



Curriculum Theologiae

The Document “We Choose Abundant Life”

Creating a Culture of Encounter

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<https://doi.org/10.48604/ct.145>

Submitted on: 2022-02-18

Posted on: 2022-02-18

(YYYY-MM-DD)

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The document “We Choose Abundant Life”: Creating a culture of encounter ¹

By Souraya Bechealany

I – Presentation of the document

Since the Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East in 2010 and the declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the summer 2014, the geopolitical situation in the Middle East has become very complex. Christians in the region face enormous challenges that confront them with choices on which their future presence depends: fragmentation, demographic decline, destabilization, etc. This makes renewal of the Churches and institutions imperative if they are to discern what God wills for them and listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying “Here and now” (Revelation 2:7).

To this end, a reference document entitled “We Choose Abundant Life. Christians in the Middle East: Towards Renewed Theological, Social, and Political Choices”² was made public on 28 September 2021 in Lebanon, by an ecumenical group of eleven specialists in theology and human geopolitical sciences: “women and men, ordained ministers and lay people, belonging to different Churches, with different cultural horizons, national geographies, and complementary areas of expertise” (n. 2)³. Following two years of consultations with 100 Christian experts from diverse churches, countries, and specialities in the ME, and including 20 youth and 2 small groups of Jewish and Muslims, the group spent a full year writing the document.

This document deserves our attention. It is a model of contextual theology based on a collaborative and inclusive approach. It is an academic encouragement to dialogue between Christians and their brothers, and fellow citizens, in the Middle East aimed at creating a culture of encounter.

The document offers an in-depth examination of the situation in the Middle East “as its starting-point, examining theological discourse and religious practices in the light of rigorous scientific and critical criteria based on the achievements of human sciences, on the one hand, and scrutinizing the geopolitical situation in the light of theology, on the other” (n.4/ n. 74-76).

It is published in Arabic, English and French and consists of three parts, sections numbering 100 paragraphs:

- Christians in the Middle East: Geopolitical context. Ecclesiastic and theological context
- Challenges of the Present and Stakes of the Future
- Choices and policies

II – The Paradigm shift

“We Choose Abundant Life” can be viewed as a Prophetic voice. In paragraph four, the authors note: “We have chosen in this document to tackle matters that some may consider inappropriate for public discussion, rooted in our belief in what the Lord Jesus Christ said: “You will know the truth and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). Yes, the focal point is Truth! In chapter three, *Choices and Policies*, the authors – determined to be a prophetic voice and together to serve the truth –

¹ This article was delivered as a conference at the 50th Anniversary of the Institute of Missiology – Missio Aachen (17-19 November 2022). It is coedited by “Missio”, “Deutscher Verein vom Heiligen Lande” (DVHL), “Embrace the Middle East”, and the Magazine “Proche-Orient Chrétien”.

² Cf. the document in www.wechooseabundantlife.com.

³ As a co-author, I allow myself to use a lot of relevant quotes from this document.

propose concrete responses, and choices, on how to handle the challenges and issues described in chapter two.

To endeavour to search for truth together, persistently, requires Christians in the Middle East to adopt a reflexive and practical *paradigm shift* moving towards a culture of dialogue and rapprochement with their fellow citizens.

To emphasise and illustrate this paradigm shift, I will outline some choices from chapter three of the document related to the following broad themes:

- 1- Christianity – taking the risk, and renewing the choice, of presence and witness
- 2- the Church – the People of God (*Lumen gentium* II)
- 3- A contextual theology: towards serving the common good

1st category – Christianity – taking the risk and renewing the choice of presence and witness

Christians in the Middle East are called to change their mindset profoundly if they aim to be the witnesses of Jesus-Christ in this region today. **“This change requires them to move from an obsession with existence and survival to taking the risk of presence and witness”** (n.80). Too much focus on survival may lead to a pre-occupation with victimization, the mindset of minorities and majorities, and a call for protectionism that does not serve the long-term future of Christians in the region. Christians should take the risk of embracing the call to presence. “It means building durable policies based on biblical principles and enshrined in the prophetic role they need to play, the significance of their witness to the resurrected Christ, and their engagement in their societies with their different geopolitical contexts” (n.80).

2^d category – The Church, as the People of God (*Lumen gentium* II)

The call to us to live as the People of God is founded in the Scriptures. Vatican II emphasises this truth in its Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, Chapter II, 1: “God, (however), does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness”. This togetherness requires the Churches to revive the spirit of Synodality and consultation, and to promote the crucial role of the women and young people in the Church.

Here are three paragraphs that underline this appeal:

1. **Revive the spirit of Synodality and consultation:** The document calls for a paradigm shift from hierarchical conception of the Church to its mystery as People of God (*LG* II) by rejecting the spirit of dissension and competition, by reviving the spirit of Synodality as the expression of the communion, and developing the Middle East Council of Churches – MECC as the unique official ecumenical body in the ME. This brings together the Churches in the Middle East and advances them on the path of their visible unity (cf. n.82).
2. **Develop the structures, teachings and practices of the Church to activate the participation of women** in all fields, including ministry, leadership and decision-making. The issue of women today requires a profound change of mentality and practice, on the grounds of their dignity and unique value in the eyes of God and the full equality between men and women (cf. n.86).
3. **“Listen deeply to the voice of young people**, their visions for renewal, positive potentials, critical thinking, and ambitions for development. Christians need to provide young people with

real opportunities to be involved in ecclesiastical and political work". The document calls on Church institutions to **"develop interactive structures with youth, based on respecting them as equals"** instead of drifting in the direction of patronizing them. [...] Christian youth are not only the future of the Churches, but also their present, and they must play a primary role in building the society of citizenship" (n.87).

3^d category – A contextual theology: Towards serving the common good

The document invites to move from an established theology to dynamic and specific theology, "based on reflective thought and scientific criteria, a theology that will seek to understand the past, read the current signs of the times, and look towards the future, in a way that would help contribute to public affairs with the aim of serving the common good" (n.83/ cf. Cf. 74). This calls for a renewed theological discourse, and a new social contract aimed at serving "the common good" characterized by inclusivity and openness towards others. To illustrate the point, I quote three relevant paragraphs:

1. **"Our Churches must renew their theological and ecclesiastical discourse in line with modern-day circumstances,** enabling this discourse to be understood by the people of God, [to] become a flexible tool for Christian mission and witness, and open a door for dialogue with the other" (n.84).
2. **Renew the social contract by developing" a theological and intellectual approach that allows (Christians) to open a new page in relations with Jews,** who have always been an integral part of the Middle Eastern tapestry and its pluralistic identity. Christians are invited to engage Jews in a serious dialogue based on the values of justice, peace, the dignity of creation and humanity, by taking an opposite direction to the dialogue pursued by some Western Christians who are biased towards Zionism" (n.92).
3. **"As for dialogue with Muslims,** we should abandon doublespeak, dissembling courtesy, and an elitist attitude. This will **lay conceptual and pragmatic foundations for the role that must be assumed by both religions** in safeguarding freedom of conscience and building local, regional and global peace" (n.93).

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges in this region is to build a society where the concepts of human dignity, freedom of conscience and of the citizen as an independent individual are enshrined in and protected by national Constitutions, consistent with relevant UN declarations and to Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae* 7 Dec 1965, The religious freedom, (paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 11, 13, 15).

Conclusion

"Choose Abundant Life" urges Christians to be **a prophetic voice** in the Middle East and commits them to deep dialogue with their Churches; with the faithful from other religions; with secular thinkers in civil society; encouraging them to be biased towards the causes of freedom, justice, human rights, the right to self-determination, democracy, and the regular peaceful transfer of power in all the countries of the region (n.97). "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32).

To this end, **this document encourages Christians to choose "Abundant Life"**. This appeal, explicitly expressed in the title: *"We Choose Abundant Life: towards renewed theological, social and political choices"* recalls Moses' appeal in *Deuteronomy 30:19b*. In the document's final paragraph (100) the authors conclude: "Our Christian presence must be founded on service (*diakonia*) to every human

being, dedicated love, and genuine forgiveness, in obedience to the will of God. Our aim must be a more just and humane society in which the kingdom of God may be fulfilled, so that human beings may receive life as God has desired it for them, according to the words of Christ in the Gospel of John: “I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).