

Report of the Association of Theological  
Institutes in the Middle East  
To  
The Ninth General Assembly  
Of  
The Middle East Council of Churches  
Paphos-Cyprus  
26-30 November 2007

In the Name of the Father, the Son,  
And the Holy Spirit  
Amen

Your Holiness, Beatitude,  
Your Eminence and Lordship  
Most Reverend Fathers and Pastors  
The Honorable Secretary General of the Middle East Council of Churches  
Respectable brethren and sisters

To start with, I would like to convey to you the distinguished salutations of the deans and professors of the colleges and institutes of theology in the Middle East affiliated to the four Church Families member in the Association of Theological Institutes in the Middle East. This respectable association is considered amongst the first ecumenical movements in our beloved East, contributed and still contributes tremendously, within the umbrella of the Middle East Council of Churches to which it belongs, in promoting the spirit of ecumenical and brotherly relations between the colleges and institutes of theology, in stimulating its activities, and encouraging the spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding among its students and professors, and the continuous improvement of the level of theological education and the study of the relationship between theological education and the reality lived by the churches, and in encouraging the Arab Christian cultures and the heritage of the various oriental churches, and the stimulation of theological publications and other teaching materials in addition to establishing brotherly relationships with similar institutions outside the Middle East Region...

**1. Introducing the Association**

The Association consists of the colleges and institutions of theology of the Middle Eastern churches member in the Middle East Council of Churches. Currently it includes twenty two theological colleges and institutions: (13) in Egypt, (7) in Lebanon, (1) in Syria, (1) in Iraq.

The Association was established in 1967 under the name of the Association of Theological Education in the Near East, and in 1980 it became the Association of Theological Institutes in the Middle East. Its executive secretariat was held by the late Fr Jean Corbon (1980-1992), Fr Elias Khalifeh (1992-1998), who is currently **the general** **الرئيس العام** of the Lebanese Maronite Congregation of Monks, then by Mr Michel Nsayr (1998-2004) who is currently the representative of the World Council of Churches in the Middle East, and since 2004 to this day Fr Daniel Courieh, and currently Bishop Iqlimis Daniel Courieh the Vice-Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church.

## **2. Important Events: October 2004-October 2007**

**A.** The regular periodic meeting of the deans and directors of the affiliated colleges and institutes was held twice. The first meeting convened in the Institute of St John Damascene, Balamand, Lebanon, September 1 - 3, 2005, and the second in The Evangelical Theological College, Abbassyah, Cairo, Egypt, on October 15, 2006. The deans and directors discussed and debated the important organizational, administrative, and financial matters related to the functioning of the Association, in addition to some future activities. The third meeting, i.e. that of this year, was not held until now due to specific circumstances related to some colleges and due to the security and political circumstances of the Middle East, and that despite the fact that this meeting is of such great importance that it may be labeled constitutional: for within its framework must be elected a new chairperson and a new executive committee of the Association for a new three-year term.

**B.** In collaboration with the MECC Unit on Life and Service, the General Chaplaincy of Prisons in Lebanon, and the Institute of Human Rights in Lebanon, our Association held a training session for theology students in Lebanon and Syria, at the House of Lawyers in Beirut. A large number of theology students attended this event, in addition to a number of lawyers, judges, prison officers, and staff working with the general chaplaincy of prisons in Lebanon. The lecturer in this training session was Professor Rob Allen, Head of the Department of Criminal and Restorative Justice in England. At the close of the session theology students, accompanied by the executive secretary and the General Chaplain of prisons in Lebanon, visited the Roumieh prison where they inspected the various sections and dialogued with the prisoners as an application of the concepts and theories that they learned during the session. They prayed and held a Holy Mass with the Christian prisoners.

**C.** A three-session local consultation on bioethics for Lebanese and Syrian students was held. The consultation dealt with theologically very important bioethical issues such as: when does the embryo's life begin? The embryo;

abortion; cloning; fatherhood and motherhood; sex and its human significance; artificial insemination; illness and handicap, transplant of organs; donation of organs; the theology of death; euthanasia; and the like. The concluding statement of this consultation is found in the attached annex. Holding the same consultation for theology students in Egypt, in one intensified session, was extremely difficult and close to impossible, due to disagreements between the colleges and institutes on time, place, issues, and lecturers.

**D.** The choirs of colleges and institutes in Lebanon and Syria participated in the traditional annual week of prayer for the Unity of Churches in close coordination and cooperation with MECC Unit on Faith and Unity. The ceremonies included chanting religious hymns and songs, prayers, and spiritual meditations. These activities were hosted by St George Cathedral of the Maronite Church in Beirut (2005+2006), and the University of Holy Ghost, Kaslik (2007).

**E.** Under the heading of "Promoting the Culture of Human Rights", and in collaboration and coordination with MECC Unit on Peace, Justice and Human Rights two regional training sessions were held for the students of Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria. The first session was held at St Marc Center in Cairo, (Feb. 9-12, 2006); the second was held at St Jacob al-Barad'i, al-Atshaneh, Lebanon, (Jan. 11-13, 2006). The training focused on an introducing human rights, taking cases of glaring violations of human rights as starting points for analysis and discussion: human rights in theological studies, the role of the Church in supporting human rights, the notion of cultural particularity, women and human rights, discrimination against women, citizenship, equality and human rights, how to promote the culture of citizenship, human rights-centered education, with special emphasis on this education and its impact on children.

**F.** The Association also holds annually a number of events on the local level, such as:

*For the students in Lebanon and Syria:*

- Monthly meeting of the student committee
- The general gathering of theology students attended by more than 100 male and female students from various colleges and institutes. It includes a lecture and a social get-together, educational games, hosted by one of the colleges for one whole day. In 2005 the gathering took place at St Paul's Institute, Harissa, Lebanon, under the heading "What does society expect from the theologian?" In 2006, the gathering took place at St Joseph's Institute, the Jesuits, Beirut, under the heading of "Religion and Politics". In 2007, we could not hold the gathering due to the security situation which Lebanon was going through, and to the financial situation.

- Two days spiritual exercise, plus some lectures on the history of one of the Middle East Churches (the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Catholic Church, the Evangelical Churches, and the Greek Orthodox Church).
- Recreational trip to the most important historical and archeological sites in Lebanon and Syria (Tyre, Sidon, Cana, in South Lebanon, and the Qadisha Valley in North Lebanon...)
- Meeting of teachers of major subjects given at the theological colleges and institutes on the "Status of theology in the church and society"

*For the students in Egypt:*

- Periodic meetings of the student committee
- Sports Day gathering hosted always by the Catholic College of Religious Sciences in Ma'adi, Cairo, due to the available resources. The gathering is attended by more than 300 male and female students from all theology colleges and institutes in Egypt. Students spend a whole day in various sports contests and activities.
- Cultural Day gathering hosted by one of the colleges or institutes, during which an important issue is analyzed and discussed (AIDS 2005, Politics and Religion, Politics and the Church 2006)
- Meeting of teachers of major theological topics.

**G.** New College joins the Association: College of Ecclesial Sciences (Sagesse) Lebanon, during the Deans Meeting of 2006, it is expected that the upcoming meeting will also witness the joining in of the Episcopal College of Theology, Egypt.

**H.** Participation in the Tenth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Brazil through two female students, in view of following up on the lectures and sessions on Ecumenism, Ecumenism in the Bible, the theological culture of Ecumenism, Ecumenism and the plurality of races, Ecclesiological Ecumenism, Dialogue between Religions and the challenges of Multi-Confessionalism.

**I.** In collaboration with the University of the Holy Ghost/Kaslik, publication of the Apostolic Canons of St Iqlimis of Rome and, the Apology of Christians and Dialogue with Triphona by St Justine) under number 6 & 7 of the Series of Liturgical Texts initiated by the late Fr Corbon. The two books were published under ATIME's sponsorship, with a generous contribution from the University of the Holy Ghost/Kaslik who paid the cost of printing both books.

### **3. Vision and desiderata for the future**

Our Association strives with all its forces to achieve its goals; and since it emanates from the heart of the churches, then these are bound to care for it through:

A. Promoting the right ecumenical theology, and strengthening academic cooperation between colleges and institutes (which is almost nonexistent now) through:

- Establishing a common center for advanced studies (ecumenical or otherwise) for all the colleges and institutes, even on the local level (of course I am repeating here a wish that was voiced by previous executive secretaries)
- Working on the improvement of curricula and methodologies.
- Swapping books and publications, for it is imperative that the library of each institute or college possess the full curricula of other institutes and colleges.
- Swapping teachers
- Electronic periodicals

**B.** Holding regional ecumenical consultations for theology students on some important contemporary topics such as theological anthropology, and bioethics.

I won't be long, but I will conclude with a plea: I entreat you all to grant us support, encouragement, cooperation, and prayer for our Association to carry out its mission perfectly in a way that glorifies our Churches and guides them on the way of Ecumenism and Unity. Most of our students are servants, shepherds, and teachers of the Church in the future. They carry our common mission and witness in the Middle East, the cradle of Christianity.

Thank you for listening.

Executive Secretary of ATIME

Bishop Daniel Courieh.