

## Annex (2)

Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum  
Track on: *Theological and Biblical Perspectives*

*Theological conference in Bern – Switzerland  
10-14 September 2008*

### **I- Background:**

The World Council of Churches member churches, on several occasions, expressed their willingness to act for a just peace in the Middle East, and to come to a peaceful and just resolution to the conflict between Israel and Palestine (WCC statements on the issue from General Assemblies to Central Committees, to Executive Committees). However, we must confess that the ecumenical family is still all too often a house divided with respect to this issue. We have not achieved the necessary degree of unity in word, thought and deed to be effective witnesses for a just peace. Issues like the covenant, the promised land, the interpretation of many biblical texts, the question of occupation and its relation to Divine Law v/s international law, and other issues are still divisive. A common understanding about the root causes of the conflict would be very helpful. Theological differences that become an alibi for inaction should also be addressed. Churches must engage each other theologically and ethically in order to embrace a justice based approach that honours real concerns about growing anti-Semitism while addressing the urgent need to end the occupation and build a just peace in the Middle East.

The Central Committee of the World Council of Churches resolved at its meeting in September 2006 to establish a Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum (PIEF) as the cornerstone of a comprehensive ecumenical advocacy initiative on the Middle East. It described the forum as an instrument to “*catalyze and co-ordinate new and existing church advocacy for peace, aimed at ending the illegal occupation in accordance with UN resolutions, and demonstrate its commitment to inter-religious action for peace and justice that serves all the peoples of region.*”

Intense preparatory work has been done right after the Central Committee meeting to implement this decision. Less than one year later, in June 2007, the WCC brought all the churches in the Middle East together with many other churches, ecumenical bodies and partners around the world, calling them to join efforts and take coordinated and concrete actions that would lead to a just peace in the region, and mainly in Israel/Palestine. The Amman Call delivered at the end of the June International Peace Conference is being considered by many of the WCC constituency as a document to be “received” and to be acted upon earnestly.

Since that event, very positive echoes were received by the WCC from member churches and partner organizations. The inclusion of long-term 'peace building' themes in the work of the forum has encouraged such participants. The Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (SEK-FEPS) will be hosting an international theological consultation organized by WCC within the framework of the PIEF to deal with biblical and theological issues that may play a role in the conflict in Israel/Palestine and may hamper church advocacy for peace.

## **II- Issues that can be addressed by the conference:**

In the Amman meeting (June 2007), the Working Group on “theological and Biblical perspectives” encouraged that : “the Forum will work on (facilitate) developing literature, programs, and conferences that address Biblical texts and theological issues in the light of the current context and develop responses based on different approaches for a just peace in the Holy Land”. The Core Group of the PIEF stated that one of the main objectives of the forum would be: *“to develop and promote a common understanding on theological and biblical issues that might be behind the occupation”*.

Among the theological and Biblical issues that might be considered “underneath” and/or “behind” the conflict and that need to be addressed by the churches, we can identify three main ones:

- The “Promised Land”
- “Israel and the Church”
- “Peace and Justice”

We can also list a series of sub-topics that could be dealt with during the conference:

- God’s covenant with Israel
- Abraham as placeholder for God’s promise
- Zionism and the right to the land
- Christian Zionism and the fulfilment of prophecies
- Promised land in the Prophets and in the New Testament
- Holiness of the land in Christian theology
- God’s faithfulness towards his people and our response
- Israel in the Bible and the State of Israel
- The Biblical land and the coexistence of many peoples: a historical approach
- The people of God: ethical and moral implications
- First and second Testament as the one Bible of the Church
- The great commandment and the “neighbour”
- The limits of Peace and Justice in an unredeemed world
- The commitment of the Church to the quest of a just peace

## **III- Overall objectives:**

- To identify and to address -through presentations, discussions and working groups- theological and biblical issues that might be considered as lying behind the conflict.
- To develop and to promote a common understanding on theological and biblical issues that might be behind the conflict.
- To “de-sacralise” the conflict -mainly around the land- through a holistic approach to the biblical Message.
- To come to a theological understanding that different approaches of the same biblical and/or theological concepts are possible but should not prevent common action for peace, given that they are all based on respecting human dignity and freedom.

#### **IV- Specific objectives:**

- To constitute, on the basis of the acts of the theological conference, one or several drafting group(s) that will work on producing a handbook that can be used by Churches in concrete congregations and parishes. This handbook will deal with all the identified issues (during the preparatory process of the conference, and the conference itself) and tackle them in a multi-faceted and contextual approach from an ecumenical perspective.
- The handbook will aim at encouraging Christians to seek justice and peace rather than justifying occupation of a land through a “literal” and/or a “fundamentalist” reading of biblical texts.

#### **V- Target Group:**

- Theologians/Biblical scholars and church representatives from the whole ecumenical family
  - o 15 from the ME
  - o 20 from Europe
  - o 6 from NA (USA – Canada)
  - o 4 from Asia
  - o 4 from Africa
  - o 3 from LA
  - o 2 from the Pacific
- WCC and SEK-FEPS staff

#### **VI- Proposed program and methodology:**

- Main lectures with lengthy debates and discussions
- Panel presentations with debates and discussions
- Working groups addressing several issues
- Resource persons will introduce the themes of the working groups
- Listeners will be responsible for the synthesis of every day and the conference as a whole
- Listeners could become the drafting group of the future handbook
- The conference main language will be English.

#### **VII- Expected outcome(s):**

- Acts to be well documented. They will serve as:
  - o a basis for a future publication;
  - o a basis for different working groups (or for the “listeners”) that will draft the different chapters of the handbook.

#### **VI- Location and date:**

- Bern - Switzerland: hosted by the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (SEK-FEPS) and the Reformed Churches in Bern-Jura-Solothurn.
- September 10 (arrivals, preferably before 17h00) to 14 (departure), 2008.