

## JOINT ECUMENICAL DECLARATION OF PRESIDUM OF SWISS PROTESTANT CHURCHES AND CONFERENCE OF SWISS CATHOLIC BISHOPS

To mark the visit to Lebanon of officials from both churches and the appeal to parishes on behalf of persecuted Christians and victims of war in the Middle East

### RELIGIOUS FREEDOM – A RESSOURCE FOR THE FUTURE OF A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

1. It is with one voice that the Reformed and Roman Catholic Churches of Switzerland are launching this appeal for religious freedom in the Middle East and around the world. The dimensions mentioned in the documents on religious freedom of Vatican Council II or the World Council of Churches WCC<sup>1</sup> are fully shared by the Churches of Switzerland.
2. Religious freedom is the right of all human beings to voluntarily follow a personal and communal spiritual life path without being compelled to do so and to be able to freely express one's convictions without constraint. It is the right of each community to be given the opportunity to lead their lives and practice their faith without hindrance, provided public order is respected. Finally, it guarantees the right to convert to another religion without fear of reprisal.
3. Religious freedom is a component of human rights, and religion is an integral dimension of the human being. In the Bible, man and woman are created in the image of God; they are fully human in their relationship with others and with the Lord. In Jesus Christ, God made all human beings free, and to enable them to remain so, He freed them from all forms of slavery.
4. Religions are essential to life in society, as they are integral to human existence and help to create the necessary values for life in society. Nonetheless, they are not immune to corruption and manipulation. They are the source of living together in mutual respect, solidarity, justice and peace: the Christian values of love, faith and hope offer solid prospects for building a harmonious, dynamic and forward-looking society. Comparable values also exist at the heart of other religions, rendering mutual respect and peaceful co-existence possible.
5. Sadly, this is not reflected in the news we receive on a daily basis of massive influxes of refugees and displaced persons forced to leave their homelands, and violations of human rights and religious freedom in many parts of the world, particularly in Syria, Iraq and the Middle East.

Or we learn about the atrocities of terrorist organizations claiming to act in the name of religion and who commit indiscriminate massacres, rape women, trample on people's rights, and destroy the cultural heritage of humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> Encyclique *Dignitatis humanae* of Vatican II; Document « Religious minorities and rights for religious freedom », WCC Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, 2.12.2011. Cf. also « *Placer l'être humain dans son droit; les droits de l'homme et la dignité humaine dans une perspective d'éthique théologique* », Position 6, FEPS 2007

They prey on all those who do not embrace the so-called values of Islamic radicalism, including Shia and Sunni Muslim believers, and religious minorities. Among them, Christians of various denominations are being subjected to genuine «religious cleansing», among other abuses, because they embody hated Western values, even though they have resided in these lands for some 2,000 years and their culture is firmly implanted there.

Christians are victims of social, political, economic and judicial discrimination in addition to religious oppression. Fearing execution or expulsion, many Christians have been compelled to take the path of exile.

6. Together with the leaders of the World Council of Churches and Pope Francis, FSPC and CSCB call on all political and religious authorities and all local and international organizations to do all in their powers to bring an end to civil wars and persecutions, to ensure respect for religious freedom for all communities and every human being, and to establish a lasting peace within and between nations of the region. Without respect for religious freedom, no lasting peace is possible. Without a religious dimension, no society is truly human.

We call on the Christians of Switzerland show sensitivity to the dramatic plight of their Christian brothers and sisters and of all endangered believers in these countries and to demonstrate solidarity in responding generously to the various actions proposed in this regard. In a secular society such as ours, it should be recalled that religious freedom is at the heart of the basic choices of everyone's life, and that it would be wrong to conclude from the terrorists of today or the extremists of the past that religious affiliation is something to be despised, rejected or exploited.

7. From Lebanon, a pluralist land *par excellence* and host to millions of refugees, FEPS and CES put their trust in God the Creator and Saviour, and appeal to all people of good will to work for the respect of religious freedom, so that the different religious groups of the Near East countries can live in peaceful and sustainable coexistence. At stake is the very future of humanity.

Beirut, Bern, Freiburg, 25 November 2015

Gottfried Locher  
Council President FSPC

Mgr Markus Büchel  
President CSCB