

REPORT OF FATHER MICHAEL JALAKH ACTING GENERAL SECRETARY OF M.E.C.C. IN ITS EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING IN HOTEL MARRIOTT DEAD SEA.

Hotel Marriott (Dead Sea), 22 – 23 January 2015

Your Holinesses, Beatitudes, and Eminences,

Dear Fathers and beloved members of the MECC Executive Committee,

1- I thank God for his voluminous graces, and for the blessing of this meeting assembling us today. I call upon His Holy Spirit to inspire us and enrich us from his graces while we contemplate in the situations of our Churches and our Children. I begin with addressing His Beatitude, Theophilos the third Patriarch of Jerusalem and the Orthodox family MECC President, for receiving and hosting this meeting on the banks of the Dead Sea, where our Lord Jesus Christ walked and shared with us baptism and experiences, and where the skies opened and the Holy Spirit flew. I thank you all, members of the Executive Committee for attending and participating, which reveals and reflects the importance you give to the Council and to its role in enhancing its presence and our unity. Our meeting today is nothing less than a sign of vitality of the Council and a sign of our commitment to it.

Introduction

2- I know that many of your good selves were waiting for this meeting for more than a year. I know that it has been 40 years from the foundation of this Council, and that a celebration was expected (on the level of the whole Middle East) to shed

the light on the Council once again. I know that everyone wants the Council to be present in the heart and middle of the Christian events and for it to give its opinion in issues evolving around us. I know that you want the Council to be present in Lebanon and Syria and Iraq and Egypt and Jordan and Iran and Libya and anywhere there is an Eastern Christian. I know that you want the Council to launch ecumenical, theological and social initiatives and to preform relief and humanitarian acts, and charitable projects for the refugees and displaced. I know that what is expected from the Council and the held hopes are massive, as massive as the injustice and the persecutions that Christians suffer from in our countries. I know that I am not fulfilling my duties concerning relations and visits and holiday greetings. I know that I did not visit the heads of Churches, and did not send detailed reports, and did not inform Patriarchs and responsible and heads of Churches nor Executive Committee members and partners and friends in what is happening in the Council. All of that I know and I know a lot more...

3- The waiting process is a sign of great concern that Churches hold towards MECC. I am happy that these opinions are interpreted as architrave instead of criticism, and wishes instead of faultfinding. I particularly find in the sentiment and language of each and every single one of you the importance of MECC and its role. However, I have to show and submit the situation in which was the Council before I handled the responsibility on April 2013, especially that there is a shortage of information or general foggy information.

MECC status in April 2013

4- There is no doubt that a lot of tasks, achievements and reforms were executed thanks to the "Task Force" and the former General Secretary Bishop Paul Rouhana, that we should thank for their massive efforts. But, a lot were still unachieved and stuck and a lot of reforms had not been activated yet. Between 2009 and 2013 urgent problems were

solved but the price of these settlements was that all MECC assets (apartments and stores) in Beirut and Sidon and all of its properties were sold (except the office in Egypt). Even though, the local offices issue was still stuck in Cyprus and Jordan and Egypt, in addition to the law suits waged against the Council in Lebanon and the debts towards its ministries and its institutions. In addition to all that, the essence of the letter addressed by the partners on the 27th of October 2008 to the MECC Presidents and the Executive Committee members was still valid in a lot of its aspects, especially in the points evolving around the leadership of MECC, its ownership, its identity, adequate financial planning, accounts transparency and preparing reports.

5- The first subject that unexpectedly took a lot of time was to identify the actual number of fiscal deficit, where no one gave me an exact number, some said 170,000 and some said 400,000, and some even said that the number is minim (the Social Security and the employees of Cairo).

6- Afterwards I had to identify the priorities, and this is where I faced the dilemma between 1) The State dues which would aggravate in case of delayed payments. 2) The employees' salaries (those who left and the ones that stayed). 3) Initiating and launching projects that would refresh the Council. It goes without saying that setting the Council's priorities meant sacrificing basic activities or at least postponing them, for humanitarian causes and more urgent issues, the thing that would make the Council subject of criticism.

7- All of this pushed the Council into a vicious spiral. For partners weren't ready to offer help to settle the Council's deficit and debts, unless we proved that we are the true agents and guardians of the Council, and unless we proved tangible results. This was a hard task without any income, and while the Council was facing trouble in paying, not only former employees but his current employees also and so forth.

8- On another hand, the staff was facing a real-time humanitarian situation. Some of them were dismissed, and others did not get paid for several months (in Cyprus, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon). All of them were continuously calling demanding their rights, including the lawyer. What can the Secretary General say to people that spent most of their lives serving the Council, considering that they were oppressed by the Churches. In addition to that there were some that filed lawsuits against the Council to claim their dues, and some that continued working with partial or even without Social Security.

9- Apart from that, the majorities of specialized and trained personnel especially in category "A" programs has left or was dismissed.

10- As for the accountant, that was not competent in his field and that was not fit to understand and accommodate the Council and its accounting programs. His loyalty tended towards other institutions he worked for but he was paid his whole salary from the Council, that was paying also his Social Security in addition to another salary from the ICNDR program. He used to attend and work as he wanted by his timing and his way. I tried several times to understand the Council's accounting calculations were I felt that I was partially entering a labyrinth, which was hard to go out from. I tried so hard and after months I discovered this swirl.

11- On a logistical level, and because of the liquidation of the apartments, the offices and the stores, the main office in Beirut and its meeting room and the apartment of the General Secretary became a warehouse where you can find almost everything: from a library, to an archive, to a disk and photo store, to cabinets, tables, chairs and old printers and computers... MECC meetings were held outside of its office because of technical problems (such as discontinuous internet) and lack of available space, which forced us to rent locations in order to hold meetings and cost us additional expenses. The

partners' meeting had a positive impact where and for the first time in October 2013 the meeting was held in the main office. Some partners visited the offices and the General Secretary's apartment for the first time, although they worked for years with MECC.

12- As for programs, most of them stopped functioning, beginning from the program of unity and faith to ATIME to ecumenical and Islamic – Christian dialogue to local programs in Egypt and Cyprus and the Gulf.

13- For Media, Communication and PR (Public Relations) the Council had two websites, and both were not functional (www.mec-churches.org; www.mecc.org). Giving a neglect impression for the website visitors and lack of harmony in the direction of the Council.

14- In addition to that the Council was blacklisted in the ACT Alliance that includes 140 Churches and Church organization in Europe, Australia, Africa, the Middle East, and America. It was necessary and urgent to counter this blacklisting that took away any opportunity of receiving aids, and also took away the trust between the partners and MECC.

15- Reconstructing a trust relation after its deterioration is a massive challenge, exactly similar to the case of renovating an old institution which would be harder than building a new one.

16- The reputation of the Council was bad and some asked me if we were still alive or we announced our bankruptcy and stopped working. From Iran to Scotland to Vienna to the SJU (Saint Joseph University – Beirut) I noticed the same impression and heard the same complaints.

17- On the administration and financial level some compared MECC to a sick man in intensive care who needs special attention, and after that he will become an ordinary patient and afterwards he'll need a convalescing period... From my point

of view, and from what I faced and heard, I think that the Council detonated back in 2008, since then we are rebuilding the Council and reconstructing it piece by piece. It's rather true that the diagnoses of the financial and administrative status began before years, but the surprise of 2008 and the partners giving up on the Council all together blew it up facing the Churches, employees and everyone related to MECC in a way or another. The fiscal deficit of the Council back then reached approximately 3.5 million US Dollars. In addition to fines that accumulated till 2013.

18- To conclude, in April 2013 the Council had spent his reserve, and sold all of its properties in Lebanon, and I suffered in every end of the month from my anxiety if I could pay the employees and the salaries although it was minimal.

19- For a year and a half the rent was not paid to the landlord of the main office and the General Secretary's apartment, the Council could not pay, which made us fear the day that we would not have anywhere to stay.

20- The Social Security issue was stuck since 2009 and the interest of interests were growing, and in both Egypt and Cyprus the fines were growing bigger after tardiness in paying monthly dues.

21- None of the partners was ready to pay any amount to cover debts, in the time were the Council was suffering from more than 1,100,000 US Dollars debts.

22- On another hand, the Council has renounced for years setting an annual financial budget or administration reports or future action planning, and did not audit the financial calculations of 2011 and 2012. Here we must note that 1.6 million US Dollars was recounted year after year from the nineties. Although most of this amount was paperwork more than it was real debt, but it was reflecting lack of transparency and was also hindering the financial revival of the Council

and embarrassing because of multiple questions from the partners and from ACT Alliance every time we ask to remove us from its black list. These are the details in the following table (Annex N. 1).

Achievements of the period between the two Executive Committees (April 2013 – January 2015)

23- I was not aiming to complain or grumble through what I presented, but it was a real description of a reality I have experienced. As well, what will be presented now, concerning the efforts to counter the problems mentioned previously is not to brag but include your good selves in the details of the structure and administration of MECC, and how we managed to partially revive the Council after its light went out, especially that the efforts I put in was merely seen. As Secretary General, I had to understand the status of the Council as it is to start working to revive it, and to avoid the loopholes that made the Council fall at first place. We managed to identify the real number of deficit and managed to identify the loopholes and controlled as much as possible the incomes and outcomes of the main office.

24- Our main concern was to prove that we are still alive, and that the Council is still a need even if we are facing administrative problems. The essential fruit of our work was rebuilding some of the confidence, which we felt from the donor associations in the last period, more specifically starting November 2014.

25- Concerning the Social Security issue, it is not hidden from anyone that we received a fireball that would burn anyone's hand in case he did not tackle it in the right way. After the auditing it turned out that the Council owned the Social Security an amount of 335.000 US Dollars, which is mainly formed out of fines that augment and grow automatically due to not settling this issue. I took a decision to stop the financial bleeding, no matter what it costs, because this was a burden that the Council would not be able to tackle further

on. We requested from the new accountant to follow up and contact the concerned people in the National Social Security to check how we can settle this matter. He was informed later on that a new limited law has been placed to settle all of the debts and the fines will be forgotten in case the debts were settled before the end of 2014. As soon as I was informed, I took a decision to close this loophole and take advantage of the law and informed the Presidents and partners as showed in this report, and they gave me part of this amount. The case is closed on Social Security and this matter has been solved, the Council is relieved from this burden.

26- On the administrative and financial level (Annex N. 2)

27- In addition of paying the bigger part of debts, we managed to:

- Respect the due date of auditing reports of the years 2011, 2012 and 2013 and we are currently finishing the financial audit report of the year 2014.

- Clean the reports from former impurities and stuck debts by contacting old and new partners

- Respect the narrative reports that came out at two levels: the first one summarized the Task Force's achievements from 2009 till 2012, and the second report handled the period between 2013 and may 2014

- Setting a budget for 2014 – 2015 (Annex N. 3)

- Requesting membership fees from all member Churches, for old stuck fees and asking for an extraordinary aid (with the approval of the Churches' Presidents) for 160,000 US Dollars

- Rebuilding the confidence of ACT Alliance in July 2014 which burnished the image of MECC with the European Churches, partners and organizations

- Receiving two supporting letters for the efforts of the Council: the first was from the "core group" in august 2013 and the second was from the Secretary General of the World Council of Churches Rev. Olav Fikse Tveit in November 2014

- Meeting the core group four times to inform them and shed

the light on the reform march waged by the Council in its programs although we are facing hard financial and administrative issues.

28- In response to our will to move forward, we accepted the offer of some partners to send a delegation of two specialists to study the governance of the Council and evaluate its performance, and to specify the weaknesses and strengths, and the opportunities and possible threats. This study classified us, and came out with twenty three recommendations (Annex N. 4). We are fulfilling as much as we can due to the present circumstances. This reflected the seriousness with which the Council was working for its reform.

29- Concerning Media and Communication and PR, we gave a lot of importance to unify the two websites, and our efforts were fruitful, we managed to unify the address (www.mecc.org). We are now working on transferring the website host form Amman to Beirut, where we can interfere faster in any dysfunctional case. Concerning the content we will continue where the work has stopped and we will continue elaborating and developing the content continuously. I hope we'll launch a news letter as soon as possible.

30- Concerning the activities we have already held, and the international and regional conferences in which we took part, we did our utmost to give them the attention they deserve for the pivotal reason that the name of the council has come left out, both on the local and international arenas. In fact, I have traveled 20 times (5 to Jordan, 3 to Cairo, 2 to the Gulf, 2 to Vienna, Iran, Canada, Rome and the Vatican, Geneva, Korea, Oslo, the Netherlands, and London) and I have delivered lectures and participated on behalf of the Council in radio and TV seminars. Similarly, I wrote a letter to Prince Charles, who pays Christians Easterners special attention through his speeches and repeated visits to the Eastern Churches in Britain, and another to the Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas.

31- I would also like to commend the sustainable relations with the WCC, noting that we worked together in the framework of the conference that was held in Lebanon, in May 2013 and participated in the General Assembly in Korea, and in the closed conference in Geneva on the situation in Syria before "Geneva 2". We also participated in meeting of the Central Committee of the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees (DSPR), convened meeting with the heads of the Council last June during which we exposed what was happening in the Council. The Associate General Secretaries assumed of course several roles on behalf of MECC, and they will speak about these roles themselves.

32- Concerning category "A" programs, and due to the difficulty of launching direct initiatives, the Council tried to cooperate with other organizations to help them develop. In that way the Council will be transmitting the Churches' words and speeches. For example "ADYAN" (Educational citizenship books) (Annex N. 5), "EDAN – Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network" (Awareness workshops), "WSCF – World Student Christian Federation – ME" (Ecumenical education), "MAAN" (Preparing programs to reinforce non-violent behavior between Christians and Muslims, "Catholic Ecumenical committee" (preparation and translation of the week of unity prayers booklet), "Religions for peace" (drafting the Christian perspective of citizenship). As for category "B" programs, the directors of these programs will talk about them tomorrow.

33- Concerning the Council's programs in the Gulf region, I have been two times to Abu Dhabi to participate in the Ecclesiastical Officials meeting. The idea of establishing their own board that takes care of the Christian Diasporas seemed to have ripened. Nevertheless, I tried at least to remind them that the Gulf region fell under the jurisdiction of the Eastern Patriarchs authority, and they would be better call what they were establishing 'The Gulf Fellowship of Churches) instead of the Council of Churches, and so it was.

The MECC Secretary General is a permanent member thereof.

34- On the logistical level, I have asked the Antonine Order to which I belong a storehouse for a period of three years, where I moved the bulk of the archives, libraries, and cabinets, allowing ourselves thus to use the Secretary-General's flat for our meetings, once we had fixed the water leakage problem that was causing us the problems with neighbors. We also revamped the General Secretariat's conference room and some offices. We repaired the Internet and renewed some computers. We still have to recondition the kitchen, some offices and the telephone network.

35- Concerning the employees, we terminated the contract of the lawyer Maher Samara in April 2013 after 23 years, and we still have some due payments to settle.

36- As for the lawsuit that is still pending with the former Chief Financial Officer, Tony Frangi, we recently appealed the ruling of the first instance court ruling which sentenced us to pay him \$ 42,000.

37- On another note, in May, we recruited a part-time accountant to replace the former one, which allowed us to have a better idea of the Council's financial situation, and facilitated our efforts to end any pending financial transactions with the Social Security fund in Lebanon.

38- With the beginning of this year, we employed a new young man, the task of whom consists of coordinating communications and media. At the present time, he is assuming the role of the Secretary-General's private assistant, given that Miss Sayde has reached retirement age. In light of the increasing number of relief and restoration projects in Syria over the past year, two persons have been employed for a period of one year. They take care and are in charge of the accounts and reports pertaining to those projects.

The challenges of the Council – on the internal level

39- The Middle East Council of Churches stayed powerful in the subconscious of a lot of Church Leaders and originations. They did not know or did not want to know that the Council was weakened at a certain point. Most of them realize the status of the Council but it remains a theorem more than reality. As if they do not want to believe what happened. This impression was frustrating to us because we did not know how to explain the situation; but on another hand this impression was a source of pride because it meant that the politicians and journalists and all concerned people wanted the Council to be strong and professional. The pride is faced by a challenge to us all to transform the theorem into a reality. Therefore it is necessary for the Council to continue its reforms.

40- The importance of the evaluation that was executed last year appears here. It showed weaknesses and strengths in the administration and in the structure of MECC. We have to take into consideration that some factors that helped with the deterioration of the Council still exists, and that some modification made by the Task Force needs to be activated, some must be implemented and some must be changed. This is normal especially after the experimental period we passed through in the few last years.

41- The ecumenical situation is far from being idle. It is continuously changing, so are our churches, which are enduring successive blows and tremors. The case of our partners in the West is changing, and their priorities are being affected, very often, by their situations, media and the policies of their countries. Therefore, we need a flexible and adjustable structure, capable of keeping pace with the changing situation, as well as with the emerging needs and expectations. We all need transparency, however, the good will is not sufficient, by itself, we shall work hard to achieve it through a clear financial system, streamlined accountability programs, the publication of a simple and rational financial and administrative handbook, a code of conduct, a salary scale

in line with the living conditions. It is no coincidence that we faced lawsuits and problems with all the former financial officials starting with Tony Frangi, passing by Viviane Lorenzo, to Tony el Mir. Building up on contemporary financial foundations and transparent accountability programs will help reduce the crises spilling over from one mandate to another and from person to another, as it will contribute to the council's institutionalization, increasing hence the seriousness at work and its trustworthiness, from the standpoint of our churches as well as that of the partners, donors and friends.

42- Concerning human resources, we moved from excess of employees in the nineties to lack of employees nowadays. It causes embarrassment especially when some ask us to perform tasks that need 160 or 170 employees when we only have 4 or 5. We need three full timers competent employees, and others to work based on temporary contracts per program like ecumenists, theologians and journalists. It is important to set strategies and visions but they need professionals to follow up.

43- With the Task Force reforms (Approved in 2012) we practically moved from high centralization to independent programs that I consider as threat to the Council. Without any doubt that the reforms aimed to lower the pressure on Beirut's main office and this is what partially happened, but decentralization may lead to the deterioration of the Council. We do not assume that this is the case now but it might become similar if we don't react. For neither general centralization held by the GS is the best, nor is definite independence is the solution. Here I would like to tackle to related threats.

44- The bond and relation between category "B" programs and the General secretariat. Category "B" programs form a positive factor and give the Council a core service dimension. We have four effective programs (DSPR, ERS, DSJ, and ICNDR) but every single one is related to the Council in a different way. Some programs give its entire surplus to the Council, while other

give nothing; some pay its outlay and office rent with total financial independence and others are fully consolidated in the MECC accounts. The situation is a lot better than before; where at least the programs pay its own employees, but except the Syria program no one is paying the fee agreed by the Executive Committee related to the Headquarters administration that ranging between 5 to 10%. Everyone uses the name and the logo of MECC in the name of Churches but the proportion of loyalty to the Council as central administration differs. This causes embarrassment to the Council where two or three programs approach the same western partner or organization asking for help for relatively similar projects.

45- There is always an autonomy tendency. There is no doubt that autonomy from the Council and moral relativity towards it and asking for aids under its umbrella is a temptation that can hit anyone. But doesn't over-independency mean strengthening the cracks in the Council? Otherwise, the legal dimension of these programs offers it no independent identify away from the Council, at least those present in Lebanon. So the Council is the only party responsible towards the government on where and how to spend the money which puts MECC in risk. Ambiguity still prevails from our point of view between autonomous, independent, consolidated or inter-related programs. What we talk about in this matter is not only the fruit of the experience we are living but also in both, the last audited annual reports and in the recommendations of the assessment of April.

46- The relation between local offices and the headquarters in Beirut. As we all know, the Council is a home for everyone, not to a single or particular person. But the threat lies where MECC becomes a home to no one, just like some governmental institutions in our countries or State common lands. The big challenge is to make the Council a house to all churches, a private Council to every church. Local offices in Cyprus, Egypt, Jordan and Syria represent a real challenge to

the Council for how is it possible for the churches to interact, integrate, adopt and feel its belonging and its ownership towards the Council, while it closed its offices in Cyprus, Egypt, Iraq and the Gulf, and the offices of Jordan and Syria related to local churches that adopted these offices? How can the Council be transnational and go across churches? On one hand, MECC should have local and national offices to always interact and communicate with local churches, and it would really be Middle Eastern Council. But, on another hand the question remains how they would communicate with the General Secretariat. What is the actual legal authority of a central office on employees in local offices, while incapable of paying their salaries? We are proud of the directors in Syria and Jordan, but this is because of their personal loyalty and love to the Council. These questions are frequently asked by auditing firms and lawyers about what are the responsibilities of the main office in Beirut towards these offices.

47- Executive Committee members' diversity. Another challenge affects all the churches which is including the female and youth element in the Executive Committee that effectively is the administrative board of the Council. In this cause we are all equal: Evangelical and Eastern, Oriental and Catholic! We are always asked about the female and youth percentage in MECC board and we feel a bit embarrassed to respond that 32 members and alternates are all men and not a single woman. But aside that, and away from the embarrassment or equality between man and woman or other ideas we consider weird, we have to seriously think to diversify even if slightly in electing the Executive Committee members if you find that appropriate. There are a lot of competent people in our churches carrying the Eastern Christians cause in their minds. I may add and say that we need two or three experts in administration, finance and corporate strategic planning, branding and media. All of this helps fortifying the structure of the Council and evolving it and continuously developing it.

48- In addition to what was previously said, which needs more studies and discussions; there are administrative points that can be affirmed during our meeting these two days:

– The membership fees of Churches: we have difficulties in collecting the fees from the churches. There have been accumulations over the years from some of the churches. That issue goes beyond materialistic problem. There is something essential that the partners keep on asking about in the financial reports, and it is about how much the churches are committed in the Council. I don't exaggerate when I say that the decision taken in the Presidents June's meeting to collect 160,000 \$ divided on four families, had a big positive impact on the partners and the Churches in the West. It comforted them towards the ownership of the Council and towards the extent of their commitment in the procedure of restructuring. It has given the Council credibility much needed. Based on this, it is essential to urgently ask for paying the fees first, then paying the extraordinary contribution requested by the presidents. It is the minimum done for assuring justice and equality between churches, and that made the Middle East Council of Churches distinguished from the moment it was founded. It is not fair that some Churches pay their fees while others are allowed to ignore this symbolic commitment (Annex N. 6).

– The Department Service of Palestinian Refugees (DSPR): this department is doing a powerful work to help the refugees in Gaza, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Jordan and Lebanon. It is given all the respect and appreciation. It defended the Council in front of the ACT Alliance, pushing it to be again a part of the alliance and removing it from the black list. Nonetheless, and in addition to what was previously mentioned about the difficulty of handling the relationship with the General Secretariat of the Council, there are two unsolved issues with the department. I promised the department last year during the meeting with the central committee that I will present the issues to you. Due to the exceptional circumstances and wars in the region, the department started helping Syrian refugees

everywhere. By the time we appreciate every good and help given to a needy, we cannot but think about the delegation given to the department from the moment it was founded. The second point is that the central committee started thinking seriously about collecting money from governments and Muslim financiers, due to the retract of help from the West.

– One of the problems we are facing concerning the procedures is the hierarchy of families. This is an old story that the first Christian Councils talked about like they talked about Easter. Someone drew our attention to put his name or his church's name before or after others but can we follow a specific order? Would we follow the alphabetical, the chronological or the numerical order? We promised that we would show you this issue. If you see that it has no importance, we would tolerate it as if nothing happened and we will leave it to the general secretary. He will behave in an appropriate way over and over or we will take a decision during our discussions in the afternoon.

49- If someone asks why we are insisting on the management, the structure, and the calculations and questioning, it's because we consider that the weakness in management and calculations and conflicts in responsibilities, has made essential factors that lead the Council to the situation where it was in 2008 and 2009. We also consider that the transparency we want starts from clear calculations and reach the trust we have to gain. We do not see that there is another substitute for an institution like the Middle East Council of Churches if we want to build a solid future. The message of the Council is sublime especially in these hard days where we cannot make mistakes even unintentionally.

The challenges of the council – on the external level

50- The role and the mission: what we talked about until now is just how the council reorganized itself through constant reconsidering its acts, programs and priorities in order to cover the expectations of the churches and the aspirations of

Christians and people of the regions. The role of the council is to satisfy the needs and eradicate the worries that churches are living. I fear that the expectations would be higher than its capacity to handle because they are big just like the suffering of Christians in the Middle East. The events are being fast. Wars, persecutions and decampment are preventing us from thinking carefully about what is going on around us and about the materialistic and spiritual needs that are growing. The challenge we are facing how to plan for the future with a suffering heart, with hope where there seems to be no hope.

51- For that reason, we invited for a first meeting to discuss the role of the Middle East Council of Churches and its goal in the current circumstances. It took place in monastery of Mar Youhana – Beit Merri, on Saturday 27th of December 2014 in the presence of M. Ghassan Al-Chami, Pascale Lahoud, Father Fady Daou, Father Michel Jalakh (Lebanon), Samer Laham (Syria), Georges Fahmi (Egypt). This meeting included:

- A reading of the current Eastern situation, concerning the political, economic and social levels and concerning Christianity and church.
- General principles and instructions including a lecture of the situation and how to benefit from social potentials of youth Christians and other subjects.
- Analytical diagnosis of the presence of Christians in the Middle East (SWOT Analysis) that shows where the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats lay. We also showed some ideas and suggestions of the Council's work (Annex N. 7)

52- It is worth noting that the above-mentioned meeting is the first milestone of a series of meetings and seminars we are intending to hold, and to enlarge their scope in order to discuss ideas and conceptions, and to set objectives and solutions in order to shape a clear role for the council.

53- Apart from that, we shall give the priority to relations among churches, for the challenge consists of making the

council a universal venue, and a communication tool among churches for them to preserve a permanent bond and face, together, the difficulties "with one heart and one soul" (Acts 4:32). The council shall devise new channels for this same mission, as the former Secretary General, HE Bishop Paul Rouhana already declared: "The Council can no longer maintain the same pace it had in 1974. Since it should take account of the significant changes that have occurred in the life of our churches during the past four decades. It should assume its role amidst churches in a different way." The Council is not just an office or an institution like others, rather, the council stems from churches that meet together to address their affairs and communicate.

54- Partners and donors. There is a challenge of a different kind, namely the Council's relationship with partners and donor organizations where it has to communicate with donors and respect their priorities while clinging to its objectives. The Council, as an institution, is committed to donors' requirements and obligations and strategies. Not only this, but it has also to act and to arrange its financial management and accounts like any normal commercial company through audits, specific procedures, permanent reviewing, and technical workshops. In the past, the majority of partners were organizations directly related to churches. Over the last two decades, most of them became organizations with a developmental rather than ecumenical orientation, and focusing on relief and aid rather than on information. Hence, those who provide them with funds have henceforth become public institutions or governments per se. Thus, this shift directly impacted the core of the relations between the partners and the Council. One must not forget as well the growing interest expressed by these organizations in establishing direct relationships with the charitable organizations or with the churches, through local offices that represent them, which were opened in our countries. In addition, there is some kind of competition among the beneficiaries themselves. We are not

only talking about our churches or our countries, but also about our region, Sudan, Africa or the Philippines and others. Assistance and aids turned from general support and large quantities into limited aids, in relatively small quantities and intensive conditions.

Aspirations and expectations

55- Action Strategy. I will dedicate this paragraph basically to all of us, as members of the Executive Committee entrusted with the proper functioning and the development of an integrated plan for the Council. But, in order to avoid talking about all issues in an unorganized manner, I would like to introduce to you the frameworks that could help us think together smoothly. Apart from all that we have said previously on the status of the Council, taking into account the current conditions of the financial capabilities and human resources, we need a serious strategy to light up our way forward. Such a strategy cannot plan for more than two or three years despite the fact that based on the current reality, it should fall within the broad horizon and long-term history. But given the collapse of social and ideological systems, and the blurred idea we have while foreseeing the future, we are bound to work on the short term but steadily. We cannot solve all the problems, but we can put a stone in the construction process of the temple of peace and live together if we find common grounds in our views and set our priorities. Projects are numerous but the lesson lies in the follow-up, the investigation and the outcome rather than in the projects themselves.

56- Churches of Europe and America are waiting for the Council directives and instructions on Christians in the Middle East. Can't we think of a declaration or a document to be issued by member churches in order to express our thinking and our point of view regarding what is happening around us and to help those concerned in the West in order to better understand our reality in the Levant?

57- Projects. We had been paying particular importance to a meeting that assembles all the heads of churches in the Middle East; however, it did not see the light due to security and logistical difficulties. The idea is still on the table but lacks some elaboration, development and conviction by all of the presidents with respect to the role and the outcome of such a meeting, especially that many meetings are being held in the name of Christians in the present time. Apart from this, the main project is currently centered on media activation so that the Council becomes the authority to which all concerned parties refer in case they wanted to get to know Levantine Christians.

58- As for the other initiatives, I expose the following if you find it appropriate:

- Unifying the prayer of "Our Father" in the Arabic language in all of our churches
- Unifying the Credo
- Establishing unified catechism book in all of our Churches' schools
- Working on establishing a work sheet that we offer and expose to the Orthodox Churches' synod to be held next year in 2016 containing the wishes of our Churches and its expectations and asking upon what we ask, to unify Easter feast
- Working on exchanging visits between our Churches Presidents and those in the West
- A seminar concerning the new constitutions of Arab Countries and the status of Christians and non Muslims in it
- Seminar discussion whether radicalism is the destiny of religions in the Middle East
- Establishing some kind of Eastern Christian lobby in the west especially in America based initially on our Churches' Diaspora to help explain to the politicians the facts in the ME region and perform pressure on the media if possible.

59- These are thoughts we decided to expose to explain the

convictions that the Council is now a need more than any other time and that everyone aiming to work in Ecumenism and the Christian dimension has the doors wide open. We have together in what concerns all of us. We don't lack the will; what we lack is following up our projects from well trained experts that believe in the cause of the Council and be responsible towards the General Secretariat and the Executive Committee. The General Secretary cannot follow up all projects but he can coordinate and guide according to the will of the Patriarchs.

Acknowledgments

60- We are pleased to thank all of those who stood by the Council, by prayers, advice or by moral and financial support and those who responded positively and showed motivation and participated under different titles to help the Council in its renewable march. It is an occasion to thank the employees who sacrificed for the Council and served MECC and loved it, some of them left with sorrow but others are still willing to work and help the Council. A special thank you to the core group partners who did not leave the Council in the hardest times. A renewed thank you to His Beatitude Theophilos III, Patriarch of Jerusalem for hosting this meeting. I also thank His Holiness Pope Tawadros and his Beatitude Mar Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi for inviting to celebrate jubilee of the Council. I thank the previous GSs especially HE Bishop Paul Rouhana for caring and Mr. Girgis Saleh for his help in Egypt. We thank our struggling staff especially Rev. Habib Badr the honorary treasurer of MECC for his presence even with all of his busy schedule, the associate GSs Elias, Jimmy and Shaher, the directors Seta, Samer and Wafa and all the staff and employees for the help and collaboration.

Conclusion

61- I have not dwelled on the Council's vocation and role, since you all know it very well and you are even experts in it. The council remains a necessity, a need, a request. It is a milestone, a referential authority and an axis on which the

whole world relies in order to get to know Christians and check on their situations. It is, for Christians in this Levant, a home where they gather to dialogue and converge. For its employees, it does not represent a job, rather a vocation, we all endeavor to achieve, in spite of the hardships and hurdles we face on our way. Some people dubbed what the council experienced over the past years "a decline". Such an expression reflects a lack of hope, and faith in God, The Master of History. It is a condemnation for the future, this is surrender to fate. What the Council has been through is a mere crisis, a crisis in the Greek meaning of the word – Krisis – ie a decision, a ruling, a choice, discernment. Well yes, what we have been through made us make the best choice, and granted us discernment to make the distinction between what is crucial and what is not necessary. It made us see the great value of the council and that without it our churches would incur major losses. It made us learn from our mistakes and learn to be serious in our proposals.

62- Reform is an ongoing process, a sustainable development. It is a mentality, a mindset one must respect and adhere to, otherwise we will make the same mistakes and be trapped in the same quagmire again. We have accomplished several milestones in our journey, starting with the Task Force up until now, but there is still a lot to be done. I ask for the blessings of our spiritual superiors, and for the prayers of all of you. May God give us the power to achieve his will in all our deeds. Thank you.

Father Michel Jalakh