

**Archbishop of Canterbury's Appeal
for Christians in the Holy Land
Synod July 2011**

(Video "Christians in the Holy Land Conference 2011" plays).

I returned from a visit to the Holy Land last year with a very very strong sense that we had to do more to express our solidarity with the Christian Communities there, for reasons that are both obvious and perhaps a little less obvious.

We know our brothers and sisters there are suffering, and we don't always ask ourselves often enough what our response needs to be. And as you've seen, Archbishop Vincent Nichols shares these concerns and we were able to exchange our views about what might be done, and also share this with Pope Benedict during his visit last year.

The Pope very much endorsed our sense that we needed to raise the profile in this country of Christians in the Holy Land and find ways of supporting and assisting, of fleshing out our theoretical understanding of the challenges which face them with a much clearer sense of why exactly people on the ground feel such pressure. Why some feel that they can no longer sustain themselves or their families in their ancestral places, why the future is so far from straight forward for them.

Next week's conference is a first step, a conference very much focused on the experience on the ground of Christians in the Holy Land. We'll be joined for this conference by our own Bishop in Jerusalem, Bishop Suheil, whose concerns have been very much in the prayers of many of us for a long time. The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem will also be attending, a number of Anglican and Roman Catholic Bishops, people from other Christian communities, a representative of the Jewish Board of Deputies. We're hoping also for very senior representation from the Foreign Office, and from the European Commission. And all those we've spoken to in all those contexts have been entirely supportive.

We're convinced that the seriousness of the situation of Christians in Israel and Palestine is still not well enough understood by many opinion formers and decision makers in the UK and elsewhere in the west. The overall decline in the Christian Population of the Holy Land has been very significant in recent decades and it is, as you've heard, accelerating in the West Bank and East Jerusalem very rapidly. The number of Christians in Israel itself remains steady, but we still face the not too distant prospect elsewhere, especially in East Jerusalem, of the disappearance of most of the historic Christian communities. Communities that have been there, in some cases, since the days of our Lord.

And it's that prospect, the prospect of the Christian presence in a good deal of the Holy Land being reduced just to the level of heritage; Churches as museums, rather than living communities of Faith and Witness - it's that prospect which concerns us so deeply.

So the conference will give us an opportunity to examine some of the reasons so many people are leaving, and also ask us the question: what we can do to help those Christians who so urgently want to stay in their Homeland, and to imagine a future there for themselves. As I've said we'll be drawing in some highly placed figures from the UK Government and the European Commission, from a variety of diplomatic and religious backgrounds, but most importantly we want to hear from the people on the ground - Israeli and Palestinian.

It is with this in view that I want to appeal today to you for your support in creating in the near future a fund with which we might assist projects of community development and work creation, especially among Palestinian Christians. And in setting up this fund, we propose to work with the Friends of the Holy Land, a small but growing ecumenical charity – you may have visited their stall here at Synod. The distinctive thing about the Friends of the Holy Land is that it's made up of parish-based groups, who are dedicated to praying with and for Christians in the Holy Land and supporting them in practical and personal ways. The Friends of the Holy Land encourage pilgrimages, and involvement in local grass-roots projects to contribute to the sustainability of the most vulnerable communities and families.

So this group, the Friends of the Holy Land will act as the receiving agency for contributions from individuals and groups towards what we hope will become over time a substantial fund, generating income that will help sustain hope for a viable future for Christians in the Holy Land.

I am making this appeal to Synod in advance of the conference so that you may all have a chance to think about how you can best support this venture and also of course so that you may be able to hold us in prayer next week when we meet. I hope that in the weeks ahead, fellow-Anglicans will give generously to support this vision, and consider ways of becoming better informed and more involved with the issues – not as part of any kind of political campaign but as part of what we owe to our brothers and sisters in Christ's Body, in supporting the continuance of the vital presence of Christian communities in the land where our Lord preached, lived and died the Gospel.

The sensitivity of the subject matter – the political sensitivity – is high, as you will all know, and we shall need prayers that we be saved next week from just an exchange of familiar words, whether platitudes or blame or resentment, and be enabled to ask about the practical measures that will open doors of hope for our brothers and sisters. We have to remember that – as I suggested to you on Saturday – if Christians can hold on to hope in a situation of conflict and fear, that is good news for everyone. Without that, the chances of justice and reconciliation, in the Holy Land and elsewhere, are significantly reduced.

So, please, support the conference in prayer, support the appeal for funds that will, we hope, decisively increase the effectiveness of the work of the Friends of the Holy Land and others, and that support will be part of our service to what we all long for, the peace of Jerusalem and all that that peace might mean for our world. So please support this, as generously as you are able, in whatever way you feel appropriate. Thank you.