

**Christian Churches Together
Forum on the Persecuted Church
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Report by

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Christian Reformed Church in North America



The setting for our meeting was the historic “Old First” Presbyterian Church in Newark, New Jersey, which prides itself on being “the church that founded Newark” in 1666. Thirty-six people attended, representing the ministries of communions including the Antiochian Orthodox Church, the Bruderhof, the Church of the Brethren, the Disciples of Christ, the Evangelical Covenant Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in

America, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Maronite Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Church of Christ. Representatives from the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) were Ali Short and Shannon Jammal-Hollems from the Office of Social Justice and Gary Bekker from Christian Reformed World Missions.

The express purpose of the meeting was for us to draft a letter from Christian Churches Together to the Persecuted Church around the world in order to express our solidarity and support. The two-day event provided us the opportunity to learn together about the persecution and suffering that Christians are facing in several regions, particularly the Middle East. Opening devotions were led by the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Newark, Joseph Cardinal Tobin, C.Ss.R.

The Middle East

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that since March 2011 [from Syria alone](#) there have been

- 4.8 million refugees to other nations.
- 6.6 million internally displaced persons.
- 1 million persons requesting asylum in Europe.

On the first day of the meeting, we were privileged to hear from Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II of Antioch, who traveled from Lebanon to join us. The Patriarch escaped an [assassination attempt last June](#) by a suicide bomber who took the lives of three of the clergyman’s bodyguards.



The Patriarch reported to us that as soon as attempts to bring down the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria began in 2011, Christians began to suffer. Syria's population dropped quickly from 22 million people, 2 million of whom were Christians, to 18 million, with just 1 million of those being Christians. In Syria and Iraq, the so-called Islamic State known as ISIS has increasingly tried to erase the evidence that Christian churches were ever there.

On a recent visit to [Iraq](#), the Patriarch learned that 80 percent of the Christian population in Iraq has been killed or has fled in the face of severe persecution. In Baghdad alone the number of Christians has dropped from 60,000 to 6,000. Mosul, a historically Christian city, saw its Christian residents driven out in 2014. Now, nearly three years later, most of them remain in refugee camps.

When asked about the relationship between Christians and Muslims in the region, the Patriarch said, "It hasn't always been perfect, but we have coexisted." He pointed out that those in the West should not forget that Christians and Muslims have lived together there for fifteen centuries. Christians have contributed much to the culture in the Middle East—for example, by establishing schools and colleges that serve both Christians and Muslims. "ISIS doesn't represent the Muslims that we live with," stated the Patriarch. "ISIS is against both Christians *and* Muslims. They have hung imams in mosques. They have kidnapped Christian bishops. They have killed Christians and Muslims alike."

The Patriarch suggested four ways for churches to support Christians in Syria and Iraq:

1. *Work with local churches.* The Patriarch encouraged that CCT denominations support the work of [International Christian Outreach](#) and [International Orthodox Christian Charities](#), the relief and development arm of Eastern Orthodox churches that is serving refugees and displaced persons in Iraq and Syria. More than 70 percent of the people they help are not Christians. They see this development and relief work as an investment in the future, knowing that their well-being is inextricably bound to the well-being of their neighbors, both Muslims and Christians. He pointed out that most of the United Nations aid in the region goes to refugee camps that are almost entirely Muslim. "Let us make decisions about what we need as Christians," said the Patriarch, "and empower us to do so."
2. *Come to learn.* Several other representatives at the meetings echoed this point. The leaders of the church in the Middle East have realized that the most effective way for them to elicit support from North Americans—in the form of prayers, financial contributions, and advocacy—is by hosting them in the Middle East. Once

North Americans get to know the faces of Christians persecuted in the region, hear their stories, and walk through their streets, engagement increases.

Father Aren Jebejian, a representative from the Armenian Apostolic Church, shared with us that during his most recent visit to the Middle East, the Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem told him, “Don’t send us money. Vote with your bodies, your presence. Come see us.”

3. *Advocate on behalf of Christians in the region.* The Patriarch shared with us that Christians in the Middle East suffer the consequences of Western intervention in the region. There are many Muslims who share their goals for eradicating fanaticism and extremism, but the U.S. alliance with Saudi Arabia makes working together difficult. Middle Eastern Christians are more concerned with government policies than ISIS because the policies have a greater impact on Christians, and a greater influence on their leaving the region.

Here is what he told us in his own words: “Please impress upon your elected officials the need to help. We feel abandoned. We need American advocacy on our behalf if we are going to stay here. If you give us the opportunity to stay where we are, we will be your strongest supporters.” Every few months the PC(USA) brings pastors to visit them. They appreciate the visitors and their prayers. As noted above, they see such visits as critical to gaining support in advocating for change.

4. *Remove sanctions.* The Patriarch stated strongly that sanctions do not harm government officials but instead harm Christians like those in his community. From his perspective, sanctions are not effective, and Christians are suffering as a result of them.

Following the Patriarch’s address, we were reminded that Pope Francis has called for people to enact [two strategies](#) in order to combat misunderstanding and animosity: encounter and dialogue. The Pope has also asked Roman Catholics to [pray for persecuted Christians](#) diligently.

In the midst of chaos, however, Christians in the Middle East refuse to be defined by the single story that their region can be characterized by violence. They have hope. Here are some of the stories we heard about Christians’ seeing God at work in their communities:



- When ISIS attacked Aleppo, Christians were hidden by their Muslim neighbors in a mosque there. Four Muslim men were killed while defending the Christian church building from being destroyed by ISIS.

“AS A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, WE ARE EXPERIENCING REBIRTH. WE ARE WEAKER, AND SMALLER IN NUMBER, BUT MORE POWERFUL IN OUR HOPE.”

Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II

- [Sister Maria Hanna](#) serves in Iraq, working to sustain faith in the midst of crisis. Sister Hanna and the Dominican Sisters that she works alongside have established an orphanage and a kindergarten to serve refugees. When asked whether she would serve Muslims, Sister Hanna replied, “We do not serve [people] because they are Christians. We serve because we are Christians.”



- When ISIS kidnapped and murdered 21 men in early 2015, all but one of them were Coptic Christians from Egypt. The [21st man](#) was Mathew Ayairga, a citizen of Chad, who, upon seeing the faith of the Christian men as they faced death, declared, “Their God is my God,” choosing to die alongside them. His choice to lay down his life in the name of Christ continues to inspire Middle Eastern Christians who suffer.



- This past December, a [Muslim girls choir came to sing](#) Christmas carols at St. Elias Greek Catholic Church in Beirut, Lebanon.



One of the key takeaways from the meeting was how important definitions are to having these conversations. We don't all

define religious persecution the same way, so numbers will vary when we offer statistics of Christians facing persecution. A helpful distinction that one representative mentioned at the event was that the *persecution of Christians* is different from the *suffering of Christians*. Persecution takes place when one is targeted for one reason or another. The tangled web of ethnicity, religion, nationality, ability, and so on make it hard to tease out religious persecution specifically and say, “This is simply because of religion.”

Another helpful distinction made at the meetings came from Beth Copeland, from [Open Doors USA](#). She talked about identifying persecution in the region as “smash” or “squeeze.” Smash events are overt and explicit. They would describe attention-grabbing events such as murders or beatings. Squeeze events are implicit and covert. They are far more prevalent, such as what we see happening to Palestinians in the West Bank.

“INDIFFERENCE IS A WORTHY FOE.” BROTHER ANDREW

Denominational leaders named the fact that working together does not come naturally to us as denominations rooted in our own cultures and understandings of orthodoxy. We talked about obstacles as well as ways in which we can work together. The obstacles identified to working together through CCT are (a) mistrust among members, (b) differing experiences (East-West), (c) the tendency to speak in broad strokes rather than to speak into particular situations, which tends to be more helpful. As for working together on a local level, participants were encouraged to partner with folks at local Greek or Antiochian Orthodox churches to learn more about Christians in the Middle East, as many of their members are immigrants or refugees from the region, or still have extended family there.

Orthodox leaders pointed out that they experience tensions among their denominations overseas because of interpersonal conflicts and attempts by North Americans to proselytize the Middle Eastern Church. They also pointed out the need for an outreach strategy to Muslim neighbors, to show the love of Christ rather than to focus on self-protection. “If we want Muslims to stand up for religious freedom for Christians, we need to stand up for religious freedom for Muslims,” said Father Vicken Aykazian.

“THERE ARE MANY WOUNDS ON THE BODY OF CHRIST, BUT THE MOST GRIEVOUS OF ALL IS THE LACK OF UNITY AMONG GOD’S PEOPLE.”
BISHOP GREGORY MANSOUR

As we listened to our Christian visitors from the Middle East share about the challenges in the region, Rev. Sandra Van Opstal's description of the different ways that churches seek to be multiethnic came to mind. She teaches that churches tend to fall at one of these three places on a continuum: extending hospitality, standing in solidarity, or practicing mutuality. Most churches who want diversity fall into the first category of hospitality and welcome. As churches move along the continuum, the major change is that the power begins to shift from hosts, to older siblings, to partners.

As a denomination seeking to be of encouragement to Christians around the world, we are also called to move along the continuum that Rev. Van Opstal describes toward mutuality in our relationship with our sisters and brothers in Christ in other regions of the world.

THE BIBLE IS A LETTER FROM PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS TO PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS. IT IS PART OF OUR IDENTITY IN CHRIST, WHETHER WE EXPERIENCE IT OR NOT. SUFFERING BRINGS US CLOSER TO THE HEART OF GOD.

BETH COPELAND, OPEN DOORS

Knox Thames, advisor to the U.S. State Department on Religious Minorities in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, told us that the U.S. has a unique level of commitment to advancing religious freedom. In contrast to what we heard from the Patriarch from the Middle East, Mr. Thames told us that in this time of increased infringement on the exercise of religious freedom by both authoritarian regimes and networks of terrorism, the U.S. government sees terrorist networks as the greatest threat.”

The gift of the Reformed tradition in all of this is our ability to manage polarities, to handle the messiness, to work in spite of not having all the answers. “The fact that you can’t get everything right doesn’t mean that you can’t get anything right,” said Gary Bekker in his address to the group.

Nigeria

We heard about Nigeria from Jay Wittmeyer of the Church of the Brethren. The Church of the Brethren first began their work in Nigeria in 1923. Their ministry has focused on evangelism, but they have also started educational efforts, built hospitals, and engaged in community development work.

Boko Haram, founded in 2002 in opposition to Western education, remains the Church of the Brethren's greatest threat in northern Nigeria. Since 2009, Boko Haram's goal has been to declare an Islamic state and establish a caliphate.

Since their founding, Boko Haram has been responsible for the kidnapping of roughly 1,400 women and children, the deaths of an estimated 10,000 Church of the Brethren members, the internal displacement of 170,000 church members, and the destruction of 1,600 churches. In April 2014, 276 schoolgirls were taken in Chibok from a school that was originally founded by the Brethren. Overall, 3 million people have been displaced from their homes because of Boko Haram.

Boko Haram is as much a cultural and social group as it is a purely religious one. Once an area is "Dar al Islam," it is under the caliphate, and sharia law is then in place. Because the area is a caliphate, non-Muslim women are taken and converted to Islam through marriage to Muslim men. Boko Haram does not see these efforts as violent but, rather, the application of their understanding of the Islamic social structure. Jihad is purposed to gain political power by taking land, making this a geopolitical fight.

According to Mr. Wittmeyer, Boko Haram has killed more Muslims than Christians. Because of this, the conversations they are having in Nigeria on solutions are not necessarily focused on "religious persecution." The Church of the Brethren is now working on rebuilding homes, distributing food, providing medical assistance and education, and facilitating trauma healing workshops for Muslims and Christians together.

India

Jim Lyon of the Church of God spoke about India. According to the latest [Open Doors 2017 World Watchlist Report](#), India is now ranked 15th among nations in which the practice of Christian faith is most dangerous. Last year the country was ranked 31st. The rise is alarming.

India has the second largest Muslim population in the world (behind Indonesia). The country has recently experienced a rise in religious nationalism among its Hindu population. This has resulted in the oppression of vulnerable groups and the persecution of religious minorities in four ways:

1. *The deregistration of NGOs.* 9,000 nongovernment organizations (NGOs) were decertified in India in 2015 alone. As a result, they are no longer able to operate in India or receive funding from abroad. Compassion International is one of the

organizations affected, with 148,000 children losing their sponsors, making them vulnerable to being forced to labor on tea plantations or being sold into sexual slavery.

2. *Diminishing the work of charities through regulation.* Given that 60 percent of India's population lives below the United Nations poverty line, the work of charities that address poverty is especially important.
3. *Anti-Conversion Laws.* Indian law prohibits conversion through coercion, and it equates offering any kind of material support to coercion. This presents a challenge to Christian ministries in the country.
4. *Not enforcing freedom of religion laws.* According to Mr. Lyon, the lack of enforcement of religious freedom laws makes it possible for religious nationalists to get away with crimes against religious minorities.

Recommendations

1. We would like denominational leadership to invest time and resources into visiting the West Bank and Lebanon within the next two years. This will be critically important for the Office of Social Justice as we seek support for advocacy efforts. There are a couple of upcoming opportunities to do so with partners.
2. We would like to dedicate OSJ time and resources to awareness raising, education, and advocacy about the suffering of Christians globally, and about religious persecution both in North America and around the globe. While persecution in North America was not covered at this event, occurrences like the shooting at the Islamic Cultural Center in Quebec City, the murders of Khalil Jabara and Srinivas Kuchibholta, and the eight fires that have happened in four weeks at mosques in the United States demonstrate the need for domestic awareness raising, education, and advocacy efforts.
3. We would like World Renew staff to explore the potential for partnering with [International Christian Outreach](#) and [International Orthodox Christian Charities](#), the relief and development arm of the Eastern Orthodox Church working in the Middle East.

4. We would like the new mission agency to explore ways to strengthen the connection with advocates [Elmarie and Scott Parker \(Presbyterian Mission Agency\)](#), who live and work in Lebanon.