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AN INTERFAITH AND ECUMENICAL GATHERING FOR SYRIA

St Giles' Cathedral, 30th October 2012

The Very Rev Dr Finlay A.J. Macdonald
(Additional material, Douglas Galbraith)

How it came about

On Sunday 5th August, in the course of a sermon preached in St Giles' Cathedral, I made reference to the civil war in Syria. The following day I received an e-mail from a member of the congregation asking about links between the Church of Scotland and Christians in Syria and, more generally, about the engagement of western churches with the crisis there. I shared the e-mail with the Secretary of the World Mission Council and from that sharing and follow-up discussions with others emerged the idea of an ecumenical and interfaith 'Gathering for Syria'. This was envisaged as a national event for Scotland, to be attended by members of civic and faith communities and with the aim of expressing solidarity with the people of Syria. While an initiative of the Church of Scotland, the Gathering was also supported by the Edinburgh Inter-Faith Association and the City of Edinburgh Council. It took place in St Giles' Cathedral on the evening of Tuesday 30 October. It was a sombre and reflective occasion facilitated by appropriate readings, reflections, prayers and music. Some two hundred people attended.

THE ORDER

People gathered to **music** from the Middle East played by the Edinburgh-based Dunya Ensemble

Words of welcome were conveyed by the Minister of St Giles' Cathedral, the Very Rev Dr Gilleasbuig Macmillan

There was sung the hymn **Immortal, invisible, God only wise**¹ containing the words 'To all, life thou givest, to both great and small; / in all life thou livest, the true life of all'. It was sung to St Denio, founded on a Welsh folk melody

Dr Macdonald then gave this **Bidding**

In March, 2003 as Moderator of the General Assembly, I visited Syria as a guest of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon. I met with members and leaders of churches within the Synod – in Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo. In Aleppo I also met with the Mufti of that city; in Damascus I met with the Greek and Syriac Patriarchs and with the Grand Mufti of Syria. All these conversations were cordial and friendly and, as a western church representative, I felt most welcome, notwithstanding the fact that this was on the very eve of the American-led invasion of Iraq.

For me one of the most memorable moments of that visit was an invitation from the Grand Mufti, Sheik Kuftaro, to convey a Christian greeting to those gathered for Friday prayers in Damascus' Abu Nour Mosque. This was a singular honour and underlined what I had come to sense were good relations between Christianity and Islam in Syria. One small but significant detail of that occasion will long remain with me. It was when the Grand Mufti welcomed me as his 'cousin in faith' and, continuing the family image, explained to his large congregation that I was a follower of their 'Uncle Jesus Christ'.

It is in that family spirit that we gather here this evening, on the initiative of the Church of Scotland with the support of the Edinburgh Inter-Faith Association and the City of Edinburgh Council. We are people who belong to different faith traditions but between these traditions there is a kinship which can – and in these days must – be more than historical. One of the

many tragic aspects of what is happening in Syria today is a forcible severing of these cousinly ties and their replacement by distrust, enmity and fear – what William Dalrymple, writing recently in the *Guardian*, referred to as ‘the ripping apart of Syria’s closely woven sectarian patchwork.’

So we come together this evening as cousins in faith.

At the same time we recognise that a gathering such as this will include people of no particular religious affiliation who also strive to create more just societies and a fairer, brighter world, and whose motivation consists of good will and a compassionate concern for human need.

The Latin word ‘precare’ meaning ‘to pray’ lies at the root of our English word ‘precarious’ – a word which well describes the situation in Syria today. So, as we gather to think of Syria, let us unite in prayer, in meditation, in reflection, in the kinship of faith and shared humanity, in this ancient, holy place, where for centuries people have gathered in their precariousness, in search of comfort and hope.

*The **Beatitudes** were read by the Rev Lily Twist, Chair of the Scotland District of the Methodist Church*

*An **account of the current crisis**, set within its historical context, was given by Thomas Pierret, Lecturer in Contemporary Islam, University of Edinburgh*

*Reflective **Middle Eastern Music** was offered by the Dunya Ensemble*

*In the absence of Rev Adeeb Awad, former General Secretary of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, who was unable to take up the invitation to attend because of the current situation, the Very Rev Dr Andrew McLellan read **messages from Churches in Syria**, which included the following:*

From the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon (3/9/12):
edited from a longer message

The intensity of violence, the huge number of innocent people killed, the disruption in the major cities where our churches lived and served in peace for centuries, these have gone beyond description, or even imagination.

Some of our churches are still unable to meet regularly, like in Homs; the churches in Edleb, Damascus, Aleppo and other places are affected partially or totally.

Naturally, no Christian community can escape the fate of the communities in which they live, and thus all share in the suffering and the struggle for life, and all feel the loss of the basic conditions for a normal life. It is guessed that refugees in neighbouring countries number some two million, and so many families in towns and villages host displaced families. We as a church are trying to do what is possible with very limited resources, and this makes it hard to reach all we want and need to reach.

Friends, we appeal to you to continue to pray for us and with us for God's peace and for God's righteousness to prevail in Syria. We appeal to all those who are able to help towards a peaceful solution – no more killing and no more destruction. Pray for us to have hope, and to be able to help our people have hope.

In Christ, The Rev Fadi Dagher, General Secretary of the Synod.

From Samir Nassar, Maronite Archbishop of Damascus (21/10/12):
edited from a longer message

On this Sunday (21st October), between the liturgies of 9 and 11am, a car bomb shook the Christian quarter of Bab Touma in Damascus, leaving thirteen victims, dozens injured, and significant damages to the surroundings. Scenes of fear and panic: parents running to search for their children in the schools (Sunday is a working day in Syria), burned cars, shredded bodies, with sirens of ambulances increasing the sense of being in an apocalyptic time. And always the same question: Why? A few scattered believers in the church began to pray the rosary while kneeling in prayer to our Lady of Peace.

Bab Touma is an historic district of the old city, one which has known many martyrs, and through which St Paul came at his conversion and baptism. Since the beginning of the crisis, this district has been spared. Is this gratuitous violence to scare the last remaining Christians? Many have taken the route of Exodus, others are ready for a hasty departure – but it is difficult to turn the page and go. A church without its faithful is a mute witness.

I said the great mass on Sunday evening to 23 people only, praying for the victims of the morning and for the Muslims in Syria who celebrate Al Adha on the 26th, while in mourning and silence. The Christian message is primarily that of the Cross of salvation, of love, of forgiveness. Will we have the courage to assume the prophetic adventure? Faced with this challenge and in this chaotic and bitter loneliness, we need so much your prayers and your friendship.

*Participants here listened to **Song Without Words Op 30 No 3 (Mendelssohn)** played on the piano by Christopher Harding, accompanist at the University of Edinburgh and Napier University*

*Verses on the theme of **Peace from the Qu'ran** were read by Molham Shurbaji, formerly Lecturer in Architecture, University of Damascus*

(It has not been possible to reproduce the Arabic text, read at the Gathering, but the translations, which were also given, are printed, with the commentary which accompanied them)

Like all other religions, Islam promotes peace, love and harmony among people. Actually the word Islam, in addition to meaning submission (to God), is also derived from the Arabic word Salaam (peace). Thus, no wonder why the salutation in Islam is: 'Al-Salamu Alaikum' (Peace be upon you). This is similar to Shalom in Hebrew. In this regard, Prophet Mohammad ordered his fellow Muslims to salute others, Muslims or non-Muslims, with peace when he said: 'Peace before Speech'. It is a rule in Islam that during war time, an enemy warrior who pronounces the word peace is totally immune.

O mankind, we have created you from a male and a female, and have made you nations and tribes that you may know each other. Surely the noblest of you, in Allah's sight, is the one who is most pious, righteous. Surely Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.

Therefore, the religion of Islam (Submission), advocates freedom, peace and mutual agreement and admonishes aggression. The following verses make that very clear.

[Quran 5:87] ...and do not aggress; GOD dislikes the aggressors.

[Quran: 7:199] ...You shall resort to pardon, advocate tolerance, and disregard the ignorant.

Goodness and evil are not equal.
Repel evil with what is better.
Then that person with whom there was hatred,
may become your intimate friend!
And no one will be granted such goodness
except those who exercise patience and self-restraint,
none but people of the greatest good fortune.
Quran 41:34-35

We just best continue to support the best around, green programs, *inter-faith dialogue* in promoting *social harmony*, more friendliness, much more friendliness, and not least, more LOVE and AFFECTION among all.

This was followed by the *Muslim Call to Prayer*

In preparation for prayer, *Des pas sur la neige* (Debussy) was played on the piano by Christopher Harding

Extempore prayer was then offered by the Minister of the Cathedral, in language appropriate to the inter-faith setting

Then was sung the hymn, *Thy kingdom come! on bended knee / the passing ages pray*,² which looked ahead to the knowledge, peace, and righteousness which would mark 'the promised day of God'.

The Gathering concluded with appropriate music from the Dunya Ensemble

Participants then gathered for conversation and refreshments in the Moray Aisle

1 by Walter Chalmers Smith, the 'cultured and catholic-minded' minister of Free High Church, Edinburgh until 1894, and Moderator of the Free Church Assembly in its Jubilee Year (1893).

2 by Frederick Lucian Mosmer (d. 1929), an American Unitarian minister. The tune it was sung to was *Irish*, originally found in a Dublin collection of 1749. The hymns were accompanied on the organ by the Master of Music of St Giles', Michael Harris.