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Executive Summary

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The Crisis in Syria: How the churches are responding and how God is at work

A Syrian Pastor

The churches in Syria (and Iraq) are facing major challenges amid the current regional crisis. For many years, these churches were at peace, enjoying relative privileges. Suddenly everything has been turned upside down. Many Christians have been displaced, while some 400,000–500,000 Christians have migrated from Syria. Christians are facing the atrocities not only of the Islamic State (IS) but also some 45 different terrorist groups in Syria, including some linked with Al-Qaida.

The church was not prepared to deal with persecution or oppression, but is catching up rapidly. It is developing a theology of persecution—how to stand in persecution and a stance on resistance. Reconciliation and forgiveness are now huge issues for the whole region.

Caring for people of other faiths was not a priority before, but now evangelism and social action are going hand in hand. Most churches are now reaching out and helping the displaced, the poor, and those impacted by war. As they do, stories are emerging every week of conversions inside Syria and Iraq.

IS atrocities inevitably have a deep impact on Muslims. While many support the aspirations of IS, many others are saying that this is not the Islam they believe in. Quite a number of them come to Christ when the gospel is presented to them.

The refugee crisis is huge in Lebanon. Many churches there are very much engaged with the refugees, offering humanitarian aid. In the last two to three years, Lebanese and Syrian pastors say they have seen more Muslims come to faith in Christ than in their whole lives. God is bringing them as refugees to hear the gospel.

In the midst of suffering and darkness God is working in his sovereignty. There is a new spirit of Christian unity inside Syria and Iraq. The churches are thinking about how not just to survive, but to thrive, and to make a contribution.

The Arab Christian Church has survived pressure and persecution from the Day of Pentecost to now. The question is not one of survival but of impact. Even with small, and diminishing, numbers, Christians have had a huge impact on society.

The church has a brighter future. It will continue its witness with help from Christians from other lands, but it can do much more than in the past. Migration is a big issue, but the church has always been a minority. Numbers do not matter if there is the will to work together.

Christians outside the region should become more aware of what is going on, arming themselves with good information—not just about the bad news, but about the good things God is doing. Prayer is crucial.

Christians in the region feel a sense of isolation and it is important to know that somewhere Christians, churches, and organizations are praying for them and thinking of them.

Financial aid in this time of crisis would be very welcome, whether to support the churches in their social work, or to help Christians who have lost their homes.

We can learn three lessons for churches everywhere if we stand with solidarity with the church in the Middle East. Firstly, the church needs to be prepared to face the reality of a hostile environment. It needs to be doing ‘double listening’—listening to what God is saying through his Word, and what society is saying.

Secondly, in places where the church is a minority (whether in a secular or a religious society), it should not lose heart and hope. It was a minority at the start of its history. It can always have a right impact, whether through evangelism or building up society.

Lastly, the church must trust in God’s sovereignty and goodness in the midst of very hard circumstances, even if we cannot understand what is going on. Many Christians in the Middle East are doing this in the midst of pain and destruction. Some are experiencing God’s protection, and others are willing to live for him even if they are not protected.

China's Conflicting Signals: A local official attacks Three-Self churches in Zhejiang while a high-level official meets House church leaders in Beijing

David Ro

Even the experts are baffled. Legally registered Three-Self Patriotic churches are under attack while the illegal House churches are invited into official dialogue. Is China heading for another Mao-era persecution or opening up to an era of religious freedom?

Starting with the demolition of San Jiang Church in April 2014, over 1,200–1,500 crosses have been removed and dozens of churches demolished in Wenzhou city. One conjecture is that someone in the central government is testing the strength of the Three-Self church in the populous Christian Wenzhou region in preparation for a nationwide campaign to 'indigenize' Christianity with Chinese characteristics.

Another plausible explanation is internal politics. The simplest explanation is that China overall is moving toward conservative Neo-Maoist ideology. With the popularity of Christianity growing, leftist forces in the central government are seeking to limit its growth.

Despite the attacks, the Three-Self church has in fact been strengthened by them, and for the first time, House church leaders have crossed the divide to stand beside their former adversaries.

Meanwhile, President Xi Jinping's National Security Commission in June 2015 met a group of nationally recognized House church leaders in Beijing—the first such event in Communist China's history. A convincing explanation could be pragmatism: Xi needs to find a way to provide recognition for millions of Chinese citizens. Pessimists, on the other hand, would see Beijing luring House church leaders in order to bring them under government control.

There are four possible scenarios:

1. *Persecution*: Three-self and House churches come under attack in a national campaign.
2. *Status quo*: House church remains illegal and operates as usual under pressure.
3. *Legal status*: House church becomes legal within limits and with pressures.
4. *Separation of church and state*: Least likely and potential to be most dangerous for the church.

Scenario #3 is the most likely as well as the most favorable for the church since freedom within limits provides enough operating space to expand, along with some pressure to keep the church sharp.

House church legalization would be hotly debated. Differences between registered and unregistered House churches could divide the church for another generation.

Many would caution against advocating toward moving to a freer society. The global church often idolizes the church in China as a model of Christianity flourishing under difficult circumstances. However, China would more likely follow another model, similar to South Korea in the 1970s to 1990s.

Legal status would have many benefits. One of the most significant is that a legal environment increases the scope to develop effective sending structures for sending missionaries abroad.

The Three-Self and House church divide would slowly diminish and true reconciliation would begin. A freer religious market would shut down Three-Self churches which have relied on government support while healthy Three-Self churches would continue to grow.

In preparation for the eventual legal status of the House church, we must remember that the evangelization of China should be the primary responsibility of the Chinese. Missions strategies should focus on seeking supporting roles in partnerships with indigenous churches. Any foreign involvement could still be seen as meddling in domestic affairs.

The Chinese church must learn from the lessons and mistakes of the Western and Korean missions movements. It needs the global church, but Chinese church leaders are also watching to see who are sending missionaries. Chinese leaders have asked why mega-churches and 'missional' churches in the West are not sending any missionaries.

As the country apparently moves in a Neo-Maoist nationalistic direction, we can expect more bad news to come. However, God is answering the prayers of the global church for China and its leaders. Good news is on the horizon because a God-timed spiritual working appears to be taking place in the hearts of some of China's top leaders. It does not make sense in this current political environment, but is God preparing China's role in global missions?

Turning Jerusalem into a Christian Mecca among Christians in Africa and beyond: How should we respond?

J Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu

Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem have increased greatly within the last decade. Figures are difficult to come by, but from the United States, many parts of Europe, and Africa, Christian pilgrims visit the Holy Land in large numbers.

In 2013, the government of Ghana faced public criticism for attempting to sponsor some Pentecostal pastors for such a trip. The issue here is the emergence of Jerusalem as a place of effective prayer in the contemporary Christian imagination. A number of evangelical Christian leaders pointed to that as justification for the request to the government. Another explanation offered by those in favour of the trip was that Christians were entitled to state sponsorship for pilgrimages to Israel just as Muslims receive to go to Mecca.

The religious and theological issues that arise from the proposal relate to the nature of Christianity itself. It is a religion that neither privileges a particular geographical location as the centre of Christian practice nor sees any form of pilgrimage as critical to the expression of faith. Whereas in Islam, pilgrimage constitutes a major pillar of the faith, Christianity has no such historically recommended geographical centre of religious ritual.

Mecca, the original theatre of the revelation of Islam, has retained its religious significance for all Muslims, and this is demonstrated in the *qiblah*, the direction to which they turn in prayer. Jesus' direction in terms of where to pray did not refer to any particular geographical location or place: *'When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you'* (Matthew 6:6).

Historically Jerusalem has had more significance for Christianity than any other city in the Middle East. It is the city in which Jesus went through the major events culminating in his crucifixion and where the disciples were expected to wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It hosts some of the major landmarks of the Christian faith.

The reference in the Scriptures to Jerusalem as a 'heavenly city' has given its earthly version added significance. Theologically, Jerusalem has remained in the Christian imagination as a replica of the place where Christians will spend eternity.

For those who have had the opportunity to visit Jerusalem and its related cities for religious reasons, it has served the purpose of bringing the Bible alive in terms of some of the descriptions of the ministry of Jesus Christ.

However, Jerusalem ceased to be the centre of Christianity when Stephen was martyred. There is no such thing as 'Christian culture' or 'Christian civilization' in the sense in which there is Islamic culture or Islamic civilization. The principle of the incarnation, with God translating into flesh, brings Jesus Christ to the heart of each culture.

'Meccanizing' Christianity by seeking to hold Jerusalem as being as important to the Christian faith as Mecca is to Islam creates an important theological misnomer. Christian pilgrimages may be undertaken as important parts of personal and communal renewal. However, the statements of Jesus Christ and the subsequent post-resurrection history of the faith indicate that there is really no geographical centre meant to be the focus of Christian encounter with God.

God is spirit and those who seek to worship him must do so in spirit and in truth. Jerusalem may be significant for some reason but Christianity has no 'Black Stone' to which we are required to repair for religious credit.

Visits to the land of the Bible can be desired for what they are worth, that is, helping people to connect what they read with what they experience. However, Christians need to be careful not to institutionalize religious tourism to Jerusalem in a way that seems to suggest that it is mandatory for achieving the fullness of life that God makes available to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Developing Young Leaders with Disabilities: A ministry beyond our wildest dreams?

Dave Deuel

At the climax of redemption history, when people from every tribe and nation come to worship the Lord on His holy mountain, persons with disabilities will be among them, singing praises with the rest. As preparation, our Lord Himself will make the blind to see and the deaf to hear. Perhaps for the first time, those unable to speak will sing, and those who are immobile will leap for joy. And they all will teach the redeemed to praise God for the hard-earned lessons of suffering.

Who are people with disabilities? Roughly one in seven people across the globe are unable to see, hear, move about, speak, or think clearly. People with disabilities are much like anyone else except that, by God's design, they have impairments. There is a disappointingly small number of leaders with disabilities in local churches and other Christian organizations. However, there is hope and we can rejoice in the progress that they have made.

The Lausanne Movement addresses this challenge in *The Cape Town Commitment*:

We encourage church and mission leaders to think not only of mission among those with a disability, but to recognize, affirm, and facilitate the missional calling of believers with disabilities themselves as part of the body of Christ.

Indeed, Lausanne is committed to encouraging and facilitating people with disabilities in leadership roles in which they can serve according to their calling and gifts.

God has prepared and gifted some people with disabilities for leadership roles in local churches and Christian organizations. This will unquestionably strengthen the body of Christ, for all parts of Christ's body will be serving.

People with disabilities have become leaders within disability networks and in disability organizations. Some also have successfully started their own organizations. These are signs of progress, but they rarely serve as leaders of local churches.

The church needs to learn from the wisdom gained through suffering that people with disabilities possess. They can offer spiritual insights into physical, emotional, and social suffering that the church desperately needs to hear.

We need to remove obstacles holding back young leaders with disabilities. While obstacles may be physical, such as the need for a ramp or a rail, some of the most stubborn obstacles are conceptual. These include biblical misinterpretations and theological misunderstandings.

Social misunderstandings are another obstacle. In some regions of the world, there are those who still believe that people with disabilities are contagious and must be isolated. Others believe that demons cause disabilities.

Another type of obstacle is ideological, arising from the cultures in which we live. One ideological assumption says that people with disabilities cannot care for themselves. However, not only is this incorrect, but it holds them back. In caring for them, we should strive to respect disability cultures, which are as diverse and complex as those found in any other cross-cultural ministry context.

We—the current leaders of churches and organizations—are the only ones who can remove these obstacles. Colleagues around the world should consider the following suggestions that will help to open doors for young people with disabilities to become local church leaders:

- Encourage a young person with a disability to use their gifts in church and to find their calling or vocation.
- Invite a young person with a disability to work alongside you in a leadership role, providing mentorship and assistance as (and only when) needed.

- Lead the way in placing called, gifted, and trained people with disabilities in local church and Christian organizational and leadership roles.

In doing so, the church will discover that many are gifted deacons, teachers, pastors, and missionaries. They will also have the insights, empathy, access, and relationships essential to reach into the disability communities to evangelize, equip, and train the next generation of effective disability leaders.

Finally, other people with disabilities will see leaders with disabilities in their effective roles, be encouraged, and respond by moving from passive to active. Opening doors for young leaders with disabilities will be a ministry beyond our wildest dreams and bring us irresistible joy.

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Lausanne Global Analysis

Lausanne Global Analysis seeks to deliver strategic and credible information and insight from an international network of evangelical analysts to equip influencers of global mission.

Editor's Note: The Lausanne Movement connects influencers and ideas for global mission, with a vision of the gospel for every person, an evangelical church for every people, Christ-like leaders for every church, and kingdom impact in every sphere of society. Our three foundational documents are *The Lausanne Covenant*, *The Manila Manifesto*, and *The Cape Town Commitment*.

The Lausanne Movement is a global network of individuals and ministries from a wide range of denominations, nationalities, theologies, and strategic perspectives that shares an evangelical faith and commitment to global mission. Articles in the *Lausanne Global Analysis* represent a diversity of viewpoints within the bounds of our foundational documents. The views and opinions expressed in these articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the personal viewpoints of Lausanne Movement leaders or networks.

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Inquiries regarding *Lausanne Global Analysis* may be addressed to analysis@lausanne.org.

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