



For Immediate Release:

Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP): The Future of the Christian Church in the Holy Land in Peril

Washington, D.C.- February 27, 2018

Today marks the third day of the closure of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, considered by many to be the holiest site for Christians around the world. Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) stands in solidarity with the Heads of Communion in Jerusalem and the Christian community living in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories as they face an unprecedented attack which threatens their very existence in the birthplace of our Christian faith.

In early February of this year, Christian leaders in Jerusalem received word the municipality intended to break a centuries-long status quo agreement and would begin to collect taxes on church properties not used as houses of worship. Nir Barkat, the mayor of the Jerusalem Municipality, claims the churches owe taxes in arrears of roughly ₪650 million Israeli Shekels, or approximately \$186 million U.S. dollars. CMEP is receiving reports that a total hold has been placed on the bank accounts of the Franciscans and partial holds on the bank accounts of the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox churches. Unconfirmed reports from Jerusalem indicate that Franciscan owned schools have already been forced to close their doors because of the holds placed on their bank accounts by the Israeli government.

Concurrently, the Israeli Knesset is considering the "Bill of Church Lands" legislation, brought forth by MK Rachel Azariya that would permit: "Israel to retroactively expropriate land sold by the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches since 2010" ([Source](#)). While the bill has been temporarily taken off the agenda for consideration by the Knesset, CMEP is dismayed by the possibility that this legislation could be reintroduced. These two grave threats - the "Bill of Church Lands legislation" and the shift of the Status Quo through illegitimate taxation -, taken together, could ultimately lead to the devastation of Christianity's presence in the Holy Land. Hundreds of thousands of Christians, Muslims, and Jews benefit from the educational and social services of the local churches in Jerusalem, who provide desperately needed services to the most vulnerable populations.

On February 25, for the first time since 1990, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre closed its doors in protest. The Heads of Churches act as the stewards of the Holy Sepulchre. A [statement](#) released the same day asserts that the decision of the municipality of Jerusalem "is contrary to the historic position of the Churches within the Holy City of Jerusalem and their relationship with the civil authorities. These actions breach existing agreements and international obligations which guarantee the rights and the privileges of the Churches, in what seems as an attempt to weaken the Christian presence in Jerusalem."

CMEP's Executive Director Rev. Dr. Mae Elise Cannon said, "The attack against the Christian community in Jerusalem is outrageous. Should the decision by the Jerusalem municipality and the "Bill of Church

Lands” legislation move forward, it is possible there will soon be no living and breathing vibrant Christian presence in the very birthplace of our faith. With many churches in Jerusalem already experiencing financial hardship, the added strain of illegitimate taxes would almost certainly cause them to close their doors. This is not just an attack on the Christians in Jerusalem, but an attack on the Christian community around the world.”

CMEP calls upon President Trump and his administration to immediately intervene with the appropriate Israeli authorities to ensure the Jerusalem municipality reverses its decision regarding the collection of illegitimate taxes and to ensure that the “Bill of Church Lands” legislation is permanently withdrawn. Without such action, the Christian community in Jerusalem might soon suffer irreparable damage and eventually cease to exist. These actions of the Israeli government are an existential threat to the future of the Christian church in the Holy Land.

Formed in 1984, Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) is a coalition of 27 national church denominations and organizations including Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Evangelical traditions that work to encourage US policies that actively promote a comprehensive resolution to the conflicts in the Middle East with a focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. CMEP works to mobilize US Christians to embrace a holistic perspective and to be advocates of equality, human rights, security, and justice for Israelis, Palestinians, and all people of the Middle East.

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Formed in 1984, [Churches for Middle East Peace](#) is a [coalition of 27 national church denominations and organizations](#), including Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant traditions. It works to encourage U.S. government policies that actively promote a just, lasting and comprehensive resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, ensuring security, human rights and religious freedom for all people of the region. [Click here to unsubscribe](#).

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