



WE CHOOSE ABUNDANT LIFE

نختار الحياة

We Choose Abundant Life

**Christians in the Middle East:
Towards Renewed
Theological, Social, and Political Choices**

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We Choose Abundant Life Group
Beirut, September 2021

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Introduction

“I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live...”

(Deut 30:19b)

1. Christians in the Middle East face enormous challenges that confront us with choices on which our future existence and presence depend. God’s words in chapter 30 of the book of Deuteronomy, quoted above, refer to the covenant and the commandments. These were confirmed in the life and ministry of Christ the Lord when he completed the work of reconciliation and gave his disciples the great commandment of love, love of God and the neighbour “to the end” (John 13:1). Today, once again, we find ourselves confronted with the choice between blessing and curse, life and death. We are called to opt for life in spite of all that this may entail in commitment, sacrifice and perseverance. We are required to use all our capacity to serve the wellbeing of our fellow humans, to work towards the renewal of our Churches and institutions, and to strengthen our witness and active presence among our brothers and sisters of all religions and diverse intellectual and cultural perspectives. Today, as we ask God for forgiveness for our weaknesses and mistakes throughout history, we draw from the mercy of God and his forgiveness strength and steadfastness to reject the culture of death and choose life.

2. The geopolitical situation in the Middle East today is extremely complex. Amid the many events taking place in this region, Christians face all kinds of fragmentation, from demographic decline to the gradual fading of our presence and witness. This makes it imperative to embark on an in-depth examination of our situation, drawing on a calm critical reading based on an informed

theological vision and rigorous scientific approaches. We are an ecumenical group of specialists in theology and human and geopolitical sciences. We are women and men, ordained ministers and lay people. We belong to different Churches and have different cultural horizons, national geographies, and complementary areas of expertise. We came together to offer this reading to the best of our abilities, in the light of our knowledge, our experience and our love for our Churches, our people, authorities and institutions.

3. In this document, after consulting with a broad network of experts in the Middle East in order to examine our Christian situation through a constructive approach, we have adopted the methodology of contextual theology. This takes reality as its starting-point, examining theological discourse and religious practices in the light of rigorous scientific and critical criteria based on the achievements of human sciences, on the one hand, and scrutinizing the geopolitical situation in the light of theology, on the other (cf. para. 74-76). Our aim is to lay a foundation for discerning what God wills for his Church in this region and to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches “here and now” (Revelation 2:7).

4. We have chosen in this document to tackle matters that some may consider inappropriate for public discussion, rooted in our belief in what the Lord Jesus Christ said: “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). This commits us to deep dialogue about the whole document with our Christian brothers and sisters and our Church authorities; with the faithful from other religions; with secular thinkers in civil society; with regional and global ecumenical institutions, above all the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC); and with regional and international organizations and entities of good will that desire to work for a just peace and the common good for all people in the Middle East.

5. Our theological and geopolitical approach falls into three parts. It includes, first, a description of the context in which we Christians in the Middle East are living. Secondly, it sets out the challenges we face. Finally, it proposes choices and policies we need to adopt, if we want to engage seriously with the purpose of our existence and presence. We hope that this document will help lead to a courageous dialogue, particularly among our youth, and strengthen their Christian hope, so that they may choose life and be a sign and instrument of true happiness, a light from the light of the Christ who defeated death by death and rose victoriously.

Chapter One

Christians in the Middle East, our Reality and Situation

I. Geopolitical Context

Diversity: Between Strength and Weakness

6. The Middle East has been marked by diversity since ancient times. In such various fields as religion, language, ethnicity, society, culture, and politics, this diversity has been marked by both distinctiveness and convergence. Even before the emergence of monotheism, the region was characterized by a religious dimension. It has seen a multitude of religious expressions, including the idea of a supreme god in the ancient Egyptian civilization, as well as the civilizations of Mesopotamia, Syria, and Canaan. Later, besides Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with their different confessions, the pluralistic scene included other religious communities, such as the Yazidis. This religious coexistence, with both positive aspects and challenges, was reflected in social relationships, linguistic expressions, political orientations, and cultural approaches. These also have been marked by coexistence, in aspects related to the public sphere and common space, particularly in the management of public affairs and the pursuit of the common good, but also resulted in patterns of conflict and competition, as some sought to dominate others or protect their special interests.

7. This context called for a quest for the best models to manage diversity and for devising patterns to enable our different communities to come together and live as neighbours. This led to affirming **diversity as a cultural model** that corresponds to, and is in harmony with, the identity of the Middle East. In its

first article, the UNESCO *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2001) describes cultural diversity as “a source of exchange, innovation, and creativity” and says it is “as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature.” Diversity is a characteristic feature of communities and societies in the Middle East, even in political administration, despite the inclination of political authorities in some historical periods to authoritarianism or to over-standardize political structures.

8. While diversity should be seen as a source of richness, a space for interaction, and an encouragement to cross-fertilization with regard to common values and public interests, throughout our history it has been equally at the root of conflict and war. In the aftermath of WWI and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the multifaceted colonialization of the Middle East frequently failed to create frameworks that allowed local communities to manage their religious and ethnic diversity through a civil state governed by law and thus to proceed “naturally” towards balanced national identities. This colonialization helped to entrench a protectionist vision, fostering a malicious policy of “divide and rule”, and enforced the creation of the State of Israel (1948) through a dreadful pathway of bloodshed and displacement, to the great cost of the Palestinian people. The oil revolution led to a new rentier economic and investment trend that discouraged the idea of productivity and plunged our region into a negative pattern of consumption that adversely affected the production of knowledge. **In recent years, alongside new forms of colonialism and proxy wars, the Middle East has seen a re-emergence of sectarian and religious fanaticism** that appeared, particularly, in elements of a Sunni-Shiite conflict, where both the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the concept of “the guardianship of the jurist” (*wilayat al-faqih*) have played a devastating role.

9. Amid these transformations, many Christians felt their existence threatened and endangered. Among some, this feeling was deepened by a **reductionist approach based exclusively on the logic of majority and minority.** This context has, perhaps, encouraged educated Christian elites to search for “rescue” terms, concepts, and systems. Intellectual structures

advocating Arab nationalism or Syrian nationalism, for example, were erected, and ideology-based parties with an explicit secular inclination, aiming to separate religion from politics, were formed. From the womb of some of these parties, however, dictatorial and repressive political regimes emerged, to the detriment of freedom, democracy, and social justice. As a result, **the model of diversity was fatally wounded, and pluralism succumbed.** Indeed, the failure of the “rescue” approach was one of the key factors that led to a contrary approach based on religion. This transition from a radical secularism to a radical fanaticism sometimes reached as far as exclusion and demonization, reawakening among many Christians the old fear for our destiny. As a result, today some seek protection through an “alliance of minorities”, seeing this as a guarantee of a continued Christian presence in the Middle East. This option, however, distorts a genuine Christian witness – which is based, not on using religion as a political instrument, nor on claiming specific rights or privileges to maintain a rigid identity, but rather on opening up to the other in dialogue. Today, this option impedes Christian involvement in the societies to which we belong and hinders our struggle to enhance common citizenship and implement it fully.

From Aborted Modernity to Ambiguous Globalization

10. Most historians agree that the *Nahda* or Arab Renaissance took off after Napoleon Bonaparte’s campaign in Egypt (1798), although we should note that some remarkable landmarks of renaissance, especially in Egypt and Syria, go back to an earlier date. **The Arab Renaissance is a modernist project** in the first instance; it was a serious attempt to reflect on the significance of European modernity and was inspired by a number of its elements to renew Arab culture and society. Since then, our region has seen other interesting modernist phenomena with a significant impact on our cultural environment, but the Arab Renaissance remains the most important and extensive modernist project in the Middle East.

11. One of the main features of the Arab Renaissance was in-depth reflection on the relationship between religion and social development.

The pioneers of the Renaissance made valuable contributions to social and political ideas, the relationship between religion and reason, and the role that reason plays in liberating humans, both individually and collectively, from ignorance. The thinkers of the Renaissance era did not offer just one answer to the relationship between religion and reason. While some put Islam and reason on an equal footing, others regarded reason as a general phenomenon, independent of religion, that could ensure human beings a space for dialogue with one another, regardless of religious affiliation. In addition, the Arab Renaissance sowed the seeds of nationalist ideas, in line with the rise of nationalism in 19th century Europe, and in some of its trends it advocated the separation of state and religion.

12. The Arab Renaissance not only focused on education and enlightenment but also had a political dimension. The Renaissance mind retains the seeds of a social and political project, emanating from the confidence its pioneers had placed in reason and reason's ability to manage the affairs of a diverse society. The point, here, is that **reason represents what is general and common among human beings**. The state cannot be built on particularities, such as religion, race, or colour, but rather on what humanity has in common. **This principle is the backbone of the modern democratic state and the foundation of the idea of citizenship**. Many of the Renaissance pioneers saw this principle as the golden rule that can help society advance and lay the foundations for a fairer political practice.

13. Christian thinkers assumed a leading role in the Arab Renaissance.

This may be because, more than anyone else, they were able to benefit from the schools established by Christian missions and local Churches. Some strove to find common ground with Muslims, irrespective of religious identity (cf. para. 9), by taking reason seriously and emphasizing their common culture, founded on the Arabic language. However, the Renaissance was not a Christian project, although Christians played a leading role in it: it was an Arab project, founded

by Christians, Muslims, Jews, and non-religious Arabic speakers, in other words, by all those who believed that they belonged to a common Arab culture.

14. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the experience of our societies has proved that **the political project emanating from the Renaissance did not bear its desired fruits**. In part, this may be because some Muslims felt that this project was inspired by Western values, being rooted, in particular, in European modernity, and that this modernity, in the final analysis, was shaped outside the Islamic *ummah* (nation), despite the importance of Islamic factors in its emergence. This is clearly the view of the theorists of the Islamic awakening (or Islamic revival), who propose an alternative political model, derived, in one way or another, from Islam. Alongside this is the failure of most of the states established in our region to set up a true democratic model, especially after the Balfour declaration, favouring a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine, and the creation of the state of Israel after the British and French Mandates ended. Moreover, some rulers in these states took advantage of the Palestinian *Nakba* (1948) and the ensuing conflicts to impose overt or covert dictatorships and intellectual and political repression, under the pretext that fighting the Zionist entity required this, even at the price of personal freedom (cf. para. 9).

15. The failure of societies in the Middle East to embrace the project of modernity expressed by the Renaissance, and to formulate it in a way appropriate to their particularities, **led these societies to oscillate between traditional and modern values**. This is often reflected in the way these societies deal with some issues emerging from post-modernity, either with a pre-modernity mentality or in excessive recourse to such pre-modern elements as a metaphysical mentality. This fluctuation is exacerbated by the still relatively limited contribution of members of our societies to the contemporary intellectual and scientific worlds.

16. Attachment to particular traditions, legacies, and customs in the Middle East often carries religious, sectarian, ethnic, national, or tribal overtones,

sometimes causing our societies to drift into fanaticism and even extremism. One of the most dangerous current trends is a form of religious extremism that can take so a violent turn as to attempt to obliterate other identities (cf. para. 9). While political Islam in its extreme forms is seen today as a breeding ground for religiously-based violence, **it is essential to underline that violence is not inherent in Islam, nor in political Islam as a whole, nor exclusively in religion. It is rather, in the first place, an anthropological and social phenomenon, often linked to a closed, exclusive, and arrogant discourse about identity.**

17. Middle Eastern societies, like other societies elsewhere, are part of the rise in globalization over the last decades. In urban areas especially, this is seen in a great deal of standardization of food, drink, and clothing. **Add to this the ability provided by modern means of communication to communicate almost instantaneously.** Such media played an active role in the uprisings of the Arab Spring (cf. para. 20-21), by documenting the popular movements and spreading news about them near and far. While globalization often fosters human communication by opening up unprecedented horizons, it is not immune from creating confusion. **Globalization fosters and deepens human attachment to devices and machines, which may endanger our ability to establish genuine relationships with people around us,** in a way that overcomes excessive dependence on communication technologies.

18. Our globalized world is characterized by an intensified economic interconnection between countries and the emergence of globalized economic structures. Economic considerations play a growing role in state policymaking, sometimes at the expense of solid moral systems, notably the UN *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). Also growing is the rift between the states that have produced our digital civilization and those that simply consume digital technology. **Societies in the Middle East, where the culture of consumption prevails, often find themselves victims of economic globalization,** and of the conditions imposed on states that cannot keep up with it, given their marginal role in production and marketing.

19. The strong tendency towards universalization associated with globalization often leads to a reaction overemphasizing particularity and narrow identity. Polarization is not limited to identity, however, but is a general feature of globalized life. In the Middle East, it usually takes the form of **tension between the intensification of religious feeling** on one hand, **and the rise of religious indifference and lack of trust in religion** on the other, down to a “new” atheism among some people, especially the young (cf. para. 54).

Transformations of the Arab Spring

20. December 2010 saw the outbreak of the Arab Spring, an event of great significance for our region, as it exposed the decades-long accumulation of political disease, economic challenges, and cultural problems. The protests uncovered the gap between rulers and peoples and proved that the existing political regimes have lost their legitimacy, because legitimacy can stem only from the citizens’ satisfaction with the politicians’ performance. Within the demand for a political system that people wanted to be truly democratic, the slogans raised by the popular movements revealed an interplay between the longing for social justice and the desire for civil rights, especially freedom. These movements expressed themselves in unconventional ways and patterns and managed to transcend the barriers of religion, confession, race, gender, and the generational divide. They rose up against established economic models, called for overcoming ready-made prescriptions for political reform, and questioned the ability of traditional parties to change. This was coupled with an obvious expansion of civil society, which played a significant role not only in keeping pace with the popular protests, but also in stimulating intellectual and conceptual debate about the system of values and social and economic issues.

21. Citizenship, both as a concept and as a value, spearheaded the Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and, later on, in Iraq and Lebanon. Popular movements showed that the citizens’ rights had been violated and infringed for decades, until this deviant situation turned into the norm, often

based on arguments such as religion, confession, race, and region. Hence, the uprisings challenged the concepts of minority and majority in the name of a citizenship based on individual rights, and called for citizenship to be at the centre of political practice and a beacon for political and social reform.

22. Young people, both male and female, played a central role in the uprisings of the Arab Spring. They took the helm in several countries. The uprisings showed that youth are suffering from an acute crisis, the main aspects of which lie in unemployment and political exclusion, and that **young people are indeed looking forward to radical political and social change**. They prompted a deep reflection on youth issues and on how best to involve youth in family life, religious community, and public affairs. Increased attention was also paid to women's issues through the pursuit of greater justice in allocating resources and opportunities and ensuring greater protection from exploitation and extortion. The popular revolutions underlined the risk of ignoring young people's issues and the need to listen to their voice but also the failure of religious institutions, in many cases, to understand the changes in the lives of this age group as a result of globalization. Young people are divided in their attitudes towards religious institutions. Some feel alienated from or rejected by the institutions. Others remain attached to them yet are re-considering this attachment by seeking more freedom. Others still are very much attached to the religious institutions as a moral authority and a major source of personal security.

23. The Arab Spring uprisings carried a considerable potential for change, even though, in some countries, they were accused of not being able to develop a comprehensive nationwide project for modernization. Yet their potential may have been one of the main reasons that drove dominant political forces, the usual beneficiaries of the *status quo*, to try to circumvent these popular movements, demonize them, and hold them responsible for the accompanying unrest, sometimes also seeking to enmesh them in traditional political conflict. However, **these uprisings, despite the attempts to paralyze and neutralize them, were the starting point for new ways of looking at the relationship between citizenship and other**

elements of identity such as religion, confession, race, and colour, based on citizenship as an umbrella that acknowledges, embraces, and respects differences (cf. para. 12). In this framework, meaningful terms were evoked such as “unity in diversity” (Egypt) or “management of diversity” (Lebanon). These intellectual dynamics stirred up waters that had been stagnant for many years and challenged the tendency in our region to restrict the concept of citizenship to the benefit of narrow identities.

24. Despite these positive aspects, the Arab Spring revolutions have so far not yet established true democratic political systems in the Middle East. While some countries were able to launch political change and adopt new constitutions, in some others, the old regimes that had provoked such revolts were able to reproduce themselves, or defend their survival with ferocity. **It is not unusual for the peoples of our region to find themselves forced to choose between the police state and the state of freedoms.** In addition, many political forces took advantage of the Arab Spring uprisings to further fuel terrorism and transform our region into a scene of conflict between the Sunni and Shiite axes (cf. para. 8).

Environment and Health

25. The current challenging battle of humankind against the Covid-19 pandemic is no accident. It is rather a harsh accounting for major crimes committed against the planet, its resources, and its natural balance. The outbreak of the virus came as a warning to people everywhere to wake up, give due respect to life, nature, and environmental health, and to take seriously the call to be worthy of the planet we are living on. Decades of inappropriate practices and reckless human habits have devastated large parts of the Earth. The very existence of humankind is threatened unless we change our behaviour radically, consciously, and systematically and put an end to the harm we are causing to the planet. Ecological and climate change is not inevitable but is closely related to human choices, policies and political decisions.

26. In this era of globalization, the policies of neoliberal capitalism, coupled with the exploitation of nature and the environment, have had disastrous consequences. **The entanglement of globalized capitalism and eco-colonialism**, which expresses itself in deforestation, commercialization of wild and marine life, excessive dependence on industrialization, and the resulting environmental pollution, including the greenhouse effect and gas emissions, has destroyed the global climate, damaged the Earth's atmosphere, upset the ecological balance, and increased epidemiological threats. **The Middle East, in particular, suffers the repercussions of this entanglement due to wars, the failure of the states to abide by environmental criteria, and the spread of recklessness, lack of awareness, and corruption.**

27. The privatization of the healthcare sectors and the reduction of investment in scientific and epidemiological research helped to weaken preventive and curative public health systems in many regions of the world, while lowering people's confidence in them. The pandemic uncovered the confusion in healthcare and embarrassed countries that found themselves inadequately equipped to manage an emergency on this scale. Often, the response in these countries was even of a security and political nature, to the detriment of the health aspect. We see this **in a number of Middle Eastern countries**, where existing institutions, such as the ministries of health and social development, were bypassed by the formation of emergency committees, often under the supervision of security services, leading to **a conflation between concerns about public health and security measures.** Some governments even resorted to new monitoring tools that infringed public and private liberties and violated human rights.

28. Given the pressure of narrow economic interests, the social inequity, and the inadequacy of the governments' response to the crises that resulted from curfews and full lockdowns, the rapid spread of the virus had disastrous repercussions on the poorest among us. **The pandemic has revealed the fragility of the economic paradigm adopted in some countries of our region:** an economy based on services and external loans, with a concomitant

marginalization of the productive sectors, such as agriculture and industry (cf. para. 18), the neglect of education and health, the accumulation of domestic public debt, and increased unemployment.

29. The pandemic revealed the fragility of the education system in most countries in the Middle East. Countries blithely resorted to digital teaching, even though many families do not possess the necessary electronic tools, such as computers and internet access. The pandemic also revealed the limitations of public education: its inability to keep abreast with development, its relationship with social differences, and its promotion of unequal opportunities between rich and poor. Education in our region is often the victim of a double teaching system (day and night) that inhibits progress for students. It also suffers from a lack of infrastructure, human and financial resources, a neglect of the technical arena, and incompatibility with the needs of society.

II. Ecclesiastical and Theological Context

Diversity

30. Churches in the Middle East trace their origins back to the apostolic era. The faith of these Churches is founded on the common tradition of the universal Church, especially on the Scriptures as the benchmark and the most accurate expression of the deposit of faith that Churches must constantly preserve with the help of the Holy Spirit, through *kerygma* (preaching and teaching), liturgy, and service in all its forms. **A distinction must be made, however, between the content of the deposit of faith on one hand, and ways of expressing it on the other.** The former remains unchanged, while the latter adapts to changing contexts and the expectations, needs, and questions of the faithful at different times and in different places.

31. Since their birth, the Churches of the Middle East have been living with diversity. The early Christian centuries testify to the many and various ways in

which the deposit of faith handed on to the Churches by the early witnesses was expressed, given our differences in language, culture, and human interaction. The preaching of the gospel gave birth to deep-seated traditions that nurtured the faithful, who passed them on from generation to generation. Our patristic, liturgical, literary, spiritual, canonical, artistic, and linguistic heritage still attests to this diversity. We refer for example, to the rich Antiochian tradition with its Greek, Aramaic, and Syriac roots, as well as its theological schools and close relationship with the Syriac and Cappadocian Fathers (relating to Cappadocia in Asia Minor); the Alexandrian tradition with its Greek and Coptic branches, its theological school, and its rich cultural and spiritual heritage; the Armenian tradition and its unique legacy. Nor should we forget the Roman Catholic tradition and the local Evangelical heritage with its roots in the 16th century Reformation. Although the situation of every Church in the Middle East differs, taking account of their circumstances of time and space, all aim to proclaim the one gospel “here and now”, in fulfilment of their call and mission.

32. Since the 17th century, **Western missions**, whether Latin (Roman Catholic) or those associated with the Reformation, **have had a significant impact on the emergence of Eastern Catholic Churches as well as Churches belonging to the Evangelical heritage.** Some of these Churches are traditional, while others follow a “free system”. **In the past, the emergence of these Churches was seen as problematic**, since it came at the expense of the historic Churches; **nowadays a considerable number of Christians in the Middle East tend to appreciate these Churches**, because of the unique role each plays and because their presence evokes the spirit of diversity that has marked Christianity since ancient times. In this context, note also that the schools, universities, medical and social centres founded by Western missionaries strengthened the role of Churches in their societies and contributed, directly or indirectly, to the rise of the Arab Renaissance (cf. para. 10-13).

33. Following the rise of Islam, Christians in the Middle East played a pioneering cultural role by translating the sciences of their time, especially philosophy and medicine, from Greek and Syriac to Arabic, and engaging in

philosophical and theological debates with Muslim scholars and theologians. They made Arabic a language able to accommodate all branches of knowledge by coining philosophical, theological, and scientific terms. The Christian heritage preserved in Arabic is a common legacy for all Churches in the Middle East, considering the profound role of the Arabic language and Arab culture in our common witness (cf. para. 13).

Togetherness

34. Most of the historical Churches of the Middle East are either patriarchal or synodal. Both systems are inspired by the idea of synodality, which, in its original meaning, refers to communion and walking together. Synodality is theologically rooted in God accompanying God's people and walking with them throughout history, as the Scriptures testify. The Church is the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12), the new people of God are walking towards his kingdom, and baptized believers are the core of this people. As for deacons, priests, and bishops, the essence of their ministry lies in caring for the people of God (Acts 20:28) and serving this people as faithful stewards (Luke 12:42) who will be held accountable before the throne of Christ the just judge. Synodality must first be lived within each Church, then among the Churches, and finally in communion with the world. It hinges on the interaction of all the members in the one body, despite their diversity, so that the body can grow in a proper and harmonious manner (1 Corinthians 12). Hence, respect for the diverse talents of the people of God and an associated appreciation of consultation lie at the heart of synodality. Yet, unfortunately, **in our Churches today we often see the people of God – especially women and youth – marginalized in major decisions. We often see the growth of an authoritarian spirit, which obliterates shared responsibility, balanced governance, and the spirit of accountability** between the people and their pastors. It is not uncommon to see forms of corruption eroding church institutions, especially in the health and education sectors, which inevitably leads to the decline of their role in spreading the spirit of the Gospel and Christian values.

35. The Christian presence in the Middle East is shaped by the presence of all believers regardless of their different ecclesiastical, ethnic, and national affiliations. The communion of the Churches constitutes the presence of the Church of Christ “here and now”, as the Church rooted in this region’s geography and history and the civilization of its peoples. Therefore, **ecumenical togetherness, and the pursuit of the visible unity of the Churches, do not concern only some theologians or pastors; it is a foundational issue related to our common witness to Christ, the divine call to live in holiness, and the mission of the one Church in the service of human beings. The way to fulfil this witness, this call, and this mission is the way of synodality,** which the Lord desired as a path for our Churches. Either we stay together, or we gradually fade away, though this ‘staying together’ does not imply any kind of alignment over against any other religious, social, or political group. The ecumenical imperative requires an effort to transition from sectarianism to being Church, the acceptance of diversity and openness to others, moving away from isolation and the narrow pursuit of self-interest. It also requires acceptance of the challenge to restore visible unity, since the controversies and divisions that have affected the Churches throughout the ages are still weakening our mission today.

36. The global ecumenical movement has contributed to the growth of an ecumenical spirit in the Middle East. **The Holy Spirit inspired the Churches of this region to establish the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC, 1974) as a forum and a platform for encounter, acquaintance, dialogue, and cooperation towards fulfilling their united witness to the resurrected Christ, in the hope of restoring full communion.** Today, the MECC includes all the historical Churches except the Assyrian Apostolic Church. Its creation opened a new chapter in relations among the Churches. It encouraged them to a deeper rapprochement, to face common challenges together, and to interact more profoundly with their communities. It also enabled them to strive to reject the kind of conflict, competition, and reluctance that they had known throughout their history. Indeed, this history has known periods of closedness and isolation, mainly because of psychological factors in which tribal mentality,

theories of superiority and complexes about persecution prevailed over the love of God that casts out fear (1 John 4:18). However, **in spite of the ecumenical progress in recent decades, Churches still find difficulties in dealing with one another on the basis of creative ideas and clear and structured programmes** to enable them to highlight their common spiritual ecclesial identity and engage together with greater strength in achieving visible unity. This was reflected in the severe crisis the MECC experienced a decade ago, which almost destroyed it. Today, the MECC is seeking to make a fresh start and to recover the role that has historically distinguished it.

37. Since its emergence in the seventh century AD, Islam has been an integral part of the reality of Christians in the Middle East. Most Christians in our region live within societies permeated by Islam, and Islam has become an intrinsic factor in preaching the Gospel. Although Christian-Muslim relations have been generally marked by a positive dynamic expressed in coexistence and in the values of love, brotherhood/sisterhood and cooperation – by what is usually called the dialogue of life – they have also gone through bad times dominated by mutual hatred, conflict, and sometimes persecution. Precipitating causes include the imbalance of political power, the resort to excessive force, the psychology of fear, narrow sectarian calculations, and the dominance of theological discourse that undermines the other and seeks to deny the legitimacy of the other’s religion. **Most Christians today believe that, when dealing with Islam and with Muslims, we must be driven by the principles of togetherness, rapprochement, and brotherhood/sisterhood, as well as by the dialogue of life and intellectual dialogue as a way of living together.** In doing so, we are inspired by the positive experiences of our history, while drawing lessons from negative experiences to avoid their re-emergence.

38. We must admit that sometimes discussion in Churches today is characterized by double standards when dealing with other Churches and with non-Christian religions, which goes against the spirit of togetherness. What is said in private is often the opposite of what is said in public, contradicting the Lord’s command: “Let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your

'No' be 'No'" (Matthew 5:37). Some church institutions fall into doublespeak. Seeking to cultivate the West and obtain assistance from some American and European Christian groups, they adopt ideas that militate against coexistence, exaggerate the suffering of Christians, and promote the theory of systematic persecution by Muslims. At the same time, they deliver a different discourse before Muslims, commending them for "protecting" Christians, and calling for community and coexistence. These double standards can also be detected in ways of speaking that denounce sectarianism, while calling for the preservation of sectarian privileges or promoting sectarianism as a necessity towards the other.

39. The relationship between Christianity and Judaism hinges on a common spiritual legacy based on the Bible, notably what we know as the Old Testament. Over time, the relationship between the faithful of the two religions has had its ups and downs, depending on geographical and historical contexts. In the Middle East it was generally peaceful, and marked by togetherness, until the establishment of the state of Israel (1948). Relations between members of the two religions were distorted by the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the conflation of Judaism, Zionism and the state of Israel. The interaction between Jews and Christians in our region deteriorated, giving way to enmity emanating from feelings of injustice and fear. In this context, we refer to the document *A Moment of Truth* (2009), launched by Palestinian Christians, and commend its insistence that justice is the way to reconciliation and a lasting peace.

Theological and Spiritual Formation

40. The Churches in the Middle East have founded prestigious institutes and university colleges to provide ministers with a humanistic, theological and ecumenical education, aimed at building the Church as the body of Christ and witnessing to the Gospel in this region of the world. In these institutions, students become acquainted with the heritage of their own

Church and other Churches following modern critical curricula; they live the life of the Church in worship and liturgy; and they learn how to integrate the values of love, reconciliation, dialogue and peacebuilding in their own personal development. These institutes and colleges have also opened their doors to lay believers, women and men, who aspire to acquire an in-depth education about the faith or believe that the Lord has called them to engage in church service. These colleges and institutes prepare teachers of catechism for schools and parishes, in cooperation with some educational centres established specifically for this purpose.

41. In the field of theological education, the Association of Theological Institutes in the Middle East (1967) played a prominent role in opening up prospects of cooperation between educational theological institutions. The Association currently consists of eighteen members from Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. It cooperates closely with the Middle East Council of Churches, notably with its Department of Theological Affairs and Ecumenical Relations. The work of the Association is based on personal and theological interaction, common prayer, the exchange of educational and academic experience, reflecting together about the future of the Christian presence in the East, relationships with non-Christians and shared witness in a diverse society. **In the last decade, the Association has faced a number of structural and administrative difficulties that have prevented it from pursuing its objectives.**

42. In the last three decades, in the light of wars, crises, migration and displacement, as well as the impact on our societies of global experiences and culture, our Churches have become more aware of their responsibility to educate the faithful and to ensure their spiritual development. This renewed educational endeavour has had a particular impact on youth and apostolic movements, prayer groups and religious organizations, with media channels and social media playing a prominent role, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some recent Church documents have augmented this educational effort, encouraging, embracing, and providing appropriate tools.

43. Beyond the family context, schools are the ideal location for education at the human, community and religious levels. Churches, therefore, pay great attention to them, especially since the beginning of the modern era. Church schools have spared no effort in developing their mission, strengthening their capacities and improving their programmes. **At a meeting between a number of Orthodox patriarchs and the Council of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East (1996), a common Christian education project was adopted.** A series of books were written by a commission appointed by the Churches, which turned the curriculum into a reality. Yet, in Lebanon, some have treated these books cautiously, preferring to cling to their own Church's legacy and language. Churches in Palestine have also produced an ecumenical curriculum for Christian education that has been adopted in all educational institutions since 2000.

The Problem of Existence

44. The number of Christians in the Middle East, relative to the population as a whole, has steadily decreased since the end of the 19th century. In contrast, there is a growing Christian presence in the countries of the Arab Gulf. The primary reasons for this decrease are the recurrent wars that provoked the emigration of millions of people, as well as economic hardship, social injustice and unemployment, especially among the youth who are forced today to search for work opportunities abroad. In addition, the Middle East is witnessing an absence of democracy on all levels, a lack of respect for human rights, and political, economic and social instability, all of which generates a feeling of despair, frustration and shattered hopes in large segments of society, including Christians.

45. The emigration of Christians, which has intensified in recent decades, is not a direct response to the rise of violent Islamic fundamentalist movements, but rather a parallel movement. Yet the growth of these movements, as well as their efforts to islamize a number of

our societies, reminds many Christians of the time when they were living (as ‘dhimmis’) under the protection of Muslims and intensifies the perception of being a threatened minority, fearful of dissolution and withering away. This perception is aggravated when some Churches are linked in their identity to a particular ethnicity, which sometimes results in greater isolation. This is often then exploited to seek external protection, further reinforcing the feeling of being a minority. **The absence of genuine democracies, able to guarantee and protect the rights of their citizens and preserve diversity, leads many people to seek refuge in their confessional identity. That, in turn, increases the power of the concept of the religious bloc at the expense of the individual.** This tragic reality is exacerbated when the language used by the religious establishment, in many cases, is still far from the daily reality, the suffering and the fears of local Christians; it rarely speaks to the real existential dilemmas they face (cf. para. 47-48).

46. In addition to voluntary migration, the Middle East’s political, military, security, economic and social crises have created displacement and waves of refugees with consequences for the Christian presence. The stalemate in the situation of the Palestinian refugees that has persisted since the *Nakba* of 1948, the Iraqi refugee crisis and its humanitarian consequences since 2003, as well as the repercussions relating to the Syrian refugees since 2011, are prominent factors here. In these three cases there is also a parallel crisis of internal displacement. The demographic segmentation of Lebanon during the civil war (1975-1990) was replicated on a larger scale in Syria and Iraq. The continuous migration of both Christians and non-Christians from these particular countries should be seen as a different form of seeking refuge.

Churches and Society

47. Churches in the Middle East are not immune to the rapid changes going on in globalized societies. Indeed, they are trying to keep up with this change by getting involved in technologies for communication and using the

huge potential of such technologies to spread the Gospel. **Yet the ability of the church discourse to spread so rapidly reveals the deep rift that exists today between a society where traditional religious values are no longer at the forefront and Churches that often cling to rules and regulations from bygone times**, promoting a discourse that does not relate to the reality and requirements of society today. It is not uncommon for church public statements explicitly or tacitly to defend traditional social structures that are no longer viable or intellectual premises derived from a sectarian mindset that has become deeply questionable. In spite of the requirements of Christian witness, some theologians reject renewal, preferring isolation, and cling to a non-critical approach in the interpretation of the Bible and the heritage of the Church. With few exceptions, the Churches lack the courage to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17), prophecy and renewal, in taking up the issues of societies in the Middle East and engaging responsibly and effectively in a required process of change.

48. One of the most striking features of this rift is, perhaps, the often-observed dichotomy between the official institution of the Church and the youth in society. **While young people strive for self-realization, we believe that the institution of the Church often repeats a form of language that does not respond to the major crises faced by the youth**, nor is it consistent with their aspirations for a democratic society that believes profoundly in individual freedom and equality, based on pluralism, dialogue, acceptance of differences, openness to culture in its broad sense, and learning from its experiences and achievements. It is noticeable that youth often feel alienated in the Churches to which they belong. They need people who can engage with them and help them foster a church identity in which dialogue prevails over monologue and where shared decision-making is preferred to unilateral diktat (cf. para. 22).

49. There is a spirit of rivalry in some church institutions. They seek to dissociate themselves from the larger Christian community. This sometimes happens even within the same Church or between Churches that are united by faith, rather than seeking solidarity, synergy and integration. In their rivalry,

these institutions often forget their *raison d'être*, namely providing a free service according to the saying of the Lord “Freely you received, so freely give” (Matthew 10:8). **With such behaviour, they resemble, in their priorities and standards, those civil commercial institutions that aim only at a quick profit.** This, if anything, demonstrates the lack of apostolic spirit, planning, common vision, and the principle of accountability and fair accountancy.

50. Excessive popular piety and occult beliefs are growing in our Churches today, as a result of wars, pandemics and the ensuing disorientation, which shows that large segments of the faithful have lost confidence in their faith and the awareness, patience and hope it requires. They have drifted towards the illusions of magical powers (cf. 1 Timothy 4:7) that promise a God who intervenes in the world in the kind of resounding intervention that breaks the rules of nature to automatically meet their needs, save them from their sufferings, eliminate their enemies, heal them from their diseases, and repair what has been corrupted by politicians. Far from being a healthy expression of deep faith, this undermines a genuine Christian identity and exposes a weakness in Church leadership and a failure in Christian education and spiritual growth.

51. Churches are not political institutions as such, but along with their leadership and people they form an integral part of the societies in which they live. Thus, they are concerned with public issues, especially since their mission aims at ensuring the happiness of human beings so that they may have abundant life (John 10:10). However, **the relationship between the official Church institution and the state or political power is often dominated by personal and factional interests, a minority mentality, and a pursuit of narrow sectarian gains at the expense of ethical values and social cohesion.** It is too common for Churches today to lack prophetic courage and be unwilling to speak truth to power. They keep silent or turn a blind eye to practices that infringe on human freedom and dignity (cf. para. 47-48).

52. As we mentioned above, Christians played a pioneering role in developing Arab civilization after the rise of Islam (cf. para. 33) and during the Renaissance

movement of the 19th and 20th centuries (cf. para. 13). Thus, Christians assumed roles of great importance in education, healthcare, politics, economics and more. Yet, **it appears today that the Christian role is declining due to their decreasing numbers, in addition to the ability of others, notably Muslims, to get by without “their services”.** But this decline is often accompanied by exaggerated speech about the importance of the Christian role. By dwelling on the roles they played in the past, some Christians seem to fall into the trap of not constructively shaping their present and future.

Chapter Two

Challenges of the Present and Stakes of the Future

A New World That Has Not Yet Been Shaped

53. During the past ten years, societies in the Middle East have seen profound changes linked to the uprisings of the Arab Spring (cf. para. 20-24). These changes have generated theological, cultural, social and political challenges appealing to the conscience of our peoples and Churches and prompting us to reflect on their implications. **What we see today is a reshaping of this region; while the past, proving unable to respond to social and political challenges, led to an explosion, the new has yet to form its shape.** Certainly, authoritarian regimes, tribal mentalities, sectarianism, and family feudalism have negatively affected our societies and their institutions. Regardless of its political success or failure, the Arab Spring challenged the institutions – especially religious ones – seen as building-blocks of society by introducing a new narrative, radically different from what was known during the last century. Note also a deep willingness, mainly among the youth, who were very much part of these uprisings, to hold to account the authoritarian structures, especially those patriarchal masculinized structures that controlled our communities for centuries and to a large extent still do so. One of the most prominent components of this willingness is the striking female presence in the Arab Spring uprisings and their active contribution.

54. **The tendency to discredit social structures and institutions by young people was accompanied by a noticeable increase in religious indifference and criticism of religious authority. That led in some cases to atheism,** even though this atheism currently is not linked to a philosophical ideology that expresses itself politically, as was the case with Marxism in the last century until the fall of the Soviet Union (1989). The increase in these phenomena among

some young people in our region, without any direct political motivation, exposes the shallowness of the current religious discourse in general and the distrust of a large number of young people in the institution of religion as well as the way it responds to public affairs. These new trends, along with the uprisings, should not be met with disapproval and marginalization but should prompt a renewal of religious language and provoke a paradigm shift in how we see the linkage between religion and public affairs and the traditional patterns adopted for managing them.

55. These phenomena, which we have observed in the societies of the Middle East, are undoubtedly connected with wider globalization, with its intrinsic tendency to favour the new over the old and the changeable over the constant. This tendency appears, for example, in the way people deal with communication technologies, as they repeatedly seek to replace their old devices with new ones. Such behaviour affects not only the technical aspect of our lives, but the intellectual and moral aspects as well. It results in a wary and suspicious attitude towards all that is related to the past, especially inherited values that still burden our societies with their thought patterns and behaviour codes. Our societies have suffered recently from many value-relevant crises that must be examined and their implications carefully reviewed. Favouring the changeable over the constant, which includes questioning various components of the value system, becomes an invitation to religious thought to reconsider the relationship between the constant and the changeable in the body of doctrine, and also to non-religious thought to have a deeper insight into the underlying criteria of values and behaviour.

Towards a New Social Contract

56. Christians in the Middle East are dealing today with a complex reality in witnessing to their faith in the public sphere and the effectiveness of this witness in taking part in governance. This reality exposes them to two main traps that they need to avoid: the first concerns their demographic

decrease both numerically and geographically, which prompts them to adhere to totalitarian ideologies, authoritarian regimes, power surpluses, and alliances with other minorities with whom they have intersecting interests. The second lies in thinking that if they are able to occupy positions of influence, and acquire benefits, and authoritarian protections, this can ensure the continuity and the value of their presence in the Middle East, even if this runs against their fundamental historical principles in defending freedom, human rights, and coexistence based on the logic of citizenship and the kind of solidarity this requires with the faithful of other religions and those professing secular values.

57. Christian discourse in the Middle East is facing today the challenge of deconstructing a minority complex, in which internal and external protection is invoked, and intensifying the search for ways to activate the cultural contribution of Christians. They should not wallow in the search for positions of influence, depicting the other as a source of fear. That would destroy the essence and the depth of their choices, as they were revealed in their illustrious history (cf. para. 10-14).

58. Freedom of conscience, the crown of all freedoms, is a major challenge in the Middle East and an inalienable, sacred right. It is rooted in the dignity of the person, regardless of origin, religious affiliation, or political choice, as evidenced by the sacred books that tells us that God created humans in his own image (Genesis 1:27) and we are God's successors on earth (Al-Baqarah 30). Hence the importance of the transition from the idea of tolerance to that of freedom of conscience, which allows us all to live freely according to our options and convictions.

59. Islam in most countries of the Middle East is a source of legislation. This poses a structural challenge to the principle of equality among members of the same society, regardless of their cultural, religious, ethnic and linguistic affiliations. Hence, **the Christians of the Middle East are required, along with our Muslim brothers and sisters, and our other partners, to delve deep into building a civil state where citizenship can be applied without**

discrimination or exception. This challenge is crucial in confronting extremism, exclusion, isolation, and self-isolation and in building civil states marked by the good management of diversity. This challenge seems more pertinent and pressing today, after Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed Al-Tayeb, signed the *Document on Human Fraternity* in Abu Dhabi (2019), and the expansion of this dynamic to include the Shiite authority in Najaf, the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who was visited by Pope Francis (2021) in a move of great religious and political significance. The Marrakesh Declaration (2017) and the Mecca Document (2019) are also important in this context.

60. The concept of the civil state remains, to this day, stuck between an excessive form of secularism, with what it may bear of fusion and amalgamation, and a failure to transcend constitutions that rely on religion as a source of legislation. In both cases, serious errors are generated; **the civil state is neither an ideological structure that aims to deconstruct the minority-majority formula**, as it seemed to some advocates of Arab and Syrian nationalisms (cf. para. 9), **nor a mere solution to the dilemma of minority submission to majorities. It is, above all, a challenge to build a modern and constitutional state that can provide a model for managing diversity and remains equidistant from all religions.**

61. **Establishing a civil state should go hand in hand with dismantling the association between the religious and doctrinal, on one hand, and the public sphere, on the other, by transforming the former into a moral compass, rather than an interference in the management of public affairs.** Therefore, it is extremely important to challenge the identification between religion in its nomocratic aspect and law, on the basis of the civil character of the state, constitution, and laws. Religious institutions should set limits to their contiguity with the constitution and the laws and not exceed these limits unless they feel that there is a deviation from the ethical compass, knowing that they must abide by the imperatives of human dignity, peace of the society, recognition of the right to difference and upholding freedom. Hence, **the civil**

state is closely linked to establishing the foundations for societies with mentalities and modes of behaviour that do not fear the implementation of civil status laws on an open and secular basis that confirms the state's neutrality towards religions. This is the challenge: whether it is possible to align the civil nature of the state and its country-specific aspects in the Middle East with the Arab culture of the society and other aspects of identity intimately linked to this culture.

62. The cultural challenge faced by Christians in the Middle East, to which we need to respond together with our brothers and sisters from all faiths and intellectual backgrounds – the Muslims in particular – lies in reinventing Arabism as a cultural space and an inclusive cultural concept, away from a forced, ideological Arabization that contradicts the spirit of cultural openness. Arabism could then become enlightened by freedom, human rights, democracy, social justice, and economic integrity, founded on the basis of citizenship that embraces diversity, rejects exclusion, and fosters dialogue. Christians are not newcomers to the Arab environment, nor strangers in it. They have contributed to building the Arab civilization (cf. para. 13 and 33) and have lived through its successes and setbacks, sowing in its soil the richness inherited from the natural, historical, and political geography to which they belonged, as well as their enriching cultural characteristics, whether Aramaic, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian or Greek. Due to misleading ambiguities that linked Arabism as a cultural concept to Islam and to its exploitation by totalitarian regimes, this concept was distorted and Christians came to be regarded as a Western import, even though this is rejected by many Muslims themselves as well as by political sociologists. Some Christian discourses and actions in critical historical periods helped to spread such distortions. It was as if the extremists claiming a monopoly on Arabism and those disavowing and rejecting it came together in an objective alliance.

63. Today, many Christians in the Middle East live under the pressure of what might be called a “role crisis”. While renowned Christian figures played leading roles in thought, culture, politics, education and health, in the period

of the Arab Renaissance and beyond (cf. para. 13 and 33), we rarely find in their writings any theoretical discussion of the “Christian role”. Most of them did not understand their Christian identity, whether religious in a narrow sense or cultural in the broad sense, as affiliating them to a monolithic social bloc. Yet today, after the decline in many of the roles that Christians used to play, we hear a lot of theorizing about the “Christian role” and its importance, suggesting that the decline of this role calls for a puffed-up discourse about it (cf. para. 52). **Christians are therefore invited not to understand themselves as a monolithic bloc that has to play a real or virtual role in order to legitimate its existence for themselves or others, but as a group of citizens, men and women, who, together with others, contribute to the common good through the multiple roles they play – in the first place as individuals – without insisting on owning these roles or claiming a monopoly on them.**

64. In the midst of the tumultuous demographic context, marked particularly by migration and displacement, in which Christians find themselves – not alone, but with their fellow citizens – **the Middle East faces three challenges: first, voiding geography of its social, historical, cultural and religious fabric; second, the emergence of defective national identities; and third, the repercussions of migration and refugees on the host countries.** These challenges have deepened the dilemma of preserving diversity in the region. We face a growing need to harmonize the specificities of refugee, displaced and migrant demographic blocs and the constituent features of their hosting societies. We need a thorough debate on how to provide resources for resilience for both and to frame the social transformations imposed by this new reality.

Synodality and Its Stakes

65. Churches in the Middle East are facing the challenge of a transition from the concept of sectarianism to the concept of the Church. While sectarianism seems to evoke the millet system in the Ottoman sultanate,

the concept of the Church is captured in the New Testament's language about communion (koinonia), which draws the members of the Church together (Acts 2:42; Philippians 2:2), based on the relationship of love between the persons (*hypostaseis*) of the Trinity as the source, essence and purpose of the Church (John 17). We cannot understand the Church unless we invoke this concept, which expresses the mystery of the Church in its original power, making it an ecumenical concept *par excellence*.

66. For God's salvific love to be shown to everyone, **the synodal spirit** (cf. para. 34) **must be strengthened among Church leaders and believers through common pastoral programmes and strategies, especially through the collegial management of the Church's affairs and resources, eschewing a clericalism that excludes others from decision-making.** This demands a sincere spiritual communion and participatory governance expressed in clear direction, coherent policies, consistent management and responsible decisions. Authority in the Church is never tyranny, but a service following the example of Christ (Mark 10:45) and a dynamic collective process (Acts 15:28) in which decisions must be made through discernment, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and with consultation, delegation, accountability and transparency. Positions in the Church are not a tool for personal, family, or partisan gain, but rather an instrument to serve the Church's mission in society to show forth God's love to every human being, regardless of religion, race, colour, gender, or national identity. A return to synodality also opens a way to reform our ecclesiastical life so that the structures of synodal bodies and their departments, such as councils, councils of patriarchs, bishops' conferences, and pastoral councils, can be renewed.

67. **Synodality is not just a matter of structures and institutions; it is, primarily, a spirit that enables each local Church to be inspired by its tradition and open up to other Churches seeking to actualize the Gospel in the reality of life.** This cannot be achieved without togetherness, communication, and the search for contemporary forms of joint action (cf. para. 34). This is why the Middle East Council of Churches (1974) was established,

to be an inclusive forum for Churches and a platform that embodies the fundamental elements of communion among them.

68. The position of youth in our Churches raises the issue of synodality in an acute form and challenges us to appreciate the spirit of togetherness.

Young people in our Churches want to live their faith in harmony with the conviction reached by modern and post-modern societies that values of equality, sharing and solidarity must be upheld. They often find a gap between these values and a culture of exclusion, lack of listening, and absence of consultation in the everyday life of the Church (cf. para. 48). Hence the need to involve the youth actively in all levels of church leadership, in line with the talents bestowed on them by the Holy Spirit.

69. The position of women in our Churches requires a radical change of mentality and practice, taking seriously the dignity of women, their unique value in the eyes of God, and the full equality of women and men (Gen 1:27), in addition to the concept of synodality, with its commitment to togetherness and consultation. A patriarchal masculinized system has imposed viewpoints in our Churches that contradict the position God wants for women. These viewpoints have been justified by social customs and traditions and entrenched through deviant interpretations of some biblical passages. **This is the moment for the Churches of the Middle East to free themselves from teachings, structures and practices that reduce women to second-class beings, contrary to the spirit of the Gospel (Galatians 3:28) and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.** In this context, note that in the last four years, the Evangelical Churches in Lebanon have taken the remarkable step of ordaining three women to the pastoral ministry.

The Culture of Human Brotherhood/Sisterhood

70. The ministry of Christians in the Middle East is inspired by biblical principles, above all by the idea of human brotherhood/sisterhood, which is

echoed in many passages in the Old and New Testaments. From the question of God to Cain: “The Lord said to Cain, Where is Abel your brother” (Genesis 4:9), to Christ’s call to us to love the neighbour, especially the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned, and to make this a norm for our love of Christ (Matthew 25:31-46), **the meaning of our Christian presence and mission lies in building a culture of community and unconditional love among human beings. In this way, we become a sign and instrument of God’s communion with creation.**

71. In the Christian life this culture of love is rooted in our baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, who washed the feet of his disciples (John 13:1-11) and gave himself for the life of the world. Christians are therefore required to wash the feet of others and give themselves for their sake, in the image of their Master and Saviour, who is their example and their ideal. Christians receive through baptism the gift of the Holy Spirit, which bestows on them all the spirit of priesthood and prophecy and makes them responsible for the world through witness and service. Thus, **Christians in the Middle East, together with believers of other religions, especially Muslims, and with those of good will, whatever their belief and intellectual orientation, are invited to live as brothers and sisters and uphold human dignity and freedom.**

Towards a New Theological Discourse

72. As we have already pointed out (cf. para. 47-48), it is vital that Christians in the Middle East today meet the challenge of renewing theological discourse. If the Bible is the word of God given to humans through human authors, then **the interpretation of the Bible, and hence the patristic legacy, requires the use of all available tools provided by modern human sciences**, such as history, archaeology, social sciences, linguistics, semantics, psychoanalysis and cultural anthropology. Historical-critical methodology, comparison with the texts of the Ancient East, literary criticism and the human sciences in general all allow believers to better understand the content of the divine word. They can

help to place it in its cultural context and move us away from fundamentalist readings that are heavily literal or fanatical, rejecting all scientific and critical engagement with the written text.

73. This need to understand biblical texts in the full thrust of their original meaning must be accompanied by an invitation to seek the best ways to actualize and interpret the Bible and the tradition in today's world, by learning how to distinguish between the deposit of faith as such, and how this deposit of faith should interact with the realities and contexts of our societies in the Middle East (cf. para. 30-31). **Such an actualization ensures that the reception of tradition in a continuously changing world is fertile, creative and non-repetitive**, in a way that allows theology to respond to the needs and aspirations of believers. This requires, among other things, an ecumenical approach that seeks to purify memory, recognizes the value of the theology of the other, and acquires a good knowledge of what ecumenical theological dialogues at all levels have already accomplished, including the distinction between what is fundamental in doctrine and the forms of expression that have been used throughout the ages. We need to respect the principle of the hierarchy of truths and pay special attention to the expressions of truth in the traditions of our different Churches, especially in liturgy, iconography, architecture, music and languages.

74. This actualization cannot succeed without the contextual theology we referred to in the introduction (cf. para. 3). **Contextual theology is characterized by taking social, economic and political developments seriously and using them as a starting-point for pondering on what God wants from us "here and now"**. This theology is not afraid of scrutinizing reality, no matter how unpalatable it is, nor does it hesitate to respond in words not unlike those of the biblical prophets. Justice, freedom and equality are among its most prominent watchwords. Indeed, inasmuch as it confronts public affairs and stresses the contextuality of exegesis while seeking also to be true to the integrity of the biblical text in its original thrust, contextual theology poses a major challenge to Churches that allow themselves to be dominated by a discourse that closes down exegesis and interpretation,

mummifies the word of faith, and transforms the Gospel into a rhetoric that runs away from reality (cf. para. 47).

75. Within the framework of this actualization, we need liturgical renewal and reform to complete what has been accomplished in the last fifty years in restoring and modernizing the rich legacy of the ancient Eastern traditions, in harmony with contemporary culture and the challenges of modernity. This applies in a special way to the ritual and the language in the liturgy in countries of the diaspora. Churches need to attune liturgies there to the cultures of the peoples and countries that have hosted Christians from the Middle East. Perhaps the most basic challenge lies in reconciling adaptation to local cultures and languages with preserving the spirit of the tradition, with its rich expression of styles and symbolic images.

76. A key requirement for renewing theological discourse in the framework of contextual theology is to move away from the culture of polemics and exclusion between Churches and other religions, especially Islam and Judaism, and to move towards the culture of dialogue and rapprochement. This shift cannot be achieved without openness to others, listening to them and accepting the truth of their faith as they present it, rather than seeking to undermine their faith or project our own concepts onto it. Dialogue should also tackle theological questions by developing new exegetical approaches that are critical, historically objective, and open to the methodologies of the modern human sciences. These approaches must also be able to consider crucial ethical and political issues, such as how to uphold human dignity and personal freedom, including freedom of conscience, opinion and expression.

77. One of the most important ways to renew theological discourse is to develop a critical and analytical viewpoint and to create opportunities for innovation and creativity for the present generation of young women and men, in line with the great gifts bestowed on them by the Holy Spirit, which too often seem to be hindered in the life of the Church (cf. para. 68). We need to reconsider our educational philosophy, submit it to critical analysis, and

raise new generations that do not blindly accept what they are told as absolute truth or hanker nostalgically for a vanished past but are willing to learn from the past in order to shape the present. We need new generations that are not caught in a net of prejudices but dare to think critically and creatively.

78. One of the most important challenges of the Christian educational curriculum is a renewed formation that understands and accepts those who are different from us in their human needs, physical, intellectual, moral or spiritual. **Christian educational institutions need to create a space for those who differ in their church or religious affiliation, so that they feel respected, accepted, loved and equal to others.** In this framework, we should not underestimate the challenge of openness to the human sciences and the need to educate a generation that values them, despite the serious questions they raise in some academic circles. In fact, these sciences provide an important corrective and a valuable way to confront the accelerating influence of technology and its impact on learning. They also give us methodological tools to understand the rapid changes currently experienced by individuals and communities alike.

79. Theological discourses, liturgical literature, and educational methodologies should all underline the importance of human community in the Bible and tradition. They should make the doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, and our redemption through Jesus Christ their starting point and norm. These doctrines are the basis of Christian faith, underpinning the principle of communion with God and the neighbour as a criterion for God's love and glorification (Matthew 25:31-46). **Including the other justifies the centrality and sanctity of service in the Church, for without the different other, the communion of love and Christian faith would become hollow and meaningless.** Neglecting the other inevitably undermines the uniqueness of messianic redemption as the starting point for our every educational endeavour, liturgical practice and theological discourse.

Chapter Three

Choices and Policies

80. “I have set before you life and death... choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19b). The social, political and theological realities in the Middle East today, with all the challenges they pose, place before Christians crucial choices that require a profound change of mindset. This change requires us to move from an obsession with existence and survival to taking the risk of presence and witness. It means building durable policies based on biblical principles and enshrined in the prophetic role we need to play, the significance of our witness to the resurrected Christ, and our engagement in our societies with their different geopolitical contexts.

81. Churches in the Middle East today need to listen to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and **undergo a genuine inner reform that will echo the dynamics of the Gospel and a genuine prophetic spirit, allowing for an authentic dialogue with the world in this post-modern era** (cf. para. 15). This will enable them to play their role faithfully and creatively and fulfil their mission in response to the challenges facing our region today.

82. Unity and the ecumenical movement represent a unique challenge in the Middle East. Churches need to renew their ecumenical commitment in obedience to the commandment of the Lord on the night before he died (John 17:21), particularly within the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), and to strengthen their relations with Churches and ecumenical organizations around the world. Therefore, **we urge our Churches to revive the spirit of synodality and consultation, reject the spirit of dissension and competition, and develop the MECC as an ecumenical forum that brings them together and a tool to advance on the path of their visible unity.** The

MECC is currently in dire need of renewing and rehabilitating its departments. It should adopt the principles of discernment, sound governance and high efficiency, and move away from arbitrary rotation in the choice of its leadership (cf. para. 36, 41, 66-67).

83. Churches in the Middle East must face the issues of the region and its populations on the basis of a contextual theology, both at national and regional levels, ceasing to dwell on the past, import stereotypes, or stagnate in emotions and metaphysical exaggeration. This theology ought to confront the geopolitical dimensions with a methodology inspired by the Scriptures and their prophetic courage. This requires the Churches to dedicate themselves to formulate a specific theology for our region based on reflective thought and scientific criteria, a theology that will seek to understand the past, read the current signs of the times, and look towards the future, in a way that would help contribute to public affairs with the aim of serving the common good (cf. para. 74).

84. Our Churches must renew their theological and ecclesiastical discourse in line with modern-day circumstances, enabling this discourse to be understood by the people of God, become a flexible tool for Christian mission and witness, and open a door for dialogue with the other. All this can be achieved, initially, through adopting the approach of contextual theology, defining and unifying the terminology of Arabic theological discourse, and acculturating the dynamics of theology in the Churches and the faculties of theology around the world; and then, in a second moment, by renewing liturgical language and aligning it with the requirements of contextual theology (cf. para. 72-79).

85. We encourage our Churches to reactivate the Association of the Theological Institutes and Faculties in the Middle East (ATIME), and to adopt an ecumenical plan of collaboration linking these theological faculties with each other, in a common vision for training the pastors of the future. This training should be open to the reality of the modern world, faithful to tradition, and take judicious account of critical methodologies. Reviewing

the theological, philosophical and pastoral curricula of these institutes and faculties, communicating about the different fields of theological education, and exchanging information, news, students and professors, are now more needed, desired and beneficial than ever (cf. para. 73). We also ask these faculties to make an active contribution to the spiritual and theological formation of believers.

86. The issue of women today requires a profound change of mentality and practice, on the grounds of their dignity and unique value in the eyes of God and the full equality between men and women (cf. para. 69). We call on our Churches to work diligently and with determination **to acknowledge publicly the injustice done to women throughout the ages and to change how they are treated in Church and society through bold initiatives that underline the complementarity in service between women and men without favouring one over the other.** The Church needs to develop its structures, teachings and practices to activate the participation of women in all fields, including ministry, leadership and decision-making.

87. Christians in their Churches must **listen deeply to the voice of young people, their visions for renewal, positive potentials, critical thinking, and ambitions for development. Christians need to provide young people with real opportunities to be involved in ecclesiastical and political work.** They must abandon any attempt to exclude them or ignore them under the pretext that they are fomenting a revolution against cultural and social traditions and the existing value system. We call on Church institutions **to develop interactive structures with youth, based on respecting them as equals instead of drifting in the direction of patronizing them.** Moreover, they should invest in training the necessary staff and qualified future leaders from within their ranks. **Christian youth are not only the future of the Churches, but also their present, and they must play a primary role in building the society of citizenship** (cf. para. 68 and 77).

88. To enable the Christians of the Middle East to remain in their countries, Churches must **reach out to their kin who have emigrated outside the**

region, by launching special programmes to encourage those among them who wish to return to do so, and to motivate those who prefer to remain to preserve their authentic values and their cultural and ecclesial heritage in the societies in which they have settled.

89. In our Churches and institutions, we need to adopt robust policies based on **a culture that is respectful of diversity, acknowledges the right to be different, and fosters just economy, social justice and productive equity. This must take place within a framework of sound governance, guided by transparency and underwritten by competence and professionalism.** In addition, **natural, financial and human resources must be well managed**, as an integral part of the role of Christians as stewards of creation.

90. We call on the universities, institutes and schools run by the Churches **to provide education about human values**, with the aim of preparing good citizens and **establishing an informed public opinion respectful of others**, which is rooted in history and geography and positively supports social change towards citizenship and human well-being.

91. Churches must encourage members to be involved in their institutions as well as in public offices and functions, in keeping with their gifts, qualifications and specializations, avoiding all forms of nepotism, bribes and temporary exploitation, in order to respond to the needs of the people of God and foster the common good.

92. Christians are invited **to develop a theological and intellectual approach that allows us to open a new page in relations with Jews**, who have always been an integral part of the Middle Eastern tapestry and its pluralistic identity. Christians are invited to engage them in a serious dialogue based on the values of justice, peace, the dignity of creation and humanity, by taking **an opposite direction to the dialogue pursued by some Western Christians who are biased towards Zionism**, whether because of the Jewish Holocaust complex, or out of guilt feelings stemming from centuries of antisemitism, or

even to please the Zionist lobby. Such dialogue would push for justice for the Palestinian people, calling to account the policy of occupation and invasive settlement, seeking to establish true peace, and refuting the concept of the religious state, which impedes the rise of the civil state.

93. As for the dialogue with the Muslims, we should abandon **doublespeak, dissembling courtesy, and an elitist attitude. This will lay conceptual and pragmatic foundations for the role that must be assumed by both religions in safeguarding freedom of conscience and building local, regional and global peace.** This is of crucial importance in our region, which hosted the beginnings of the faith in one God and, throughout history, and despite complexities related to diversity, wove honourable patterns of brotherhood/sisterhood and collaboration. Those periods in which Christians and Muslims, as well as adherents of other religions, came into confrontation must encourage us to learn important lessons from the past and to invest in building up humanity and the countries of our region.

94. **Christians in the Middle East should refuse to adhere to dictatorial political regimes, whether ideologically secular, theocratic or feudal, or to identify with them. They must also reject a “minority alliance” and the choice of calling for protection.** They must refrain from politicizing religion and religionizing politics, and from any authoritarian gains, influence guarantees or personal benefits, while preserving their positive social role.

95. Christians are rooted in the Middle East. Therefore, **Churches must be committed to the cause of this region and its peoples,** regardless of their ethnic and religious affiliation and intellectual orientation. Such commitment should strengthen their sense of belonging to their society, encouraging them to assume their responsibilities and pursue the common good together. This requires our Churches **to be free from any kind of fear, to be open to the different other, and to contribute to the rediscovery of an Arabism enlightened by freedom** (cf. para. 62). We also urge the Churches **to develop strategies and undertake positive and practical initiatives to help Christians stay in their countries,**

and foster their involvement in the public sphere and the struggle for a civil state, a state of constitution and institutions, governed by full citizenship that will embrace diversity and be ruled by modern civil law.

96. We call on our Churches to work seriously for the ratification of civil personal status laws based on the equality of all citizens. We invite the Churches to participate actively in drafting these laws, which confirm the neutrality of the state vis-à-vis religions and the commitment of the latter to citizenship and the just legal state for all.

97. The prophetic role of the Christians of the Middle East requires us **to be biased towards the causes of freedom, justice, human rights, the right to self-determination, democracy and the regular peaceful transfer of power in all the countries of the region.** We must confront all forms of injustice and double standards, especially when it comes to the right of the Palestinian people to establish their independent state, with Al-Quds as its capital, and the return of the refugees as guaranteed by the international and Arab resolutions and conventions. Christians must also push systematically for an end to the suffering of the Syrian, Lebanese and Iraqi populations, by calling for the establishment of a state of law and citizenship that respects the historical aspirations of these peoples, against attempts to change their identity and to strike at the values of the social contract that brings them into living together (cf. para. 56-64).

98. Hosting refugees and displaced people on the basis of human brotherhood/sisterhood is an obligation referred to several times in both Old and New Testaments. It requires us to take care not to drift towards populist waves and nationalistic feelings that result in racist behaviour contradicting the spirit of the Gospel. This Christian commitment must be coupled with dedicated work to align the rights of the guests with the rights of the hosting communities and to underline the right of the refugees to return to their countries and places of origin, and the displaced to their towns and villages, with just compensation, so that their identity is protected and diversity in the communities they belong to is upheld. **It is important for Christians in**

the Middle East to be in solidarity with the oppressed and support those whose rights have been violated, to defend them, to empower them, to expose their oppressors, and to establish processes for calling those oppressors to account within the bounds of justice.

99. Media and communication are a supporting pillar in establishing Christian and human values, especially given the importance acquired by the media in the last decades and its role in everyday life. Churches must **give utmost priority to media and communication in terms of vision, policies and technologies** when mainstreaming their values, especially when it comes to living together with respect for diversity. We urgently need **to develop a joint ecumenical action plan for media that would encourage a professional discourse in the service of mission and foster human dignity**, speaking to both mind and heart, and free from rigid tradition, fake piety and apologetic debate.

100. We see in these choices and policies a thoughtful expression of the commitment of Christians in the Middle East to human solidarity and a dignified life for every human being in our region. We also see in them a rejection of the rampant culture of death and the adoption of the logic of violence to resolve conflicts. Our Christian presence must be founded on service (*diakonia*) to every human being, dedicated love, and genuine forgiveness, in obedience to the will of God. Our aim must be a more just and humane society in which the kingdom of God may be fulfilled, so that human beings may receive life as God has desired it for them, according to the words of Christ in the Gospel of John: “I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

We Choose Abundant Life Group

Beirut, September 2021

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Worksheet for “We Choose Abundant Life”

Prepared by the Education Team of the Syria Lebanon Partnership Network

The worksheet below is designed to help groups discuss how the choices available for Christians in the Middle East are similar and different to those in North America and how they are linked, both by the history of Christian mission, and also by Christian immigrants from the Middle East.

“We Choose Abundant Life” brings the Gospel from the region where it first spread, despite our ignorance of the churches that continue to worship in Syria and Lebanon. We are aware that Paul was confronted by Christ on the road to Damascus, Syria, and converted by the local saints (Acts 9 and 22). Jesus also cured the daughter of the woman in Tyre and Sidon (Mark 7), now South Lebanon. Both miracles are commemorated today at their sites by shrines in churches that preserve the memory of the origins of Christianity in Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon.

Other monuments to Christian history abound in the region. Crusader castles dot the horizon, notably Krak des Chevaliers/Hisn al-Akrad on the Syria-North Lebanon border and Beaufort Castle/Shaqif Arnun in Lebanon north of the Israeli border (see Wikipedia for pictures and locations). More appropriately, the American University of Beirut and the Lebanese American University (the former Beirut College for Women) now are monuments to the generosity of American Presbyterians and their positive influence in the Middle East.

Introduction and Chapter One: Christians in the Middle East, Our Reality and Situation

Geopolitical context

1. What is contextual theology (Paragraph 3 and 5)?

In this “We Choose Abundant Life” document, we will find how the Middle Eastern context for Christians differs from the North American. Do Christians have the power to change their context? Does God set the context for us?

2. The United States has a definition of diversity more limited than in the Middle East, since we assume every citizen has a binding loyalty to our Government. Subjects of an empire, such as the Ottoman Turkish Empire until 1920, could be loyal to their ethnic leaders first, who were responsible to the government second. In what position does that put the writers of this document as well as Middle Eastern Christian readers?
3. Why did the Arab Renaissance stimulated by Napoleon Bonaparte's 1798 invasion of Egypt fail to bring modern thought? (Par.11)? What was the role of Arab Christians in inspiring the Arab Renaissance?
4. What policy kept individuals tied to their ethnic identity under European colonialism (Par.14)? How does that policy compare to those directed in the United States at Native Americans, African Americans and Asian Americans?

5. What effect did the Israeli War in 1948 to uproot Palestinians (“the Nahba”) from their homeland have on Arab politics (Par.14)?
6. How is “human dignity” (Par.18) defined in the Middle East? How does that compare to the U.S.?
7. The Arab Spring mobilized youth and women through the internet to demand democracy (Par.22). What was the end result?
8. Privatized healthcare, science and education (Par.29) have had effects on health, education and welfare in the Middle East. Is the U.S. any different?

Ecclesiastical and Theological Context

9. What is the distinction between “the deposit of faith” and “ways of expressing it”? (Par.30) Is this distinction similar in the U.S.?
10. Claiming Arabic as a uniting factor in Middle Eastern Christianity removes the argument by Muslims that they represent the true Arabs. What was the role of Arab Christians in spreading knowledge between Europe and the Middle East (Par.33)?
11. Middle Eastern Churches are either patriarchal or synodical (Par.34). What does this distinction mean for them? When Americans view institutions as patriarchal, do we mean the same thing as Middle Easterners?
12. In the Middle East there is a double standard to be avoided (Par.38). Do American churches display the same double standard? How does the double standard affect relationships between Christians and Jews (Par.39)?
13. Middle Eastern churches have attempted to create modern Christian education materials in common. What was the result of these projects (Par.43) Has the result been different in the U.S.?
14. Thanks to early access to modern educational institutions, most Middle Eastern Christians are more educated and better off than most Muslims, so for the past century Christians have disproportionately emigrated to South America, North America and Europe (Par.45). In the modern world, emigres maintain contact with their relatives and send home money and ideas. Some of them even fly home for elections to vote as dual citizens in their original hometowns. What are the effects of their ideas on the local culture and within churches (Par.45-47)? Do U.S. churches have the same problem reconciling traditional authority with modern ideas?
15. In terms of dissonance between youth and elders within the church (Par.48), the Orthodox youth movement SYNDESMOS which has been active for the past half century puts them ahead of U.S. churches. Google it for inspiration on what U.S. youth movements can be!
16. Rivalry between church institutions (Par.49), waves of occult beliefs (Par.50), and political pacts (Par.51) occur in the Middle East. How do they affect us in the U.S.?
17. Do churches in the U.S. exaggerate their importance by dwelling on roles they played in the past? (Par.52)

Chapter Two: Challenges of the Present and Stakes of the Future

18. Though the Arab Spring was generally a political failure, how did it affect Middle Eastern Christian churches? (Par.53) Have internet communications had the same effect on American politics and churches?
19. In the face of internet influences, which American denominations have tried to occupy positions of power in order to prevent loss of influence? Which American denominations have favored a new social contract? (Par.56) In your opinion, how has the PCUSA reacted?
20. In the U.S. a civil state (Par.59) registers births, marriages and deaths. As a result, Americans have freedom to change religion or claim to not belong, but Middle Easterners' identity card, passport, birthplace and family name force them to acknowledge their religious heritage. What are the advantages and disadvantages of religious freedom for individuals?
21. Why have Middle Eastern Christians supported religious freedom? How does this position fit with Arabism (Par.62), the use of Arabic language as the source of identity? Note that such a proposal demotes the liturgical languages used by Greek, Armenian, Syriac and Coptic Orthodox churches, while for Muslim the Holy Quran provides the standard for Arabic, similar to the way the King James version of the Bible once standardized English.
22. In Par.65, note that koinonia and hypostaseis of the Trinity are Orthodox concepts while synodality is a Roman Catholic concept. Scholars reference official church documents, while the rest of us would be satisfied by simplified definitions in Wikipedia.org. For fun, think of hymn titles that illustrate these concepts, example "Blessed be the Tie that Binds our Hearts in Christian Love."
23. Synodality would invite participation of Christian youth and women in church decision making (Par.68-69). Synodality also permits discussion by Middle Eastern Christians with Muslims and Jews (Par.76).
24. With its implication of constant reform, Contextual Theology (Par.74) would be seen as a Protestant concept. How well do the Christian education materials (Par.78) of the PCUSA meet the criteria of contextual theology?

Chapter Three: Choices and Policies

25. Has the PCUSA moved "from obsession with existence and survival to tak[e] the risk of presence and witness" (Par.80) in the USA.?
26. Are American churches which relate to Muslims guilty of "doublespeak, dissembling courtesy, and an elitist attitude" (Par.93)?
27. Al Quds is the Arabic name for Jerusalem (Par.97). Can American Christians imagine a Palestinian capital there beside an Israeli one and the opportunity for Palestinians to achieve self-determination?