

No. 9713

(Sense-of-the-Assembly)

JERUSALEM: CITY OF LIFE

ADOPTED by the General Assembly

Background Information:

For Jews, Christians and Muslims, Jerusalem has been a city of hope and holiness. It is the place where histories, both separate and intersecting, have been enshrined, and where redemption and renewal have been promised.

Jerusalem has also been an arena of conflict, where followers of the three Abrahamic traditions have, at various points in the city's long history, sought to make exclusive or preeminent claims on the Holy City. All such claims have been superseded by the durability of the devotion of those who have cherished the deeper significance of the city, and by Jerusalem's stubborn character as a place where religions meet, where Jews, Christians and Muslims encounter each other in their quest of faithfulness to God.

We have entered a new period in the history of this city, a period inaugurated by a moving gesture of reconciliation, a handshake between the Prime Minister of the State of Israel and the Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, two warriors and former foes who sought to put an end to the long conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people. One of the elements of the Declaration of Principles ratified by that handshake was a promise to negotiate the future status of Jerusalem. Other matters for the final status negotiations were to be refugees, settlements, and boundaries. Those negotiations were to begin in May of 1996.

Christians should not presume to define and delineate the significance of Jerusalem for their partners in the Abrahamic tradition. Indeed, even among Christians there are widely differing perspectives on the meaning of Jerusalem, its spiritual significance, its political future. But an unwillingness to define or evaluate the devotion of others should not prevent us from attempting, at least, to articulate principles and hopes that we, as Christians, believe should be realized in the determination of the status of the Holy City. In limning out these principles, we are especially mindful of the statements and sentiments of those Christians whose lives are touched immediately by the failure of the parties involved, and the international community, to arrive at a satisfactory solution to the problem of Jerusalem, the Christians of the Middle East and most particularly the Christians of Jerusalem and of Palestine. As U.S. Christians we bear a special responsibility in light of the U.S. role as sponsor of the peace process.

Jerusalem as a place where the divine and the human come together.

For Christians Jerusalem is the venue of redemption, where the love of God for humanity took human form in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That coming together of the divine and the human, the Incarnation, reminds us that the rights and dignity of human beings can never be at odds with the will of God.

In its 1980 Middle East Policy Statement, which was affirmed at the General Synod and General Assembly of the UCC and Disciples, respectively, in 1981, the Governing Board of the National Council of the Churches of Christ stated that the issue of Jerusalem was an issue not only of shrines, but also of people. The holiness of Jerusalem and the peace of Jerusalem are inseparable from the extension of justice to all of its people.

Since assuming control of all of Jerusalem in 1967, Israel has been consistent in extending free access to the Holy Places to the international Christian community. For this policy, Israel is to be commended.

But for much of that period, restrictions have been placed on the access of Middle Eastern Christians to Jerusalem. The signing of peace agreements between Israel and Egypt, and between Israel and Jordan have eased these restrictions for a large number of Middle Eastern Christians, but for Palestinian Christians and Muslims resident in the West Bank and Gaza, Jerusalem is largely inaccessible. Since the Gulf War, the Israeli authorities have imposed a continuous closure of Jerusalem and of Israel itself to Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. While the closures have varied in their strictness, they have had the overall effect of depriving most Palestinian Muslims and Christians of the right to worship at the places held sacred in their respective traditions. In addition, the closure has had a devastating impact on the Palestinian economy, on education, on healthcare, on the unity of families.

Israel has explained this policy as a measure necessary to assure the security of Israelis, and of the city of Jerusalem itself. And indeed, Israel has suffered grievously from the senseless violence of terrorism. It is our belief, however, that the only durable guarantor of peace is justice. As long as Palestinians are deprived of access to their cultural, economic and religious center, Jerusalem, the possibility of violence borne of frustration will remain. Any resolution of the question of Jerusalem, we believe, must guarantee free access to Jerusalem for all.

Of grave impact as well has been the intensive and extensive building of exclusively Jewish settlements in and around the city, and the subsequent and relentless expansion of the municipal limits of the city to include those settlements. The impact of these settlements and the expansion of the definition of Jerusalem has been the effective displacement of Palestinians, since much of the building has taken place on confiscated Palestinian land. The settlement policy has, as well, altered the delicate demographic balance of Jerusalem, magnifying the fears of its Palestinian residents that they will be overwhelmed and marginalized in the city that they consider to be the center of their national life.

Jerusalem: a shared legacy.

For Jerusalem to realize its vocation it cannot, in any ultimate sense, "belong" to any one people or religion. History is replete with the efforts of groups -- religious, ethnic or national -- to "own" Jerusalem. And history has demonstrated that such efforts have had the effect of violating the very nature of the place and despoiling its holiness. One of the most egregious of these episodes in history was the Crusades, in which western Christians wreaked havoc and slaughter on Muslims, Jews and oriental Christians alike in an effort to "reclaim" Jerusalem for western Christendom. The Crusades now stand as a sad example of shortsightedness, cruelty and, ultimately, futility.

It is our belief that any solution to the disputed status of Jerusalem must recognize that it is a city like no other, that it is "home" to people of all three traditions, home to people who live far away but nevertheless find their identity, their past and their future hopes in the Holy City. It is essential that those who negotiate the future of Jerusalem recognize its truly unique role, that they use the prophetic imagination of their traditions to define new modes of sovereignty and governance so that Jerusalem will stand as a symbol of peace and conviviality, a living antidote to the contemporary diseases of bigotry, intolerance, ultra nationalism and exclusivism. While we cannot presume to define this solution in political terms, we are impelled to set forth the principles that we feel should be embodied in the ultimate resolution of the status of the city. A durable solution to the question of Jerusalem will require the imaginative genius and good will of people of faith, of the negotiators and of their U.S. sponsor. It could lead to new understandings of how the prevailing political norms, in particular the institution of the nation-state and the role of "capital" of the nation state, may be made consonant with Jerusalem's unique role as spiritual capital of religious traditions that transcend political boundaries.

Jerusalem as a paradigm of peace and justice

Jerusalem both transcends and comprehends its contemporary status. When we Christians speak of a new Jerusalem, we look to a Jerusalem whose holiness resides not only in its past, but also comprehends its present and looks forward in hope to its future. When we call Jerusalem the Holy City, we are both evoking its divine history and at the same time praying for the realization of future hopes and promises.

It is our challenge always to work to overcome the dissonance between the real Jerusalem, which reflects the maladies of contemporary humanity--divisiveness, violence, intolerance, chauvinism-- and that of the city that is hallowed in our faith, the mother who nurtures without favoritism her children: Jews, Muslims and Christians, who provides a home for her extended family as well, a home that radiates abundant life and the glory of God.

A Jerusalem that is called holy by Christians, that is, as the church leaders of Jerusalem have put it in their statement of November, 1994, (see appended text) a place where every Christian feels

at home, cannot reflect values that are at odds with the fundamental tenets of our faith. This, too, is our stake in Jerusalem: not a territorial claim, not a political design, but rather a steady insistence that the city we call "holy" and "home" reflects our common values of love, sharing and justice.

The peace of Jerusalem for which we, with the Psalmist, pray, is a peace for all its people: Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. It is a peace grounded in the thirst for justice. For us, this is not a peripheral concern, a passing cause. It lies at the heart of who we are and who we want to be. We invite our siblings in the Abrahamic tradition to strive together, in hope and love, for a Jerusalem that remains holy to all of us.

Resolution

WHEREAS, the General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the President of the United Church of Christ have affirmed the appeal to President Clinton concerning Jerusalem by eight US Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant church leaders last year (see appended text), and signed on to a late 1996 advertisement in a major newspaper prepared by Churches for Middle East Peace (see appended text), a joint program of the Washington offices of 15 churches and related organizations; and,

WHEREAS, the Common Global Ministries Board, meeting at Green lake, Wisconsin, November 18 to 20, unanimously adopted this resolution, directing it to the 1997 General Assembly and General Synod for adoption and action, and

WHEREAS, the General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the President of the United Church of Christ have issued pastoral letters to their churches based on this resolution, and

WHEREAS, the General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the President of the United Church of Christ have sought appointments with relevant US Administration officials to express the concerns outlined in this resolution;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) asks the two churches to undertake an examination of their understanding of the significance of Jerusalem in their theologies, their interreligious relations, and their practice of tourism and pilgrimage in and to the Holy Land.

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