

GEM Meeting - Churches Response to Migration
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CONCEPT NOTE
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Introduction

The Role of GENM in the Understanding of Migration Phenomenon:

The nature of migration is constantly changing and different traditions, views, globally and nationally are changing equally. To study the contemporary patterns of migration and to reflect on the theological approach, the churches response to migration, we need a global encounter of all WCC member churches' to discuss issues of migration and the role of churches in conflict situations. This will give the opportunity to share experiences, access to information, learn from other disciplines, work and network together, and try to make a difference in the lives of the refugees, displaced and migrants through sharing and learning.

GENM gave an example in this sense, through the public Hearing organized in Beirut - Lebanon in 2008 which, created a platform where both Muslims and Christians with their diverse religions shared their experiences in "living together under one roof", and gave the opportunity to reflect on cultural and religious actors that affect migration and living together, it pointed the historical challenges, focused on the application and interpretation of rights and responsibilities, of civic citizenship mentality, integration and national social cohesion, of assimilation and integration, of friction between minorities and majority.

Lebanon as pluralist society conveys the message of coexistence for those countries who struggle with the diversity that accompanies immigration. The Public Hearing focused on the existential reality of Christians and Muslims not just coexisting together but living together and undergoing the same experiences of violence, poverty, unemployment, conflicts and forced migration. Church leaders in the Public Hearing underlined the idea that conflicts had political rather than theological or sociological implications, that politicization of every and any situation hindered or breached dialogue, while understanding and "accepting your neighbor, the other" not only as a social category or so to speak poor, but also as a religious category, as a Muslim or a Hindu or "the different other", will enable us respecting religious pluralism that will enhance the viability of pluralistic societies.

Islamic and Christian communities, very much stressed the key role in the reconciliation process of different faiths, for an adequate standard of a pluralist society, as it assumes change in understanding the other, in dissipating stereotypes and change in attitudes, and embracing the other with its diverse constituency i.e. "Spirituality of transcendence", embracing a "spiritual commitment that enables people to affirm their identity and yet venture together towards new and more inclusive society on the basis of certain fundamentally agreed principle, transcend animosities that have divided them, transcend the division and the forces that would not keep them divided"¹. Often church leaders or even political leaders quote or refer to metaphors from the Bible or the Koran only when it had to do with their own situation but are not taken as universal truth and applicable to any human situation.

This was the idea underlined in the Public Hearing organized by WCC-MECC in 2008 in Lebanon, where 120 people of different faiths and communities gathered together to affirm that the politicization of all the issues made Lebanon suffer long since 1975, and that it needed spiritual transcendence to overcome hatred and divisions to halt migration of both Christians and Muslims from Lebanon.

¹ Brian Lennon: "British Churches Are They Irrelevant?" The Role of Religion in Conflict Situation , P251

Unity Dimension of Churches

One of the main dimensions of church's Unity is Diakonia. Diakonia as the core and essence of the mission of the churches and as a unifying force of churches, reaches out the poor the stranger and the marginalized, *As the true identity of the church lies with Christ and her true mission is to reach out, like her Master, to all mankind throughout all time and share the gift of grace she has received from him. The church must then reach out to the poor*². It aims at abolishing social injustices, and aims at "transforming the cosmos in all its dimensions, structures and manifestations"

Churches transcend confessional, national and cultural boundaries and look at themselves through the eyes of the others, and experience the sense of belonging to each other, the community of sharing. And it is through diakonia that churches grow together in unity, unity expressed in service, deepened in service and tested by service"³.

⁴ Diakonia is defined to be providing justice to those who are made poor, who are victims of oppressive socioeconomic structures that perpetuate injustice, oppression, alienation and dehumanization.

The Diakonia and Social Justice program of MECC is therefore, the framework for church participation in the Middle East Council of Churches, seeking to fulfill together a common calling, providing material, therapeutic/ spiritual and preventive Diaconia to all in need of assistance, particularly refugees, asylum seekers and migrant.

Unity and Mission as Dialogue in a Multi religious Society

Our relationship with God and our mission to the word cannot be separated from our relationship with our neighbor. In Pluralistic societies of today my neighbors of other faith do not simply coexist but interact and correlate. And building of the world community implies mutual openness, mutual listening and common partnership.

Unity and mission in the Middle East is not a conceptual notion therefore, but existential reality in the context of constant dialogue with Islam. It is a way of life that has penetrated in all spheres of society. The churches lie in a situation of permanent dialogue as they share with Islam the same land, the same history and the same destiny. The daily encounter with Islam has greatly affected the theological outlook of Christians, the values, the traditions and understanding, in other words the whole existence of the churches is shaped by living with Islam. The Christian mission in the Middle East is not aimed therefore, at the conversion of Islam, specifically with the resurgence of Muslim fundamentalism at the juncture of history, but with dialogue otherwise stagnation and isolation will lead the minorities.

Reconciliation is another major aim of Christians in the M.E. where ideological and political confrontations manifested in military clashes prevail with acuteness and destruction. The churches in the M.E are partners with Muslim neighbors in a common struggle for the rebuilding of the Middle Eastern society on the basis of God's Justice and peace, of human rights and dignity. (***Orthodox Perspective on Mission, Aram I p 104***)

MECC Diakonia and Social Justice Unit

MECC Diakonia and social Justice Unit provides churches and lay people working within churches the opportunity to familiarize themselves with new and complex situations, of economic globalization, proliferation of conflicts, rapid social change, industrialization, which are forcing people into this situation and revisit the biblical principles which stress values on hospitality, inclusion, and dignity towards the stranger. If the church fails to offer its witness and to be prophetic, the reaction of the world will be indifference and apathy.

² Robert Slesinski, *Essays in Diakonia*, Peter Lang 1998

³ Aram I Catholicos, Keshishian, "*In Search of Ecumenical Vision*", Antelias 2002

⁴ Aram I Catholicos, Keshishian, "*In Search of Ecumenical Vision*", Antelias 2002

Furthermore, MECC Diaconia and Social Justice urges churches to recognize the importance of being and remaining open and flexible in order to offer various forms of diakonia in a variety of complex situations. Some forms of diakonia are directed to individuals, others to groups or institutions, some are needed for local situations others are required to respond to regional or international needs, some are spiritual in character assisting people in despair and loneliness, others are material, feeding the hungry and the poor, and some others liberating from captivity, and still others to prevent injustice and therefore preventive diakonia.

This ministry implies, therefore, consistent and organized efforts aimed at capacity building and empowerment on the local, national and regional level through concrete involvement in peoples struggle for self realization, renewal, development and liberation.

Relevance

The Middle East is a region where economic instability, ethnic wars & rivalries, persecutions, racial discrimination, wars, political conflicts, poverty, unemployment, and constant flows of economic migrant workers from Asia increase the number of the refugees and migrants in the ME, Lebanon is one of these countries.

Most of the countries of the Middle East have not ratified refugee conventions and working conditions do not welcome foreigners, Lack of legal, transparent, right based instruments for labor migration, corruption of justice and penal system, non transparent and non-democratic practices, non-implementation of law make of the asylum seekers unwelcome foreigners, they end up in detention, arrests, exploitations, abuse and warehoused situations. Migrants, specifically migrant workers throughout the M.E. therefore face many hardships, encounter hostility, prejudice, racism and Xenophobia, necessitating the need for advocacy and awareness raising activities and refugee support projects.

Around 12.million economic migrant workers, 4 million Palestinian refugees and 2 million Iraqi refugees only in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, and around 2 million internally displaced Iraqis are estimated to be in the M.E. including the Gulf. Furthermore, Lebanon hosts 400.000 Palestinians, around 1 million Syrian and Egyptian migrant workers, 60.000 Iraqi Refugees and more than 200.000 Asian Migrant workers.

It is the UNHCR, UNRWA, some NGOs and Churches who are in the ministry of the uprooted in providing services, protection and provision of legal recognition to asylum seekers or refugees.

Granting refugees asylum or refugee status or integration in the local society in the Middle East for Arab States is an entirely political issue related to the employment possibilities legal framework, social medical system, development possibilities and democracy policies. Among the many hindrances, the major obstacle to the ratification of 1951 UN Convention on Refugee rights is the yet unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the assumption that granting Palestinians integration possibilities and naturalization will be favoring the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in favor of Israel and betraying the Palestinian cause, which is believed to the end of Palestine for Palestinians. The second obstacle to the ratification of 1999 UN convention on Migrant Workers Rights, which does not create employment opportunities is the huge presence of the Syrian migrant workers (1 Million) in Lebanon which the Lebanese government and the employers are very reluctant to grant Syrian migrant workers the possibility of benefiting from Lebanese Social Security, causing additional financial burden on the already bankrupt government, and third Lebanon always looks at Western countries when it comes to the ratification of migrants rights. However, the National Steering Committee drafted a policy guideline that provides better working conditions for migrant workers, is the draft policy guideline prepared together with the Lebanese Human Rights Institute, the ILO, Some NGOs and other concerned stakeholders, proposed to the parliament to ratify it. Hopefully we look forward to the new government to approving it.

The churches role in this, of course will be the continuation of advocacy initiatives, Human Resource Development trainings and conferences for national authorities and cooperation, collaboration and networking on interregional level with concerned actors and stakeholders, to raise awareness among the churches, individuals, government officials and civil society members, to get involved in the ministry of the uprooted to pressurize legal systems to treat more humanely and to be able to respond to many

needs and issues of refugees, displaced and migrants from: asylum seeking, to resettlement, or granting of refugee status, protection from: trafficking and abuse, detention and forced repatriation..

As a response to the call of CCME &CEC to launch and celebrate “ The year of European churches responding to migration in 2010” MECC in the suggested calendar of events, already celebrates together with UNHCR and refugee Organizations like: DRC, Caritas, Restart, Pinnacle, AJEM, and others, the World refugee Day, throughout a week with different activities, in the presence of National Authorities, Ministries, Interior, Labor, and Justice, the ISF, GS, Human Rights Institute and the Churches. And will continue to do this year as well. MECC publishes booklets advocating the rights and plight of migrants. This year a Children’s illustrated book named *Beyond Silence a Child’s World* is under publication. Organized the Public hearing in 2008 in the presence of 120 theologians, academics, church leaders and representatives, reflecting on the reasons of migration of Christians from the Middle East and the richness and benefits of plural societies in enhancing reconciliation and bridging cultures.

While for Year 2010 MECC specifically proposes to celebrate the *Churches response to Migration in 2010* the following conferences:

I- A two days regional Conference on ***Theological Interpretations of Diakonia*** , Diakonia as unifying factor in churches response to migration- Reflections.

How can Diakonia become a unifying factor in churches response to migration?
What are the various manifestations of Diakonia, in variety of complex situations, (directed to individuals, groups, institutions, local regional or international, or spiritual, material and preventive diakonia etc.)

II- A two days regional conference on ***Pluralism and Multicultural societies, an existential reality***, enforced on every society today- Churches response in welcoming the stranger.

The Intellectual Critique, Political reaction,
Islam - Europe and Multiculturalism.
Pluralism, a State Policy? What includes multicultural policies?
The example of Australia, Canada, USA and others.

Celebrating Our Differences and a Call to Civic Engagement. Celebrate international day of Faiths and Unity in civic engagement.

III- A conference on ***Detention Alternatives***, to refrain the growing rate of detentions of migrants and refugees, and pressuring states to use alternative measures in the use of detention.

IV- A two days conference in the Gulf region on ***“Ecumenical response to the Migrants needs in the Gulf, a Spiritual Response”***.

To conclude with Ecumenical Prayer

“O Holy Spirit, Tongue of fire, Descend upon us as you
Descended upon disciples gathered in the upper room
For prayer. Sanctify us, free us from bondage of sin and
Give us your power to speak with one voice.

Rushing wind, sweep over our lands and make your sound
gather again devout people from every nation under heaven.
Help us manifest together the victory of life over Death
given through the resurrection. Make us signs of the living hope
and witness of your peace.

Giver of life, abide in us, transform our former selves into
A new life in faithfulness to God's will. Along with all the others
With whom we live, with all nations and peoples
we would enter a new time, a time of transformation
when hatred is replaced by love, violence by dialogue,
condemnation by forgiveness, self centeredness by sharing.

Power of Unity, help us to move from Babel of division,
due to ethnic, or religious boundaries, to the Pentecost of
unity in the diversity of our gifts, traditions, and cultures.
Make us ministers of reconciliation among all the children of Abraham.

Spirit of truth, free us from our alienation from you.
Liberate us from the powers and principalities which
oppress and alienate. Make us instruments of your justice
to which we have been called by prophets, apostles and
martyrs. Jesus is risen. The splendor of his realm is
through your power, O Holy Spirit, available to all.
Make us messengers of the good news, apostles of peace of
Jerusalem, the peace of Holy Land, the peace of the whole world”.

Prepared by the MECC on the occasion of the Pentecost, for the peace in Holy Land.