



For Immediate Release: *Eighteen Religious Leaders Call on Trump Administration to Stand with the Christian Community in Jerusalem and the Holy Land*

Washington, D.C. - April 10, 2018

In response to the continued threats against the Status Quo and sustainability of the Christian community in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, eighteen religious leaders sent a letter to President Trump calling upon his administration to uphold the Status Quo and to protect the vulnerable Christian communities in the Holy Land. A full copy of the letter, including its signatories, is included below.

In February, Church leaders in Jerusalem received word the municipality would soon begin to collect taxes on all church property not used exclusively as houses of worship. Including back taxes, the churches were told to pay approximately \$186 million. Concurrently, the Israeli Knesset considered the “Bill of Church Lands” legislation, that would permit: “Israel to retroactively expropriate land sold by the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches since 2010.” These two grave threats could ultimately lead to the devastation of Christianity’s presence in the Holy Land.

In the letter, the faith leaders call directly upon President Trump to “make use of your good relations with the government of Israel to impress upon them the importance of an immediate reversal of both of these threats to the Status Quo. These actions will affirm the United States’ commitment to religious freedom and will ensure that Christianity in Jerusalem remains a vibrant force for peace and reconciliation in the future.”

The threats against the Christian community in Jerusalem and the Holy Land t come at a time of increased instability and violence in the region. CMEP recently issued a [Press Release](#) denouncing the disproportionate use of violence against citizens of Gaza nonviolently protesting, which resulted in the death of 18 people and over 1,400 injuries-- most of whom are Muslim. With Israel to celebrate its seventieth anniversary of independence in May and the U.S. set to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem to coincide with Israel’s celebration, we fear the violence will only worsen in the weeks ahead.

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President Donald J. Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

As faith leaders in the United States, we took reassurance from your appeal to the religious authorities of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam on December 6, 2017 to honor the historic Status Quo in Jerusalem's holy sites. You were right to affirm that: "This sacred city should call forth the best in humanity, lifting our sights to what is possible," and that, "Peace is never beyond the grasp of those willing to reach." This Status Quo that is such a critical part of peace in the Holy City has in recent months been challenged to an unprecedented degree. If the current trajectory continues, Christianity is at risk of being extinguished from the very lands where it began.

It is all the more troubling that these events have transpired during this holy season of Lent, a solemn time of self-examination leading up to the celebration of Easter. This forty-day period alludes to the forty days that our Lord Jesus Christ spent in the wilderness that tested his faithfulness to God. It is therefore all too fitting that during these past forty days, the church in Jerusalem has faced unparalleled trials in order to continue its ministry proclaiming the love and mercy of God.

This past February, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre--the place of Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection--temporarily closed its doors in protest against violations to the historic Status Quo in Jerusalem. As faith leaders in the United States, we stood behind this act of protest and wish to bring to your attention the dire consequences currently facing the Christian community in Jerusalem. There are two primary issues that currently threaten the Status Quo agreement between Churches in the Holy Land and the State of Israel: First, the churches face the threat of a substantially increased tax liability, which has never previously been imposed under the Status Quo agreement that has been in effect for hundreds of years. The municipal government of Jerusalem is considering revoking the tax-exempt status for all church lands except those which serve as places of worship. Facing a tax burden of roughly \$186 million USD, churches would almost certainly be forced to close schools, orphanages, medical facilities, and accommodations that serve the needs of Christian pilgrims. In other words, under this tax arrangement, the churches would be severely limited in their ability to carry out ministries of compassion and justice to the poor and vulnerable in society.

In addition, we are troubled by the *Bill of Church Lands* that has been considered in the Israeli Knesset. This act, if passed, could radically diminish the Christian presence in Jerusalem, by allowing the State of Israel to retroactively expropriate lands where church rights have been transferred to private investors. Mr. President, we deeply appreciate your administration's concerns for Christians in the Middle East. But while the plight of Christians in Syria and Iraq has captured the media's attention, please do not overlook the Christians of the Holy Land. We ask that you reaffirm American commitment to preserving the Status Quo in Jerusalem.

In response to this crisis, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced his government would freeze the *Bill of Church Lands* Act and withdraw the liens previously placed on church denominations' bank accounts imposed by the Jerusalem municipality. In addition, the Prime Minister appointed a committee to seek a final resolution of these issues between the Heads of Communion of Churches in the Holy Land and Minister Tzachi Hanegbi. While grateful for the

halting of these challenges to the Status Quo, our position is that these are only temporary interventions and do not represent a comprehensive resolution.

President Trump, we ask that you make use of your good relations with the government of Israel to impress upon them the importance of an immediate reversal of both of these threats to the Status Quo. These actions will affirm the United States' commitment to religious freedom and will ensure that Christianity in Jerusalem remains a vibrant force for peace and reconciliation in the future.

Mr. President, as Holy Week has come to an end, Christians throughout the Holy Land and around the world celebrated Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and mourned the darkest hour of his crucifixion. But the story did not end with the death of Christ. Rather, days ago, the Holy Fire from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was spread around the world on Holy Saturday, representing the light of Christ to the world. It is this light, springing forth when all hope seems lost, that heralds Christ's resurrection. Now Pentecost Sunday approaches in the church calendar which commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and other followers of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-31). Yet, in the midst of this holiest season for churches, the sustainability of the Christian community in the Holy Land is in peril.

We fervently pray that this intensification of threats against the Christian community in Jerusalem will not be the end of the story. Rather, with the staunch support of the United States for Christians in the Holy Land and advocacy for religious freedom for all faith traditions, we know that the Status Quo in Jerusalem will be protected. Thank you for using the influence of your office and the American government to uphold the Status Quo and to protect the vulnerable Christian communities in the Holy Land.

Respectfully,

Nicholas Anton
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America

Archbishop Vicken Aykazian,
Legate of the Armenian Church
Armenian Orthodox Church

Rev. Dr. Mae Elise Cannon
Executive Director
Churches for Middle East Peace

Rev. Dr. Susan Henry Crowe
General Secretary
General Board of Church and Society; The United Methodist Church

Most Reverend Michael Bruce Curry
Presiding Bishop and Primate
The Episcopal Church

Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer
General Minister and President
United Church of Christ

The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton
Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Rev. Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe
General Secretary
General Board of Church and Society; The United Methodist Church

Rev. Julia Brown Karimu
Co-Executive
Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ

Gerry G. Lee
Director
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

Rev. John L. McCullough
President and CEO
Church World Service

Rev. Dr. James Moos
Co-Executive
Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ

Very Reverend Kevin Mullen
President
English Speaking Conference Order of Friars Minor

Rev. Teresa Hord Owens
General Minister and President
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Don Poest
Interim General Secretary
Reformed Church in America

Diane Randall
Executive Secretary
Friends Committee on National Legislation

David Steele
General Secretary
Church of the Brethren

Steven Timmermans
Executive Director
Christian Reformed Church in North America

Jim Winkler
President and General Secretary

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Contact:

Katie McRoberts

katie@cmep.org

Ph. 202-543-1222

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.](#)

media@cmep.org | 202-543-1222 | Fax 202-543-5025
110 Maryland Avenue NE | Suite 311 | Washington, DC 20002

