

CRY FOR HOPE: A CALL TO DECISIVE ACTION
WE CANNOT SERVE GOD AND THE OPPRESSION OF THE PALESTINIANS
Public launch: 1st July 2020

We, Kairos Palestine and Global Kairos for Justice, a worldwide coalition born in response to the Kairos Palestine “Moment of Truth: a word of faith, hope, and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering,” issue this urgent call to Christians, churches and ecumenical institutions. We do this together with committed Christians in Palestine and around the world. This is a call for decisive action on a matter that we believe relates to the integrity of our Christian faith.

We have arrived at a critical point in the struggle to end the oppression of the Palestinian people. The State of Israel’s adoption of the Nation State Law in 2018 legalized institutional discrimination in Israel and the Palestinian territories, officially depriving Palestinians of their rights to life, livelihood, and a future in their homeland. Recent acts of the U.S. administration have supported Israel’s ongoing project of land taking and attaining control over the entire territory of Palestine. These include the 2018 move of its embassy to Jerusalem, its announcement in 2019 that the U.S. government no longer deems West Bank settlements to be “inconsistent with international law,” and the 2020 “Peace to Prosperity” plan. Fuelled by U.S. support and emboldened by the ineffectual response of the international community, Israel’s newly-formed coalition government has cleared the way for outright annexation of around one third of the occupied West Bank, including the Jordan Valley. These developments make it all the more clear that we have come to the end of the illusion that Israel and the world powers intend to honor and defend the rights of the Palestinian people to dignity, self-determination, and the fundamental human rights guaranteed under international law, including the right of return for Palestinian refugees. It is time for the international community, in light of these events, to recognize Israel as an apartheid state in terms of international law.

In affirming this reality, we realize that it is incumbent upon us as followers of Jesus to take decisive action. The very being of the church, the integrity of the Christian faith, and the credibility of the Gospel is at stake. We declare that support for the oppression of the Palestinian people, whether passive or active, through silence, word or deed, is a sin. We assert that Christian support for Zionism as a theology and an ideology that legitimize the right of one people to deny the human rights of another is incompatible with the Christian faith and a grave misuse of the Bible.

We call upon all Christians and on churches at congregational, denominational, national, and global ecumenical levels to engage in a process of study, reflection and confession concerning the historic and systemic deprivation of the rights of the Palestinian people, and the use of the Bible by many to justify and support this oppression. We call on churches to reflect on how their own traditions can express the sacred duty to uphold the integrity of the church and the Christian faith concerning this issue. We cannot serve God while remaining silent about the oppression of the Palestinians.

As we face this kairos, we are mindful of the legacy of faith and action of those who have come before us and have faced circumstances of urgency and crisis. In 1933 German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer declared that the Nazi regime’s denial of the rights of Jews and the interference of the state into matters of religion placed the church in status confessionis. The Barmen Declaration of 1934 reinforced the church’s obligation to stand up to injustice and to unequivocally oppose ideologies of tyranny. In 1964 the first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), Willem Visser ‘t Hooft, stated that racism, like apartheid, constitutes a status confessionis for the churches. The WCC followed this word with action in 1969 in implementing its courageous and far-reaching Program to Combat Racism. In 1977 the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) declared that “Apartheid created a status confessionis for the church” and in 1984 suspended the white Lutheran Churches in Southern Africa who practiced Apartheid. In 1982 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) declared Apartheid incompatible with Christian belief, and suspended the member churches practising racial separation. The World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) in 2017 affirmed “that with respect to the situation of injustice and suffering that exists in Palestine, and the cry of the Palestinian Christian community, that the integrity of Christian faith and praxis is at stake” and directed the General Secretary to initiate six direct action steps. Since 2009, Kairos documents from ecumenical organizations from around the world have appeared in response to the Kairos “Moment of Truth” document of the Palestinian Christians, pledging action and providing theological affirmation of this prophetic call by the Palestinian churches.

The present times call for actions as bold, as faithful, and as resolute. The time for decision has arrived. “We call out as Christians and as Palestinians to our Christian brothers and sisters in the churches around the world” reads the 2009 Kairos Palestine document. Eight years later, in 2017, in the Open Letter to the World Council of Churches and the ecumenical movement, the National Coalition of Christian Organizations in Palestine wrote: “Things are beyond urgent. We are on the verge of a catastrophic collapse. This is no time for shallow diplomacy, Christians!” Now, three years later, this is a cry for hope to our brothers and sisters throughout the world. We invite our fellow Christians, their local congregations, churches and international ecumenical organizations, to receive and respond to our common witness, to join the process of confessing, and to initiate processes to formally reject the oppression of the Palestinian people and any use of the Bible to justify this injustice by committing to the following actions:

- Initiate processes at local, denominational and ecumenical levels that recognize the present kairos and the urgent requirement for decisive action regarding the denial of Palestinian rights and the misuse of the Bible. These actions will express the unity of the church in its commitment to stand up to injustice wherever it is to be found.
- Engage in study and discernment with respect to theologies and understandings of the Bible that have been used to justify the oppression of the Palestinian people. Offer theologies that prophetically call for an inclusive vision of the land for Israelis and Palestinians, affirming that the creator God is a God of love, mercy and justice; not of discrimination and oppression.
- Affirm the Palestinians' right to resist the occupation, dispossession, and abrogation of their fundamental rights, and join the Palestinians in their creative and nonviolent resistance. The 2005 Palestinian call for Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) provides a framework for economic, cultural, and academic measures and for direct political advocacy as nonviolent means to end occupation and oppression. The purpose of BDS is not to punish or isolate Israel. It is rather to exert pressure on Israel to comply with international law, and to call upon its government and its people, in the spirit of the Word of God, to enter into the ways of justice and peace, thereby affirming its own rights as well as the rights of the Palestinian people.
- Demand also that governments and world bodies employ political, diplomatic and economic means to stop Israel's violations of human rights and international law.
- Oppose anti-Semitism by working for justice against anti-Judaism, racism and xenophobia; oppose the equating of criticism of Israel's unjust actions with anti-Semitism.
- Support initiatives between Israelis and Palestinians and interfaith partnerships that combat apartheid and occupation and create opportunities to work together for a common future of mutual respect and dignity.
- Come and see the reality in the Holy Land with compassionate eyes for the suffering of Palestinians, and stand in solidarity with grassroots initiatives on the part of all faiths and secular groups who challenge the occupation and who work for a just peace.

We make this call out of concern for the future of both peoples. In the words of Kairos Palestine, our call is rooted in the logic of love that seeks to liberate both the oppressor and oppressed in order to create a new society for all the people of the land. We continue to hold firm to the hope articulated in the Kairos document that Palestinians and Israelis have a common future -- that "we can organize our political life, with all its complexity, according to the logic of love and its power, after ending the occupation and establishing justice." As followers of Jesus, our response to ideologies of exclusivity and apartheid is to uphold a vision of inclusivity and equality for all peoples of the land and to persistently struggle to bring this about.

We acknowledge that by our commitment as Christians to the liberation of the Palestinian people we stand against the theology of Empire, a global order of domination manifesting in racial, economic, cultural, and ecological oppression that threatens humanity and all of creation. In making this confession, we embrace our membership in the community of the broken bread, the church fulfilling its mission to bring the good news of God's gift of love, mercy, compassion, and abundant life for all.

H.B. Michel Sabbah
 Patriarch Emeritus: Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem
 President: Kairos Palestine

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 General Coordinator: Global Kairos for Justice



An Open Letter from Christian Clergy from the Bethlehem Area

Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed
(Jeremiah 22:3)

We are writing this letter in our capacity as spiritual leaders of various Christian communities in the Bethlehem Area. The Israeli Government is planning to annex more occupied Palestinian land. According to the information they have released, this process could begin on July 1st. For Palestine, Bethlehem and particularly for its Christian population, this new process of annexation will be particularly catastrophic.

Soon after the occupation of 1967 Israel annexed over 20,000 dunums of land in the northern parts of Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour, for the construction of illegal colonial settlements. This severely hindered our capacity to grow as communities. They have already annexed one of the most important Christian religious sites of Bethlehem, the Mar Elias Monastery, and separated Bethlehem from Jerusalem for the first time in the two-thousand years of Christian history in Holy Land.

One of the only areas left for our expansion, as well as for agriculture and simply for families to enjoy nature, are the valleys of Cremisan and Makhrou, both located to the west of our urban areas and are under the current threat of annexation by Israeli authorities. This will affect the private property of hundreds of our parishioners. In the Cremisan Valley we also conduct spiritual activities. There is a school run by Salesian Nuns in addition to a historic monastery. The western Bethlehem countryside is also in danger, where some of our parishioners have been farming for generations, and this includes the Tent of Nations in Nahhalin. At the same time, and in accordance to the original maps of the US Plan, there are threats against the eastern part of Bethlehem, including the Ush Ughrab area of Beit Sahour, where there has been plans for years to build a childrens' hospital to serve the local community.

Our biggest concern is that the annexation of those areas will push more people to emigrate. Bethlehem, surrounded by walls and settlements, already feels like an open prison. Annexation means the prison becomes even smaller, with no hopes for a better future.

This is land theft! We are talking about land that is largely privately owned and that our families have owned, inherited and farmed for hundreds of years.

Most of our parishioners have lost hope in earthly powers. They feel hopeless and helpless, evident in the words a parishioner this month as he watched his land devoured by Israeli bulldozers preparing the way for more wall expansion: "It is devastating. You see bulldozers destroying your land and you can do nothing. No one is stopping them."

Our parishioners no longer believe that anyone will stand courageously for justice and peace and stop this tremendous injustice that is taking place in front of your eyes. The human rights of Palestinians have been violated for decades. Hope is a pillar of our faith, yet is being challenged due to the actions of those who claim to care about the Christians in the Middle East. In practice, annexation could be the final straw when it comes to a viable Christian presence in Palestine, as well as the national aspirations to live in freedom, independence, dignity and equality in our homeland in accordance with international law.

Nobody can claim that they did not know the consequences of annexation for Palestine in general and Bethlehem in particular. We feel the burden of history upon our shoulders to keep the Christian presence in the land where it all started. As we continue to put our hope and trust in God, we call upon the leaders of this world to stop this severe injustice. We remain committed to peace with justice, and find strength in the support of many around the world, specially the support of many churches. We hope that the world takes decisive and concrete actions to stop this injustice and provide the conditions to restore hope for a future of justice and peace that this land deserves.

Fr. Yacoub Abu Sada – 'The Theotokos' Melkite Church Bethlehem

Fr. Issa Musleh – Forefathers Greek Orthodox Church Beit Sahour*

Fr. Hanna Salem – Catholic Church of the Annunciation Beit Jala

Fr. Bolous Al Alam – St. Mary Greek Orthodox Church Beit Jala

Rev. Ashraf Tannous – The Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Reformation Beit Jala

Fr. Suheil Fakhouri – Our Lady of the Shepherds Melkite Church Beit Sahour

Rev. Munther Isaac – The Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church Bethlehem and The Evangelical Lutheran Church Beit Sahour

*Beit Sahour is the area of the Shepherds' Fields, traditional site of the announcement by angelic messengers of the birth of Christ.