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Berlin, den 6. Oktober 2011

Kairos Palestine – A Challenge for the Jerusalem Society

Dear Sisters and Brothers of the Churches in the Holy Land,

we hereby send you cordial greetings in the name of our common Lord, the living Jesus Christ, who is our peace.

The board and consultants of the Jerusalem Society have studied your “Word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering” (Kairos Palestine document) repeatedly and carefully since its publication in December 2009¹. We are writing you this response as a result of our discussion process and an expression of our affectionate concern. We see the Kairos Palestine document as a challenge for our own work. The Jerusalem Society has maintained sisterly/brotherly links with Christians in the Holy Land for almost 160 years. We are related, in particular, with the Evangelical Lutheran Church by a close partnership through which we provide many forms of support for its congregations, schools and other institutions. But, at the same time, we cannot lose sight of all the Christians because we are well aware that the historical and spiritual starting point for Christianity world-wide is the Holy Land.

So we are especially glad that the document “A moment of truth” demonstrates how strongly the ecumenical cooperation between Christians in the Holy Land has grown over recent years. We are impressed by the spiritual force which radiates from your witness of common prayer, biblical and theological reflection and sisterly/brotherly exchange of opinion. We welcome it gratefully as an

¹ The full text of this document in English can be found under www.kairospalestine.ps

encouragement and challenge to endeavour similarly, with the sisters and brothers of all the churches in our German context, to bring about an appropriate reception and response.

Many different events which have taken place or are still planned in connection with the Kairos Palestine document are evidence of this. It is important to the Jerusalem Society that the cry of our brothers and sisters from the apparently hopeless situation in the Holy Land should not go unheard but rather lead to untiring intercession, practical solidarity and political support. The members and board of the Jerusalem Society, in the regional churches and church institutions in the areas where they work, are contributing to enabling the justified concerns of the Palestinian Christians to be heard.

The occupation must end

As a result of our visits and contacts, we are personally aware of how profoundly the occupation and its related pressures affect everyday life, economic welfare, the family, social and church life in Palestine in an intolerable way. We share your opinion that oppression of this kind violates both biblical commands and international law and human rights. So we agree with the formulation that the occupation "is a sin against God and humanity": a sin against God because it breaks with God's will for love, justice and peace, and a sin against humanity because it causes suffering and humiliation for innumerable people every day. In line with the tradition of the prophets, we therefore see it not only as an individual, moral misdeed but as a sinful entanglement which holds people structurally captive.

In our opinion, Israel as the occupying power is not the only cause responsible for all the suffering and the negative situation in Palestine, because there are also regrettable omissions, errors and shortcomings among the Palestinians and their political leaders. Nevertheless, it is true that Israel must end the occupation if there is to be any chance of a positive coexistence of Israelis and Palestinians, of Jews, Muslims and Christians. We are grateful for your message that you consider such a common life in Israel and Palestine possible and are working for it.

Yes to non-violent resistance

We share your view based on the bible that resistance to the occupation can be an act of Christian witness in word and deed. Together with you, we emphasise that the right and duty to resist evil does not, however, justify evil ways and means and, in particular, that resistance must not cause death and should protect life. We should like to encourage and – wherever we can – support you in developing and

practising exemplary forms and expressions of civil disobedience and non-violent resistance.

We join you in condemning arbitrary and excessive use of force, the theft and destruction of property and the humiliation or even killing of human beings, even if this takes place with the justification or even official authorisation of the state of Israel. Violent acts on the Palestinian side are equally reprehensible. We should like to encourage you as Christians to raise your voices against the advocacy of such things in the Palestinian society because they, too, constitute "sin against God and humanity".

Recognition of a Palestinian state now

We therefore also welcome your urgent appeal to abandon mutual hostility with the violence it entails and to look for and prepare a way to a constructive form of coexistence for people in the Holy Land which will benefit all parties. We consider the present efforts to achieve recognition by the United Nations for a Palestinian state within the borders of 1967 a hopeful step and we would wish that it also be received in Israel as a convincing, clear sign of the will of all Palestinians to live together with the people in Israel in safety with mutual respect for state structures and recognised borders. Those who seriously believe in a two state solution must now stand up for it.

As far as one can tell, the time will come when it is too late, because the area within which a Palestinian state could be established has almost disappeared as a result of the decades of unrestricted settlement policy pursued by the state of Israel. Hence the request of the Palestinians should be granted now and the Palestinian state recognised by the UNO. Otherwise, what alternative will remain? Will it not boil down either to a bi-national state or to the continued oppression or even expulsion of the Palestinians? But since all parties support a Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel, the time has come to create this Palestinian state. In our own various contexts we should like to join you in pressing for the overcoming of enemy stereotypes and fears. That also includes the assurance that violence and even the threat of destruction have expressly been renounced.

Peace education in the Christian schools

We know that your Christian schools make a major contribution to conveying the importance of non-violence to young people, to developing creativity in civil resistance and practising forms and methods of constructive conflict resolution. We also gratefully welcome this as a means for counteracting the widespread prejudices against "the Palestinians" in our context; these prejudices are the lasting result of terrorist activities in the past and are repeatedly nourished by acts

of violence in the present as well. Christians cannot accept that perpetrators of violence and murderers are set before young people as heroes and martyrs or as examples.

Yes to the election of the Jewish people – but no political misuse

We have learnt to be sensitive to all the threats to which people of the Jewish faith are exposed. So we stand for the biblical witness to their being the first chosen, and to the covenant promise for the Jewish people. Even though we – like you in your document – are convinced of God’s missionary command for all people, this should not be misinterpreted as cancelling God’s faithfulness to the covenant with the Jewish people.

On the other hand, we are pained by the fact that there are nationalistic religious groups in the state of Israel which misunderstand and misuse the covenant promise as a pretext for land grabbing and even for expelling Palestinian inhabitants. We are convinced that such behaviour does lasting damage to the future of the state of Israel. Therefore we also protest against any kind of Christian theology in our context which distorts the bible along such lines. Together we face the challenge of providing arguments to counter any biblical-religious justification for political claims or even for evil and violence.

Yes to a boycott – but only of the settlements

We see the necessity of measures against the Israeli policy of settlements on Palestinian land in violation of international law. For this reason we support your call for a ban on goods and economic activities which originate directly from illegal settlements or indirectly promote occupation. But we believe that the effect of the message directed specifically against the occupation becomes less convincing if it is given the general label “boycott against Israel”.

We consider it helpful to have positive signs such as recommending the purchase of Palestinian products and promoting economic activities which benefit the welfare of the people in Palestine. In our context, there is still a great need for more information about which products and economic activities should be brandmarked and which should be supported.

Sisters and brothers, we members of the Jerusalem Society support all endeavours which can enable both peoples in the Holy Land – the Palestinians and the Jewish people – to live together in freedom, security, justice and peace. For this reason, as the Jerusalem Society we want to deepen our fellowship with you and look for new approaches in the framework of ecumenical learning. We thank you for the stimuli for this in your document. In the situation which is hopeless at present, we cling with you to the hope of God’s salutary activity. For we all draw

strength from the promise of the Risen One: "Lo, I am with you always to the end of time."

With cordial greetings

On behalf of the Jerusalem Society (Berlin)

Bishop Dr. Hans-Jürgen Abromeit, Chairman