

Overture xxx: On Responding to the Current Syrian Crisis

The Presbytery of _____ overtures the 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the PC(USA) to respond to the crisis in Syria focused on four principal goals: stop the killing; work for reconciliation; alleviate the suffering; and deepen PC(USA) partnership with Syrian Christians.

Stop the Killing:

- A. Direct the Stated Clerk of the PC(USA) to send a message to the President of the United States, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and to each United States Senator and Representative to use all diplomatic means, in cooperation with other major parties in the Syrian crisis, to bring about a durable ceasefire, in tandem with a cessation of military support to any participant in the conflict.

Work for Reconciliation:

- B. As a part of the necessary work of Syrian reconciliation, direct the Stated Clerk of the PC(USA) to communicate to the United States government and other parties involved the need to contribute fully to the humanitarian, human rights, and peace-building work of the United Nations. Encourage the United Nations to cooperate fully with these efforts, to involve civil society wherever possible, and to advocate measures to stabilize a more just world order in this region, encouraging nonviolent coexistence among religious and ethnic groups. Direct the Office of Public Witness in Washington, DC, and the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations to support this witness in their work.

Alleviate the Suffering:

- C. Direct the Stated Clerk of the PC(USA), Presbyterian World Mission, and Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to call on congregations and presbyteries, non-profit organizations, the United States government, and agencies of the United Nations, to provide robust financial support for organizations engaged in alleviating the suffering of Syrians, especially those displaced inside Syria and those now living as refugees in neighboring countries.
- D. Direct the Stated Clerk of the PC(USA) to call on the United States government to re-open Syrian refugees' entry into the United States and substantially expand the number of refugees admitted. Encourage the United States to maintain a more generous policy toward refugees based on our identity as a pluralistic nation.
- E. Direct the Stated Clerk of the PC(USA) to call on the United States Department of Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, to review and revise the current program of economic sanctions on Syria so as to reduce their painful impact on ordinary Syrian families and on religious, civic, educational and medical bodies unassociated with any form of terrorism.

Deepen our Partnership with Syrian Christians:

- F. Direct Presbyterian World Mission to provide an annotated list of media sources about events in Syria and the situation of PC(USA)'s Christian partners.
- G. Encourage PC(USA) pastors and congregations to build personal contacts and partnerships with Syrians: covenant to pray regularly for congregations in Syria, make visits to Syria, and develop relationships with Syrians in the United States. Encourage congregations to work with Syrian refugees now in the United States, to help and encourage them in ways that express Christian love.

Rationale

The situation in Syria continues to be one of the worst humanitarian crises of the present time. Since the conflict erupted in 2011, over 470,000 Syrians have been killed, many more than 5.1 million documented refugees have fled the country in addition to thousands of undocumented refugees, and 6.3 million have been displaced internally [2016 data]. More than half the population of Syria have been killed or displaced from their homes and 13.5 million are in need of humanitarian assistance.

The Christian community in Syria has roots stretching back to the first century. With the second largest number of Christians in the Middle East, this vibrant community, widely dispersed across the country, can play a significant role in the future of the country and the region. Over the past forty years, Christians, along with other religious minorities, have been protected from persecution by the secular policies of the Syrian government. In areas where the Syrian government is not in control, moderate Muslims, Christians from various traditions, and other minorities have often had their places of worship damaged or destroyed and their followers persecuted and forced to flee.

Today, that Christian community is significantly threatened by possible outcomes of the conflict in which control of the country could pass to Islamists intent on establishing a government that imposes a highly restrictive interpretation of Islam. In 2016, the General Assembly of PC(USA) affirmed the need to support Christians in the Middle East. Similar concerns for an end to violence and work for community reconciliation underlie the Good Friday Agreement (Northern Ireland) and the Ta'if Accords (Lebanon).

Recognizing the real dangers of an Islamist state and the scale of violence and suffering already experienced by the Syrian people does not excuse the widely reported human rights abuses of the Syrian government. While the violent reaction of the Syrian government to peaceful protestors during the 2011 Arab Spring shocked the world, the swift militarization and escalation of the conflict thereafter has spawned a conflict where all sides have committed or condoned crimes against humanity. Restorative justice, rather than retributive justice, may be possible in post-conflict Syria. Faith in God's justice remains unshakable.

Stop the Killing:

The first steps in the long process of reconciliation on all levels must involve shifting the focus away from efforts to gain an overwhelming military victory, dividing the country into separate states or other governmental outcomes that result in a weakened Syrian state. Concentrating on achieving a durable ceasefire would enable diplomatic discussions and negotiations, without pre-conditions, in which Syrians from all sides can play the central role in shaping their future and achieving their human rights as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Syria is a signatory nation. The examples of Libya, Yemen and Iraq show the dangers of losing a functional central government.

The crisis has been made immensely more lethal and complicated as the numerous combatants have each found outside supporters ready to send in fighters, weapons, and money to bolster partisan efforts. The arrival of Islamic extremists with foreign backing has further complicated the violence that is taking place throughout Syria. As long as the supply of military resources continues to flow into Syria, the prospects for diplomatic progress remain severely limited. A diplomatic approach to achieve a durable ceasefire must be accompanied by an end to the flow of military support from all outside sources.

“Blessed are the peacemakers...” Matthew 5:9

Work for Reconciliation:

The work of reconciliation must be done by Syrians, in the space created by a ceasefire and the demilitarization of the conflict. Both the US government and PC(USA) must affirm the Syrian commitment to maintaining a unified nation based on principles that affirm the rights of all minorities. The goal of a civil government, where all religions are respected without interference in the affairs of any religious group, is paramount.

The US has an important role in bringing about a ceasefire and the demilitarization of the Syrian conflict. Christian understanding of the roles of faith and forgiveness has much to contribute to the process of reconciliation. In binding up the social and psychological wounds of war, reconciliation will have to address the long-standing grievances and aspirations of the Syrian people, in addition to the alienating consequences of war borne by individuals and communities.

“... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” 2 Corinthians 5:19

Alleviate the Suffering:

With an estimated 11.5 million people displaced from their homes and with economic systems and social networks disrupted, the need for immediate assistance is immense. Refugees in neighboring countries, those farther afield, and those internally displaced within Syria, require urgent assistance. The World Bank estimates that more than a quarter of the housing and over half of the country's medical and educational facilities have been damaged or destroyed. It also observes that the breakdown of social and economic systems, and the destruction of trust among citizens, continues to have a greater economic impact than the destruction of physical infrastructure. Long-term help is needed for the reconstruction and rebuilding of the country's infrastructure. The National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, PC(USA)'s partner denomination in the area, and Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, require financial support for their effective programs, which respond to needs of people of all faiths impacted by this crisis.

The requirements for the tasks of rebuilding are so immense that a major international effort will be required. The US government must increase its level of humanitarian and economic support for Syria and encourage international organizations such as the United Nations to do the same. All nations - including the United States - need to meet their financial obligations to the UN. Due to unmet pledges and obligations, the UN has been forced to cut back on its support of refugees and internally displaced persons. The continuing fighting makes immediate assistance more difficult, and sometimes renders it impossible. The longer-term task of rebuilding can begin in earnest only when some form of negotiated settlement is in place.

The United States has a moral obligation to participate in the worldwide response to the desperate flight of people seeking to escape the brutal situation in Syria. In response to such desperation, the US government should reopen its doors to a significant increase in the number of Syrian refugees. All refugees admitted currently face rigorous screening and exhaustive vetting by five of the nation's top security organizations, following years of screening and vetting by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The number of Syrian refugees admitted to the United States to date – only 18,007, between October 2011 and December 2016 – is far too low in terms of the numbers in need; the current freeze is unacceptable. The US should accept its fair share of refugees looking for permanent resettlement. It is essential to continue to support the efforts of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and others engaged in working with congregations to facilitate resettling Syrian refugees in the US, as noted by the General Assembly in 2016.

For those Syrians who have remained in their own country, internally displaced or living in their own homes, the sharp downward spiral of the economy has had an immense impact on their standard of living. A key factor contributing to this downturn has been the sanctions imposed by the United States. Those sanctions, enacted in order to punish the Syrian government for its support of terrorism, violence, and human rights abuses, have had a major impact on the welfare of all Syrian citizens. PC(USA) Syrian partners have reported that, as a result of the sanctions, it has been very difficult for them to get permission to undertake international financial transactions or to import materials and supplies needed to establish or operate businesses, or for foreigners to provide assistance to support such activities. The licensing framework and export control requirements are complex, often requiring costly legal analysis, and acting as an impediment to international financing and trade.

The downward economic spiral has led to scarcities and price increases of everyday commodities while exacerbating difficulties in operating businesses. Syria's economic destruction has aided the recruitment of young men to fight for extremist groups in order to support their families. The current system of sanctions must be reviewed to make it more supportive of the needs of Syrian civilians so they can rebuild their economic livelihood

"... 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?' ... and the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'" Matthew 25: 37b-40

Deepen PC(USA) Partnership with Syrian Christians:

PC(USA)'s Syrian Christian partners caution that US perceptions of reality are misinformed by the fragmented, inaccurate, and often subjective reporting of Western media. Relying on more diverse information sources is crucial to a clearer understanding of the Syrian crisis.

Beyond accessing more balanced news sources about Syria, American Presbyterians can deepen their personal spiritual formation as they build contacts and partnerships with Syrian Christians, who are Christianity's elder sisters and brothers in the faith. Such opportunities are made possible through visits to Syria sponsored by Presbyterian World Mission's Syria Lebanon Partnership Network, and other denominational and ecumenical agencies such as the Outreach Foundation. PC(USA) partners on the ground can assist those seeking to understand the complexity of the conflict. Presbyterian Disaster Assistance materials offered to PC(USA) congregations working with Syrian refugees now in the United States greatly enhance community building. These relationships enable US citizens to learn from Syrian refugees and also help ease the difficult transition that many of them face.

Prayer must undergird personal engagement with the Syrian conflict: prayer for Syrian people who suffer from the crisis, prayer for decision makers responsible for crafting and implementing just and compassionate policies, and personal prayer by each person as they seek the continual guidance of the Holy Spirit in search of ways forward in this complex situation.

"... 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.'" Luke 10:27b

"...Pray without ceasing...for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." 1Thessalonians 5:17-18.