we are experiencing is a fight between religions or at least a struggle along sectarian lines.

While it is true that the so-called Arab Spring may indeed be turned into an “Arab Winter,” the fighting is not about religion. Some will try to use religion to cloak their activities and ambitions; this cannot be denied. Some political parties are explicitly identified with one brand or another of religious commitment. But the struggles today are due to centuries of political and economic developments in the region; it is too simple to say that it is all about religion. The Muslim and Christian perspective on the Arab Awakening is that it is needed for democratic reforms so that all people, regardless of whether they are Muslim, Christian, Sunni, Shiite, Alawites, or Druze, may have equal rights under the law.

While religion is sometimes used in the Middle East as a weapon, I have been privileged to witness many times when religion is employed as a force of hope and compassion that binds us ever closer together, even with our diversities. In 2007, based on the Amman Message that

King Abdullah II of Jordan had declared calling for tolerance and acceptance of the other, 138 Imams and Muslim scholars signed a document entitled *The Common Word Between Us and You*. This document states clearly that the core belief of religion is love of God and love of neighbor. We, the Arab and Middle East Christians have embraced this document. In the history of religion, this document is important because it reminds us that we are sometimes blinded by pride and we cannot see the image of God in the other. Only Love can cure our blindness and help us to see God's image in every human being.

God calls each and every one of us to live in harmony with our neighbor. As it is written in the Ephesians 4:3, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit of God through the bond of peace." Also, it is written in Qur'an 3:103, "And hold fast, all of you together, to the Rope of Allâh and be not divided among yourselves, and remember Allâh's Favor on you, for you were enemies one to another but He joined your hearts together, so that, by His Grace, you became brothers and sisters..." Certainly every person in the world needs to hear these words and write them on our hearts now more than ever. The teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Sharia's aim are but to love God and love neighbor. Today, it may be easy to love the God whom we cannot see, but it is sometimes challenging to love the neighbor with whom we have everyday dealings. This is why we must cling to the theology of hope which frees us from fear, and enables us to see the image of God in our neighbors. As it is written in I John 4:20, "Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." Simply put, to love our neighbor demonstrates our love for God.

Mutual Regard for Our Neighbor

When a Danish newspaper published cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in 2005, protests erupted around the world. Because of the strong interfaith relationships we had developed in Israel, Palestine, and Jordan, I was able to work with a group of Christians and Muslims to respond to the crisis. We explained to our Western colleagues that Muslims, like Jews and Christians, have many faces, that the Muslim community is diverse and varied. But when their fundamental symbols and values are attacked, Muslims joined together in their common identity. As people in the Middle East, we tried to convey the importance of that fundamental religious identity, even among people who are otherwise quite secular.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land used this situation as an opportunity to start a discussion about the freedom of religion and the freedom of speech in our extensive school system. In our schools, Muslim and Christian students worked through the issues resulting from the Danish publication, side by side, from kindergarten to 12th grade, sharing dialogue on the meaning of freedom of speech versus the freedom of religion. They wrestled with the question: does freedom of speech give us the right to desecrate religious symbols and traditions of the other? In this dialogue, they recognized that mutual regard and respect for the other is the foundation of peaceful coexistence, of a life filled with hope.

At the same time, we Arab Christians talked to our Muslims neighbors to help them understand that the West is no longer a religious society. We in the Middle East often have a hard time understanding a Westerner who would say they have no religious affiliation. But even this lack of religion does not justify attacking religious symbols, holy books, or holy places. This is why I called for the creation of a Code of Conduct, which was signed in 2008 by a gathering of 48 Christian and Muslim leaders from the whole Middle East at the

Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center in Amman, Jordan. The document calls for religious toleration throughout the world, through the following:

1. Respect of religious freedom and belief,
2. Respect for all messengers, prophets, holy books, and religious texts, and the prohibition of their desecration,
3. Respect for all holy places, which should be freely accessible to believers,
4. Respect for religious symbols, with any desecration prohibited and prevented,
5. Respect for responsible freedom of religious expression that does not harm the belief and feelings of others, and
6. the continuation of dialogue and human cooperation so that justice, peace, development and decent living, called for by human and religious teachings, can be achieved for all.

Interfaith Dialogue

Another sign of hope is the Council of Religious Institutions in the Holy Land. Formed in 2005, this group is the first of its kind in the Holy Land, bringing together the Chief Rabbinate of Israel (both Ashkenazi and Sephardi), the Heads of the Local Churches of the Holy Land (including Lutherans, Orthodox, Armenian, Roman Catholics, and Anglicans), the Ministry of Islamic Endowment at the Palestinian Authority, and the Islamic Sharia Courts of the Palestinian Authority to promote interreligious understanding and cooperation. Together, we have called on our communities to accurately represent each other at home, in school, at work, and in synagogues, churches and mosques in the Holy Land. This group is a modern day miracle of the Holy Land! Despite the challenges of living in a land divided by fear, we boldly claim that love conquers all and that all God's children deserve equal treatment.

Over the past two years, the Council has worked together to support the production of an analysis of how Palestinian and Israeli school textbooks depict the Other so both Israeli and Palestinian education ministries can work toward a curriculum based on mutual respect. The publication of "Victims of Our Own Narratives: Portrayal of the Other in Israeli and Palestinian School Books" is a watershed moment in the parallel narratives of the Holy Land. Using the latest empirical methods, we discerned the manner in which the books we are handing to our children are shaping their attitudes and comprehension of those around them. The results of the study indicate that there are two conflicting narratives between Palestinians and Israelis, and the values of coexistence are lacking.

For example, the study revealed a serious lack of information in all the textbooks about the religions of other peoples. Their textbooks treated the holy city of Jerusalem as a right exclusive to themselves. How can we hope for our children to live in peace if we do not plant seeds of hope in them when they are young? Now that we have this analysis in hand, we can begin to address the issues therein and work toward giving our children—both Palestinian and Israeli, a more accurate and hope-filled picture of a future with peaceful coexistence. Our aim is to make the textbooks more inclusive, so that children will grow up with a knowledge and respect of their neighbor's faith and practice. If we succeed in doing this, then we will put the train on the right track.

Transforming a Culture of Fear into a Culture of Trust

There are those in our society who have given up hope—they see no possibility for peace. They see only a future with an undulating flow of spiral violence where people kill each other and vengeance becomes one’s highest aspiration. Through our schools, we have chosen a different path. We can let those who would carve up the world into false dichotomies of us and them, good versus evil-doers, continue to define our world and how we engage it. Or we can resist this drive toward xenophobia and exclusion and let the hope which is in ours in Christ transform our thinking and definitions.

If we accept any form of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, or Christianophobia, we help create a culture of fear that regards the other simply as an object rather than the *imago Dei*—one who is created in the image of God. The resulting culture of fear creates new gaps, builds new walls of hatred, encourages political and religious extremism and, above all, demonizes the other. We should never allow fear, hate, and extremism to hold our world hostage. We should remember that any move toward dehumanizing the other harms our own humanity as well. In I John 4:18 we read, “Perfect love casts out fear.” When we love as Christ loves, our fears subside and hope resides in us. This is emblematic of the transforming power of education.

Through education and dialogue, we transmute cultures of fear into cultures of hope and compassion. Jesus was always going on his boat to “the other side,” to people outside of his own culture, to meet people where they were in order to bring healing and good news to all. We are called, as disciples of this same Jesus Christ, to do the same and see the image of God in the other.

With advances in global technology, we are daily witnesses to the pain and tragedy that springs from fear and hatred. Whether it is the burning of the Qur’an, vandalism to church buildings, or the desecration of a Jewish cemetery, there is seemingly no end the harmful events that seek to divide peoples and foment dehumanization of the other, fomenting extremism and blind hatred.

Dr. Charles Kimball, who teaches at the University of Oklahoma in the United States, is a prolific writer on world religions. In his book, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, Kimball says the five markers of extremism include:

- 1) absolute truth claims,
- 2) blind obedience,
- 3) hope for establishing the “ideal” time,
- 4) an ethic where all ends justify the means, and
- 5) declarations of holy war.

He writes, “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. When religion becomes evil, these five corruptions are always present. Conversely, when religion remains true to its authentic sources, it is actively dismantling these corruptions, a process that is urgently needed now.”²

² Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 47.

One of the great challenges of the Twenty-first Century will be to reclaim the power of faith as a driving force for justice, peace, and love. That is how we can ensure that faith is not perceived simply as part of the problems facing our world. To do this work, however, we must be convinced that no one religion has a monopoly on hate or extremism, and that all of us—Christians, Muslims, Jews, persons of any religion and persons of no religion—are equally responsible and equally called to work together to seek the common, positive values of love, compassion, justice, and peace, and together to uphold the sacred value of all persons, regardless of color, race, creed, or religion. There is no *dhimmah* or minority within a religious majority. We call for equal citizenship regardless of our religious, ethnic, or social background. We call for equal rights and equal responsibilities within the borders of all nations, especially in the Middle East.

This is our hope. This is the future for which we yearn. Along with hope, these values of love and justice are not mere slogans. Those of us who have suffered attacks on our dignity and on our future know the power of hope.

St. Paul writes that hope “does not disappoint us.” While I agree with this sentiment, I would also like to turn the statement around and pose the difficult question—can we disappoint the hope Christ has for us? That is to say, can we, because of our indifference or apathy, refuse to lay claim to the promise that hope presents us? Is it possible that the Holy Spirit is grieved because we lack the will or ambition to move beyond words and into actions of accompaniment, bridge-building, and understanding of the other? We need to become people whose lives are so infused with hope that our words and actions are hope-filled, and not simply the result of our vanity or selfishness.

The Role of Arab Christians

It is a sign of hope that Arab Christians have played a role in bridging the Muslim and Christian worlds. We offer ourselves to the world in this capacity for the sake of humanity. The mark of understanding the faith of our neighbors is in our ability to describe that same faith to them in a way that shows regard and respect. This is why I think that it is the responsibility of Arab Christians to be a voice for Islam in the West. Islam is growing in the West and is quickly becoming an integral part of its society. Muslims comprise a little over two percent of the Australian population, but they bring a richness of culture and tradition from over 65 different countries. Using the transforming power of education and the gospel of hope, can Australian Christians accept their new neighbors as Middle East Christians have done for the past 1,400 years? Will those who can trace their roots back hundreds of years be able to welcome the new immigrants and allow multiculturalism to thrive? These are questions that can only be properly answered when the hope of Christ has cast out the fear of the other allowing us to see the image of God in them.

We Arab Christians in the Middle East have mission to be faithful to the Gospel while peacefully coexisting with our neighbors. We claim our vocation, with all our neighbors, to live and work as an integral part of the fabric of our societies, having their sorrows, their dreams, and their aspirations in our hearts as well. We do not live in the mentality of the ghetto, nor in the mentality of a minority complex, nor do we live as *dhimmi* (protected religious minority under Sharia law). We have always been, as Arab Christians, building our societies, loyal to our countries and nationalities, bringing hope in hopeless situations, and guarantees of developing civil society that respects human rights, freedom of religion, gender justice, and freedom of expression. This process of reform continues to be on the heart of

every Arab and Middle Eastern Christian until today. Our hope will not end until we see the Middle East transformed into the values we cherish.

The future of Arab and Middle Eastern Christians is not in war or in occupation. The Christian future is in our participation in our societies as an integral part of our peoples, witnessing in every consequence alongside all our neighbors. Do we seek to be subordinate subjects, or citizens with equal rights and responsibilities? Do we seek toleration and protection? Do we run under the skirts of a warlord? Are we weak and persecuted, and thus in perpetual need for other Christians to rescue us? No! We seek dignity. We seek equality. We seek peace based on justice for ourselves and for all our neighbors and our compatriots.

To seek these values, Arab and Middle Eastern Christians need engagement with all Muslims. This engagement is not just for religious understanding, but to shape our shared political future. We must engage with our Muslim neighbors on the question of the proper relation between religion and state. We must advocate for equal citizenship with equal rights and equal responsibilities that can be secured by stable and secure states with reliable constitutions. We must advocate for religious freedom, freedom of conviction, and freedom of conscience. We advocate for these values for the sake of building pluralistic societies that respect all diversities. This is the reason we refuse today to continue to be divided into sects, or millets, or religious groups. We refuse that a state would be divided according to these parameters. This is not a political conversation only, but a perspective established in our faith that all people are created equal by God.

This leads me to the point that we need to engage also with the complexities of the global church, especially in the West. We appreciate that many churches in the world are standing and trying to do something. We call on them to develop a plan of action to respond to the needs of Arab and Middle Eastern Christians. Some western churches do not always understand us when we speak with them. In the western world, conversations like those we are having in this consultation are too easily informed by biases, or Christian Zionism, or Islamophobia or naïve commitments to academic dialogue to solve the world's problems. These approaches are not helpful to us. We Arab and Middle Eastern Christians refuse to be used as political commodities! We carry the message of Amman, *The Common Word*, and ask the world to adopt the paradigm of dignified common living for all citizens of the Middle East.

Emigration of Christians

I find it particularly interesting that Muslims make up two percent of the population in Australia. Christians make up the same percentage—two percent—of the population in the Holy Land, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. Our numbers used to be much greater. Many Palestinian Christians are emigrating west, and our declining numbers are of great concern to me. Why are they moving? There are four reasons:

- 1) A lack of peace and harmonious coexistence
- 2) The effects of the occupation, especially in cases where family members are separated from each other because unification permits are denied them.
- 3) A lack of jobs and economic opportunities has made it difficult for Christians to thrive in Middle Eastern communities.
- 4) And finally the growth of extremism has forced many peace-loving Christians to seek a more safe environment in which to raise their families.

The role of the church in advocating for a stable environment in which Middle East Christians can raise their families in thriving communities cannot be understated. As such, the heads of churches in Jerusalem called upon both Israelis and Palestinians to see God in the other and accept the humanity and rights by committing themselves to the following precepts:

- 1) Support community based education through Christian schools and educational institutions.
- 2) Stop emigration of Christians through job creation.
- 3) Provide affordable housing. Housing is a social right, not a luxury.
- 4) Strengthen Christian Social institutions. These organizations provide needed services to all in Palestinian society regardless of religion, gender, or political affiliation.

I believe that Arab and Middle East Christians maintain a crucial balance in our society. They are bridge-builders, brokers of justice, defenders of human rights and gender equality, and most importantly, they are peacemakers. One of our politicians recently said that Arab Christians are the guarantors of building a modern civil society. They are the ones who bear the peace that passes all human understanding to the people of the Middle East, and yet they are emigrating to the west in ever-increasing numbers. What is the Holy Land without Christians? What is the Middle East without Christians?

A Solution to the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict?

This year, 2013, finds us at a crucial crossroads regarding the prospects of a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine. Many people in the Holy Land are cynical about these prospects. Nevertheless, we continue to believe in this possibility of a two-state solution based on 1967 borders, living side by side with security, justice, equality, and reconciliation. Jerusalem should be a shared city for the two nations and the three Abrahamic religions; settlement activity should end; there should be a just political solution for Palestinian refugees; resources should be shared and regional cooperation should flourish. We continue to believe in these principles, but political realities do not often seem supportive of that vision.

People often ask me if I am optimistic or pessimistic about these political concerns. I answer that I am neither pessimistic nor optimistic, but that I am *hopeful* that peace based on justice, and reconciliation based on forgiveness is coming. Hope has arisen in Jerusalem; it does not come out of Canberra or Sydney. As long as I live, I will teach people to see the image of God in Israelis and to teach Israelis to see the image of God in the Palestinians, so that we might be transformed and celebrate diversity among ethnic and racial groups. When we do this, we will accept the humanity of the other. Thus, we will recognize each other's human, civil, religious, national, and political rights. When this happens, then the Holy Land will truly become a promised land of milk and honey for both Palestinians and Israelis alike. This is my hope.

The Power of Interdependence

When Malala Yousafzai, the courageous young woman from Pakistan who was critically injured by extremists for promoting education for women was asked to address the United Nations in New York this past July, one particular statement she made deeply impressed me:

Dear sisters and brothers, we realize the importance of light when we see darkness. We realize the importance of our voice when we are silenced. In the same way, when we were in Swat, the north of Pakistan, we realized the importance of pens and books

when we saw the guns. [You have heard] The wise saying, “The pen is mightier than the sword.” It is true. The extremists are afraid of books and pens. The power of education frightens them.³

The power of education frightens them. We realize the importance of light when we see darkness. You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free. These phrases go deeper than mere metaphor. They strike at the heart of defining God’s intention for humanity and all of creation. We were created to be enlightened, and our enlightenment is a gift from God that draws us closer to our creator. Education is more than learning sums or proper grammar. Education is the light casting out the darkness, it is love casting out fear, it is strength casting out weakness.

We are shaping young minds for a future where peaceful coexistence is possible and human dignity is upheld. We are not alone. People all over the world have been deeply wounded and paralyzed by fear. We are surrounded by the forces of oppression, racism, violence, terrorism, and hatred. Each of these causes us to suffer, sometimes directly but also indirectly on a daily basis. Healing must begin with truth-telling and with breaking the silence that hides the suffering of those who are vulnerable and violated. Only such a start will allow the possibility of healing with justice and forgiveness. Only when the light of truth exposes the lies that inflict suffering on innocent people can the seeds of reconciliation take root. Only by squarely facing suffering—our own as well as the suffering of those around us—can we begin to claim the possibility of hope. Knowing there are people like Malala Yousafzai gives me hope. When I see the children coming into our schools with an eagerness to learn, to think, and to share their gifts and talents, I am filled with hope. When I hear of the good work that you Australian educators are doing in the name of Christ, I am hope-filled.

Today, our globalized information economy makes it easier than ever to encounter diverse cultures and expressions of religious devotion. We have already seen how the Internet can be a haven for hate groups and extremists, even terrorists seeking to plot violence. But again we have a choice. These encounters with human differences can make us curve even further in upon ourselves—the essence of sinfulness—or they can draw us out from ourselves alone. With Jesus, we can go in our boat to the other side, encountering the profound complexity of this world that God loves in all its diversity.

A world without values is a world of chaos. A world that promotes violence, militarization, and consumerism is a world without a soul. Instead we need a world anchored in hope, powered by the truth, living in the light. This is the world worth giving to our children. It is the least they deserve from us. Education gives us the tools to transform the world. Bringing truth to light should be our highest priority.

Hope for a Future Partnership

Palestinian Christian intellectual Edward Said wrote that “No culture or civilization exists by itself; none is made up of things like individuality and enlightenment that are completely exclusive to it; and none exists without the basic human attributes of community, love, value

³ "July 12 2013 Speech by Malala Yousafzai to the United Nations" *'Bite Point'* N.p., n.d. Web. 25 July 2013. <http://rickwilsondmd.typepad.com/rick_wilson_dmds_blog/2013/07/july-12-2013-speech-by-malala-yousafzai-to-the-united-nations.html>.

for life and all the others. To suggest otherwise . . . is the purest drivel.”⁴ We must be as bold as Said in claiming our connection to one another.

How can we build an accompaniment relationship together? I want to invite you to begin a conversation around developing a strategic partnership between our schools and churches. I am advocating for a deeper partnership between the eighty-six Lutheran schools and colleges in Australia and the Lutheran schools of the Holy Land. How does God call us to be in relationship with one another, sharing our gifts? Consider the possibilities. By sharing resources, skills, and technologies, we can enrich the lives of our students and teachers. We can develop a student exchange program. Teachers can come from Australia and teach in Bethlehem. Teachers can come from Ramallah and teach here in Queensland. Churches in Australia can provide scholarships for Palestinian students who have terrific academic potential but are caught up in a cycle of poverty. Australian and Palestinian youth can use today’s technologies to converse in real time from one classroom to the next, sharing ideas, asking questions, and embracing each other’s culture. Australian Lutheran students can come to the Holy Land and see where Jesus walked and how we, the descendants of those present on the day of Pentecost, work and live in the light of the Gospel. Palestinian students can travel to Australia to engage in cross-cultural dialogue and see the unique flora and fauna of this beautiful country.

Education Brings Truth to Light

I would like to conclude with a brief story from Hasidic literature:

A learned rabbi once asked his pupils how they could tell when the night had ended and the day was on its way back. “Could it be,” asked one student, “when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?” “No,” answered the teacher.

“Could it be,” inquired another, “when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it is a fig tree or a peach tree?” “No,” the teacher replied. “Well, then, what is it?” his pupils demanded.

The rabbi responded, “It is when you look on the face of any woman or man and see that she or he is your sister or brother. Because if you cannot do this, then no matter what time it is, it is still night.”

It is by striving to recognize our common identity that we share with others as part of God’s creation that we truly experience transformation, and we escape the night of ignorance and fear. May God bless this vision to transform our hearts with hope, love, and truth. May God bless you.

⁴ Edward W. Said, “The Meaning of Rachel Corrie: Of dignity and solidarity,” Foreword to *Peace Under Fire: Israel/Palestine and the International Solidarity Movement*, ed. Josie Sandercock, et al (Verso, 2004).