

Christian leaders: Pilgrimages must change to help Holy Land peace

LONDON – Catholic and Anglican leaders have challenged Christians to find new ways to establish lasting peace in the Holy Land, including changing the nature of pilgrimages.

International Christian, Jewish and Muslim delegates at the two-day Conference on Christians in the Holy Land, at Lambeth Palace July 18-19, considered concrete steps that might be taken by ordinary people to help to resolve enduring tensions that have forced millions of Palestinian Christians to flee their homeland in the past 50 years.

Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury, leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion, told a July 19 news conference at the palace, his London residence, that the delegates had looked for a “bit of a step change in Christian involvement here with the situation of Christians in the Holy Land, a step change that will allow us to identify and support specific projects more effectively.”

“As this is not just for the churches in the Holy Land but for the communities those churches are embedded in, we don’t see this as an exclusively Christian project,” he said.

He added that the “approach to pilgrimages” needed to change beyond a “tourist venture” to allowing visitors “to engage with the reality on the ground.”

“The idea that out of this conference we might generate a new template about how pilgrimages might look like, that has come into focus,” Archbishop Williams said.

Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster, president of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, told the news conference that British parishes would be encouraged to work for peace and forgiveness, rooted in justice, for all the people of the region.

The plan includes charitable relief work, contact with people in the region and in the

Palestinian diaspora, and the lobbying of politicians to work for change.

He said he would like to see such work extend to the wider community in the United Kingdom to include leaders of other faiths.

“One of the greatest characteristics of this conference, I think, has been the sensitivity, almost the reverence, (with) which people have spoken and listened to each other,” Archbishop Nichols said.

“I think that on listening to the different voices – Jewish, Muslim and Christian – this conference has modeled some of the outcome it would like to promote,” he said.

The conference, organized by the Church of England and the Catholic Church in England and Wales, was attended by Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

The cardinal called for renewed dialogue among followers of the Abrahamic faiths in the region, but he also made a specific plea for the rights of the minority Christians in the Holy Land to be guaranteed and respected.

He said Christian communities were not founded by missionaries sent from Rome or Constantinople but by the apostles and were a gift to their societies because “they bring cultural openness, a sense of the dignity of the human person and particularly of women; a conception of freedom which harmonizes rights and privileges, and a conception of political society which can lead to democracy.”

He added: “They must be granted and have secured the most fundamental rights – freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, freedom of movement, civic and historical rights, education, hospitals, the possession of their own institutions – seminaries, universities, monasteries.”

Among the delegates were Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., who is of Lebanese descent, and Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, who has worked for 10 years with the U.S.-based National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East.

In a July 19 interview with Catholic News Service, Cardinal McCarrick said the

major obstacle for progress in the Holy Land and the plight of Christians there was the absence of peace.

“Once you have peace there, many of the other problems will disappear,” he said. “I think one of the reasons Christians are leaving is that they don’t find peace there.

“They find troubles, difficulties, discrimination and all kind of issues and, as they plan their families, they don’t want their children to suffer under the same conditions,” he said. “They find ways to find relatives and job opportunities in different parts of the world, and they take them.”

“I think it (the conference) will let people know they are not alone in striving for peace in the Holy Land,” the cardinal said, adding that the conference had come up with a number of ideas that would allow people to work for peace.

“The main thing is that we keep trying and, in good times and in bad, we keep the search for peace going on. This is the Lord’s land, and we must all work together to find a solution that is just and which is going to bring peace with justice and security in the Holy Land,” he said. “We must all work together on that. It is a goal which really demands our participation.”