

13 March 2015

### **Open letter: Church leaders ask Churches to pray for peace in Syria and Iraq**

Sunday 15 March is the fourth anniversary of the beginning of the Syrian conflict and the humanitarian situation continues to worsen. We ask you to mark this anniversary by joining in prayer and action as part of your Lenten observance.

The fighting in Syria that began in 2011 has claimed more than 200,000 lives and injured many more people. We are confronted on a daily basis with the atrocities in Syria and Iraq through the news media, and it is easy to become overwhelmed. But there are actions we can take. Behind the headlines are Iraqis, Palestinians formerly resident in Syria, and Syrians living under siege, without food and fearing for their lives. Many are facing constant attack, cluster munitions, ballistic missiles and the possibility of chemical weapons being used against them. They are our neighbours and are in need of assistance.

A recent [United Nations report](#) on the humanitarian response in Syria says that over the last three years humanitarian needs have increased more than six times the rate of funding. Three years ago there was an estimated 1 million people in need, and now the figure stands at 12.2 million. There are also more than 3.9 million refugees in neighbouring countries, half of whom are under 18 years old.

### **Pray for peace and an end to violence**

We ask you to join us in prayer for peace in the region and a long-term solution, so that Syria and Iraq are able to look forward to a better future.

The World Council of Churches has prepared a special liturgy for Sunday 15 March 2015. We ask that you consider including it in your service this coming Sunday or another Sunday in March, and/or print it in your church bulletin. Catholic parishes may choose to use this on Sunday 22 March when the Catholic Bishops' Lent Appeal focuses on humanitarian support for Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

*As we gather to worship God in this place,  
let us remember and pray for our sisters and brothers in Syria, Iraq and Libya.  
We lament the massacre of Christians and people of other faiths;  
we lament with those persecuted because of their beliefs;  
we grieve with Christians and other minority groups,  
who are forcefully displaced from their homes and lands  
by those who perpetuate suspicion, hatred and terror  
against those different from them.  
We are here to pray for peace in those countries and in our world,  
to renew our hope in the Triune God,  
and to strengthen our commitment to strive for justice and peace.  
Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves  
and take up their cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23).*

A copy of the full service is available from Christian World Service: [cws@cws.org.nz](mailto:cws@cws.org.nz) and [caritas@caritas.org.nz](mailto:caritas@caritas.org.nz). It can also be downloaded from the CWS website: [cws.org.nz/what-can-i-do/emergencies/syria-appeal](http://cws.org.nz/what-can-i-do/emergencies/syria-appeal), the Presbyterian website: <http://www.presbyterian.org.nz> and the Caritas website: [www.caritas.org.nz](http://www.caritas.org.nz)

### **Give to those in need**

CWS and Caritas are supporting the most vulnerable in Iraq and Syria, and in neighbouring countries, by providing humanitarian aid.

In Syria the International Orthodox Christian Charities is playing a crucial role in feeding and accommodating families, keeping people warm through a grueling winter and providing some protection. However, several prominent Orthodox priests have been abducted or kidnapped, among them Metropolitan Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim and Metropolitan Boulous Yazigi, Father Paolo Dall'Oglio.

The Middle East Council of Churches Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees is providing food, water, blankets, hygiene kits, healthcare and life skills training for Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon. Many of the refugees are Palestinians who fled to Syria from Palestine in 1949 and 1967. Caritas continues to work with partners in Lebanon to help support some of the 1.2 million Syrian refugees in the country, and is currently delivering winterisation programmes to those facing the severe winter. This assistance includes providing families with fuel, warm clothes and bedding as well as improving the weather-resistance of shelters. In Iraq, the UN reports 5.2 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, a situation that has developed since June last year. The ACT Alliance (Action by Churches Together), of which Christian World Service is a member, is appealing for more funding to provide humanitarian aid that includes emergency food supplies, healthcare and shelter. ACT Alliance members have been working through local partners in Iraq since 1996 and Caritas continues to assist thousands of displaced Iraqi families withstand the harsh winter conditions. Please support their appeals for the work of their partners in the region.

### **Take action**

Christians cannot remain silent. More than just statistics and figures, these are innocent and precious lives that need to be preserved. We urge the New Zealand Government to increase its aid efforts to Syria and Iraq. The New Zealand government has committed NZ\$14.5 million, which equates to 83.3 cents per person based on United Nations figures. New Zealand can do more. You may like to write to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade or your own local Member of Parliament asking that the New Zealand government shows genuine commitment to the security of vulnerable populations by increasing funding for humanitarian aid. You can also ask that New Zealand uses its position on the United Nations Security Council to ensure that increased humanitarian funding is given a high priority in responses in the Middle East.

Right Rev Andrew Norton, Moderator  
Presbyterian Church Aotearoa New Zealand

Most Rev Philip Richardson, Archbishop  
Anglican Church

Rev Tovia Aumua, President  
Methodist Church

His Eminence John Dew, Cardinal  
Roman Catholic Church

Elizabeth Duke  
The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)