

Harvest

The Houses of Parliament, London

Awareness Foundation: building peace through education

www.awareness-foundation.com

Special Report 4th International Conference



Making history: delegates arrive at the House of Lords for the Declaration of the Closing Statement and Action Plan

Conference Declaration delivered at the House of Lords, 7th November 2018



Conference Declaration, House of Lords, 8th November 2018

Delivered by The Revd Nadim Nassar, Awareness Foundation Executive Director, at the House of Lords.

"The Awareness Foundation hosted an international conference on 7th and 8th November 2018, where Christian and Muslim leaders from the West and The Near East discussed topics including the role of Christians in peace-building and healing communities, the immediate existential threats that face people in the Near East, relationships between Christians and Muslims in the Near East, what Western Christians can do for the region and its Christians and finally, the role of business and media in building peace.

"We were thankful that the Middle East Council of Churches and its General Secretary had a significant presence at our conference and that further cooperation and strategic planning together will be pursued.

"Our action plan, drawn up at the end of the conference by all of those participating, falls into five categories:

MEDIA

- Offering teaching programmes and short films within our PAX media programme for Christian media in the Near East.

WOMEN

- Developing programmes to empower women, socially, economically and spiritually in the Near East.

YOUTH and CHILDREN

- Developing a youth exchange programme within the Near East and between the Near East and the West
- Developing a plan to support the development of education of young people across the Near East including Ambassadors for Peace, and Little Heroes

EDUCATION and SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

- Working with clergy, organisations and decision-makers to raise their awareness of the situation and the role of Near Eastern Christians
- Encourage Near Eastern Christian voices to be heard at both a national and local church level in the West through the Travelling Fellowship programme, delegations and our PAX Media programme.

REBUILDING

- Encourage sustainable Human Capital Development through building partnerships with providers and providing information and educational resources."

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This Declaration will guide us as we plan for the future. Our strategy for years to come will be inspired by this exciting document as we strive to fulfil our vision and mission.



The Future of the Near East: The Role of Christians in Building Peace and Healing Communities

In November 2018, the Awareness Foundation held their 4th International Conference at the Copthorne Tara Hotel in Kensington, London, in the presence of our Royal Patron HRH The Countess of Wessex GCVO.

Huda Nassar, the Foundation's Director for the Middle East, welcomed the many participants from around the world and



The Revd Nadim Nassar said the Opening Prayer.



The keynote speeches were given by our Royal Patron, HRH The Countess of Wessex GCVO, and Dr Souraya Bechealany, the first female Secretary General of the Middle East Council of Churches.



In her speech, which officially opened the Conference, the Countess (*photo, above*) said that *"the People in the Near East need to know they are not forgotten. Together, we must seek to find solutions to incredibly complex issues."* She implored those present to help the people of the Near East to find an end to violence, an end that could only come through a unity borne out of genuine reconciliation.



Dr Bechealany (*photo, above*) called for an ambitious and courageous vision, backed

by rational methodology; she concluded by calling on the Holy Spirit to assist us *"for we have nothing to fear and everything to believe."*

The two key themes addressed at the Conference were:

- How can Christians in the Near East actively participate in the healing of the community in their region and have a better future?
- How can Christians around the World support their Near Eastern brothers and sisters in their peacebuilding efforts?

We were fortunate to welcome guest speakers and panellists from the Levant, Canada, the USA, the EU and, of course, the UK. Participants were Christian and Muslim.



HRH meets some of the Near Eastern speakers

Day One: Panel Discussions

7th November 2018



The first talk, on **“The Future of the Near East: The Role of Christians in Building Peace and Healing Communities”**, was given by two of our Patrons, H. E. Archbishop Angaelos and Archbishop Kevin McDonald KC*HS, together with our Executive Director, **The Revd Nadim Nassar** (photo, above).

Archbishop Kevin said that *“We need coherence; there are so many initiatives and organisations in the region, and we desperately need cooperation and collaboration to avoid duplication of effort. We must demonstrate this coherence within the Christian communities, bringing true dialogue between churches.”*

Archbishop Angaelos: *“Jesus Christ is the advocate of all humanity; there should be no distinction between Christian or Muslim. The early Church was divided into Jewish or Gentile, yet salvation and liberty was granted to all. It is too easy to forget that freedom and rights are not given by charters, but by God. We are called to live free. To be advocates as He is an advocate, then we must advocate for freedom for all.”*

The Revd Nadim Nassar: *“We must find a way to live side by side with our neighbours of other faiths, especially the Muslims, so that we can flourish together. This requires a sincere engagement that is based on honesty and respect, especially when it comes to our understanding of citizenship and belonging to the same country.”*

This was followed by a short film made by our Syrian **Ambassadors for Peace** about this project. We were joined online from Syria by our Middle East Coordinator, **Elza Nasra**, who talked about our work in the Near East and answered questions. The video link to Syria proved to be a highlight of the conference.



Elza from Syria (on screen) listens to Her Royal Highness' question

Elza Nasra: *“It is thrilling to see so many young people turning from anger and frustration to hope and enthusiasm for their future as they channel their energy positively to spread the culture of life and peace. Together with their friends of all faiths they are rebuilding their communities, creating a bright future for all.”*

In response to a question from Her Royal Highness, Elza said that *“Young Muslims are very ready to help because the Ambassadors for Peace all have Muslim friends. This is a very good sign. After seven years, Syrians have realised that only hand in hand can they build a better future.”*

Archbishop Angaelos said that the Ambassadors for Peace *“demonstrate amazing grace, calm and peace in the midst of war.”*

“What are the immediate existential threats that people, especially Christians, face in the Near East today?”



Our first panel discussion featured **The Revd Canon Chris Chivers, Sayyed Hayder Al-Khoei, The Revd Philippa Boardman MBE (facilitator), Archbishop Paul El-Sayah and The Revd Dr Habib Badr** (Photo above, left to right).

This panel presented both Christian and Muslim perspectives. The continuing conflict in the Near East creates more violence and division, as well as spawning even more extremist groups. Trust within communities has been severely damaged, our identities and our heritage are threatened, and the economy is in crisis; we cannot wait for ‘peace’ before we begin to work to rebuild - we have to act rather than just talk. As The Revd Dr Habib Badr, speaking first, said, *“the biggest existential threat facing the people of the Near East is talking rather than acting. We must live in faithfulness to the hope that is within us.”*

Archbishop Paul El-Sayah said *“The wars in the region must stop. We need a political solution, not a military one. If we stop arms and resources flowing in, then the fighting will end when the foreign aid stops.”*

Sayyed Hayder Al-Khoei, an associate fellow on the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House and a contributor to The Guardian newspaper, said that *“We need a much more open and frank dialogue between Christians and Muslims. We must stop relying on fairy-tale history where everything is the fault of “the imperialists” or just the birth of Israel. Sectarianism in Islam is as old as Islam.”*

The Revd Canon Chris Chivers: *“We ought to work at creating a deeper sense of shock at what is happening in the Near East. We must be sacrificial, and empty ourselves so that we can put ourselves in the shoes of others. God is self-emptying. We have to accept that people in the Near East need our sustained support.”*

In the Q&A session which followed, delegates agreed that this was now the time for action rather than just talking, and Ambassadors for Peace and Little Heroes, the Awareness Foundation’s programmes, were praised by many for achieving significant results.



“How do Muslims & Christians see each other?”



Our second panel comprised **Imam Qari Asim MBE, Zahra Kazmi, Christopher Bunting (facilitator), Fr Yousef Albanna, & The Revd Adnan Mouhiddin**.

The Revd Adnan Mouhiddin: *“Changes are needed for real integration and unity, and we need to invest heavily in young people. The young should not inherit our prejudices. We should encourage bonds of friendship. The Church should not be involved in politics, and it should not be*

silent on torture, atrocities, and corruption. The Church must set its priorities right. As it says in the Sermon on the Mount, "Where my treasure is, there my heart will be." We must put our treasure with God in Heaven.

Imam Qari Asim MBE said that *"We must share and learn from each other. The challenges we face today are not because of our scriptures, but because of the political, cultural and social realities that exist."* He added that *"Citizenship and shared values must be presented by all faiths. Our enemy should not be the 'other', but hatred of the 'other'. There are three models which we can follow: exclusivism (allowing other faiths no space); inclusivism (where everything is accepted); and pluralism (we can live side by side, believing in our own faith and deriving inspiration from others.)"*

Fr Yousef Albanna: *"The problem we face is caused by doctrine and education; we need secularism and equality of citizenship. Sadly, the law of the jungle is dominant, and real power is needed to impose law and security in the Near East. " He emphasised that arms sales and shipments to the regions must stop if the fighting is to stop."*

Zahra Kazmi, the cofounder of Save Muslim Heritage, said that, *"The Quran teaches us to view human diversity as a blessing. We must coexist without compromising faith, and view Christians as our brothers and sisters. The Christians belong to the Near East and they should be supported by everyone."*



In the Q&A session that followed, some felt that Western church leaders had neglected the Christians of the Near East. Communion, or a shared participation in a given reality was suggested as an alternative to the three models presented by Imam Qari. The Imam agreed that, *"shared values can bring us together so that we preserve our uniqueness but are we willing and confident to bring others into that participation?"*

At the end of the discussion, The Revd Adnan Mouhiddin said, *"As an ex-Muslim who had to flee, it is great to share platform with sunni and shi'a colleagues."* Fr Yousef Albanna replied, *"We want this version of Islam to prevail. Sadly, many Muslims still pray for the deaths of Christians and Jews."*

"Why should Christians remain in the Near East, and what can they offer the region?"



This panel featured Fr. **Gabriel Hachem**, **George Kanaan**, **Cherry Murdoch (facilitator)** and **Prof Dr Ketty Sarouphim-McGill**.

Prof Dr Ketty Sarouphim-McGill, associate professor of psychology and education at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, gave a fascinating PowerPoint presentation on 'Fear of the Other: Learned or Innate?' In her talk, she said that, *"We feel safer and more at ease with people who are like us. This distinction between the different categories of people, the "us versus them", starts as early as age six and can lead to a full-blown attitude of prejudice and bias. But it is possible to teach children tolerance and compassion through their role models adopting non-prejudiced attitudes. As Christians, our task is to break through the barriers of prejudice and reach out to others as the perfect example of emulating Christ."*

Fr. Gabriel Hachem said that very few Christians now remain in parts of the Near East as so many fled to escape the violence and the brutality of the conflict. *"Now more than ever, the mission and the identity of Christians in the Near East should be to witness to the Resurrection and the infinite love of God. Christianity was born in diversity, and Near Eastern Christians must be the first to celebrate that diversity, especially ecumenically. Ecumenism is needed like the soul. The people of the region should once again be able to offer the West a model of living together."*



George Kanaan, the CEO of the Arab Banking Association, said that “*Christians have so much to offer the Near East, in terms of providing a political, commercial and financial bridge with the West.*” He gave an example of how some Christians have found themselves acting as a ‘buffer’ between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims. “*Although Christians are numerically a minority, they are an indigenous part of society in the Near East and they should not be understood as the West understands minorities who are inevitably immigrants.*”

As before, this was followed by a Q&A Session which tackled topics including the importance of Christians remaining in the region, their role in healing and reconciliation, the pursuit of happiness and the use of ‘boxes and labels’ to stereotype each other. Those present strongly agreed that the Christians of the Near East have a major role to play in building a new, peaceful and equal society for the benefit of all. Even a small number of people can change the world.

Day Two: Panel Discussions

8th November 2018

“What can Christians in the West do to support Christians in the Near East?”



Panelists were **St. John Wright, Keith Brockbank (facilitator), Jamie Eyre, and The Revd Bonnie Evans-Hills.**

Keith Brockbank introduced the discussion by saying, “*Yesterday was about discussion; today is about solution-finding. There are two elements to this: the possibility of new initiatives, and nurturing what is already happening to support Christians in the Near East.*”

The Revd Bonnie Evans-Hills: “*Our biggest concern should be for the mental health of the younger generation in the Near East because of the awful things that they have seen. Aid isn’t necessarily focused on this – it’s more material usually. Mental health issues are much harder to engage with. Often, in the places that I have visited in the region, I see a muscular Western Christianity which sees indigenous Christians as fertile ground for conversion to a Western way of Christianity; this needs to be challenged as the wrong way to help Near Eastern Christians. We should be listening to the indigenous Christians of the region, not trying to impose our own way upon them.*”

Jamie Eyre, Director of Programmes and Partnerships at Embrace the Middle East, said that he “*wanted to flip the question on its head and ask: what should we not do as Christians in the west to help those in the ME? The answers are misrepresent, patronise and abandon. Christians have the right to live in the Near East. They are not interlopers – they are from there. I have heard people say that Christianity is European or American. But Jesus did not walk the streets of London! It is not our place to tell Christians in the Near East what to do, nor should we say whether they should stay or go. This is patronising. We must support whatever they decide. We should not abandon. Now is the time to do something – and we all can. We should pray for soft hearts; prayer is easy – we need to make the time to spend time in prayer. Another responsibility we have – to give. There are ways to support trustworthy connections and organisations that work in the Near East.*”



St. John Wright, Operations Director at the Awareness Foundation, said, *“We should start by asking – what comes after the vital material help that people need? Humanitarian aid fills the most basic needs, but the Awareness Foundation has a different approach: changing people’s lives by offering hope and a future. We need to stop the fighting, to convince the warring parties that they cannot win. We can also say to our political representatives: stop arming the two sides. If the resources stop flowing, the fighting will die out. The scars of wars cut deep into the cultural memory of Syria. What matters now is the winning of the peace. The people of the Near East deserve all of the help that we can offer them. We must build partnerships. We must empower those in the Near East to rebuild.”*

In the Q&A session, delegates discussed how we can empower vulnerable Christian communities without signalling that we are ‘Westerners coming to support our people’ in the region; citizenship and equality; and how to bring about an end to the wars in the Near East through raising our voice and demanding that Western governments put morality above financial gain.

“What is the role of business & media in building peace and healing communities?”



This discussion featured **The Revd Dr Habib Badr, Robert Davies, Richard Smart (facilitator), Barbara Meynert and The Lord Gordon of Strathblane CBE.**

Lord Gordon began the discussion, saying, *“Tourism can build peace, and it can be a motivation for peace. Tourism redistributes wealth, delivering money to the people working in venues, hotels and businesses. Terrorists stop tourism, taking bread from the mouths of their own people, and this can be used against them. The influence of the media is both good and bad. It is good when impartial media encourages discussion and shows the horror of modern warfare on TV. But media without regulation, especially social media, can promote “fake news”; some assume that videos shown on social media are as accurate as if shown on the BBC.”* He continued, *“There is a mistaken equation in the West that democracy equals happiness. The United States is very guilty of ticking a box once a country has elections. The truth is that democracy without the civic infrastructure to back it up is a sham. As for the choice of government in Syria, this should be a decision of the Syrian people. Western peace preconditions of regime change just serve to prolong the war.”*

The Revd Dr Habib Badr said, *“The media can be an instrument of peacebuilding, bridging gaps and promoting healing. But it can also promote destruction, for it is a medium, an instrument. We must put our efforts to support projects like PAX, which do indeed promote peace and reconciliation.”*

Bob Davies, a leading Canadian architect, said, *“As an architect, I am in the business of change - I have chosen this calling because I want to make the world a better place. I see the rebuilding of Syria as a design problem, and like all design problems, there needs to be a stated goal and a determined vision. Without a shared vision, there will be no implementation plan worthy of implementing. I believe that the region should be rebuilt by its own citizens, for the citizens, regardless of their religion. If possible, the countries of the Near East should be rebuilt as clean, green economies, in line with global aspirations to overcome the impending devastating effects of climate change. It is necessary to return to healthy citizenship. The countries of the Near East need their brilliant bankers, builders and economists to come home. There is a danger that the large international consortia are poised to pounce on the region; they will arrive and build for them. But they will build a foreign place where the people of the region are mere tenants. The rebuilding of the region should take advantage of the latest, proven green technologies which will have the added benefit of providing a renewable, secure supply of energy. Countries like Syria could be the greenest countries on the planet, and once again the light of the world.”*

Barbara Meynert, a senior economist and businesswoman, presented a Business Plan for Peace Building and Healing. She gave three goals: *“the development of a thriving peace economy, the creation of jobs through the integration of job creation into all policies, and the use of technology such as advanced payment & banking systems, telemedicine and portable factories to leapfrog into the future. The key is human capital development.”*

In the discussion that followed, it was unanimously agreed that the first step was to stop the war. Only then could the region begin to recover. A major concern was the level of corruption in the Near East; Barbara Meynert spoke of the effective solutions used in Asia which had done much to stamp out corruption.

Day Two: Group Discussions

East and West



Our Conferences are always held with a definite purpose - the formation of an Action Plan that codifies the thoughts of those present into a concrete, achievable set of goals. In the afternoon, we split into two groups - Near East and West - for some intense debate on the nature of the **Conference's Action Plan and Closing Statement** (photos, above (Near Eastern Group) and below (Western Group)). This was followed by a plenary session led by **The Revd Nadim Nassar, The Revd Dr Habib Badr and St. John Wright**, the convenors of the two regional groups. The fruits of the afternoon's discussions were blended to form our Closing Statement and Action Plan, which would then be delivered at the House of Lords, where we were the guests of The Lord Gordon of Strathblane CBE.

We were very moved by the passion and the enthusiasm of everyone who took part in this vital process. After the regional discussions, the two groups reassembled for a plenary session which decided on the final form of the Closing Statement and Action Plan.



We should like to thank all those who helped to make our Conference such a success. The Conference Team (Cherry Murdoch, Keith Brockbank, Richard Smart, Carina Dingemans and Carolyn Hallett) worked hard for many months in preparation and 'on the day'. Special thanks to the staff of the Cophthorne Tara Hotel for their support and hard work.

Day Two: The House of Lords

Reception and Declaration of the Action Plan

The Awareness Foundation would like to express its heartfelt gratitude to our Patron, **The Lord Gordon of Strathblane CBE**, who hosted our reception in the River Room at the House of Lords, by kind permission of the Lord Speaker. Lord Gordon began the event by welcoming everyone and telling them some of the history of Parliament and its building.



The declaration was read out by The Revd Nadim Nassar; HE Archbishop Angaelos and The Revd Dr Habib Badr then spoke in support of the declaration.



The Declaration: (L to R) St. John Wright, Huda Nassar, The Revd Nadim Nassar, Reem Issa, Josie Child

This was the perfect location, both for our official declaration and as a place to celebrate and spend some time in each other's company after two full days' hard work. For this event, our delegates were joined by many special guests from North America, the Near East and the UK.



Happy ending: most of the Near Eastern delegates pose for one last photo.

Gala Dinner

6th November 2018



The Awareness Foundation's annual Fundraising Gala Dinner took place on the evening of Tuesday 6th November at the Copthorne Tara Hotel, which would be our venue for our International Conference beginning the next day.



Invitations had been sent around the world, and we were delighted by the number of people who came along to support us at the Gala Dinner and the Conference. Those present came from all faiths and from many countries, including Canada, the United States, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Hong Kong, The Netherlands and of course the United Kingdom.

This was a wonderful opportunity for our overseas delegates and speakers to meet our friends and supporters over dinner. James Appleyard, our Chair of Trustees, gave an excellent speech about the work of the Foundation (*photo, left*). During the evening we had a Silent Auction and a Pledge Drive, both of which were very successful. We were really touched by the generosity of those who came to support our mission.

Peter Freeman and Mark Willoughby received Certificates of Appreciation for their considerable voluntary work over the year. Peter designed and built a brand new website for us, and Mark worked to ensure that we would be fully GDPR compliant.

Twice during the evening, we were privileged to listen to London-based Christian singer-songwriter John Fleming (*photo, right*) and his band playing songs from his debut album 'Fix Our Eyes'. We extend our gratitude to him and the members of his band for their great musical gift to us all.

A more relaxed schedule meant that everyone had plenty of time to socialise and to make new friends while learning about all that the Foundation is doing around the world for reconciliation and community cohesion. The Gala Dinner has raised much-needed funds which ensure that we can continue to build peace around the world; heartfelt thanks to all who took part.

We are so grateful to everyone who made this event such a success, including our very generous diners, the donors of the auction lots and raffle prizes, and the many volunteers who helped behind the scenes and on occasion in front of them.





Our Programmes



An ecumenical educational programme for young Middle Eastern men and women, enabling them to build bridges of mutual respect and understanding in their diverse communities. To date, over 700 young people in Syria and Iraq have begun their journey to become Ambassadors for Peace, and many peace-building projects are now in development, including a centre offering first aid training, a programme to rehabilitate vulnerable street children, and an ecumenical dialogue project.



A series of 3- to 5-day events for displaced and local children, aged 6 to 12, in Syria. This programme gives them new hope, and brings a smile to their faces. Little Heroes enables children to develop a more positive view of themselves and their world. Newly motivated, happier children are better able to make friends in their new schools and communities, showing evidence of a more accepting attitude towards other faiths. This leads to a growth in community harmony and a communal resistance to extremist ideologies. Over 2,000 children have already taken part.



A growing library of short, challenging videos and blogs. We tackle topics such as politics and faith, living in a diverse multi-faith world, and how to combat extremism. Our videos demonstrate an authentic and relevant Christianity that celebrates diversity. PAX has two broad aims: to encourage Christians to live out their faith confidently, and to provide a counter-narrative of peace and understanding to hateful, extremist, and ignorant ideologies online. Our videos have been watched more than 250,000 times.



How to support us

Please visit <https://www.awareness-foundation.com/donate-1> to donate through our website or to find details on how to transfer funds to us.

Please send cheques, made payable to "Awareness Foundation", to the address of the Main Office, below.

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In the US, please post checks, made payable to "Awareness Foundation America", to Steve Taber, 1170 Green Street, San Francisco CA 94109



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