

Religious leaders urge renewed peace initiative

WASHINGTON - Several Catholics were among nearly 40 U.S. religious leaders who called on President George W. Bush to launch a new Israeli-Palestinian peace initiative.

"We ask that you make Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, in the context of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace initiative, an urgent priority for your administration," the leaders said in a letter delivered to the White House Jan. 23 and to all members of Congress Jan. 25.

Bishop Thomas G. Wenski of Orlando, Fla., chairman of the international policy committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, was among the five chief signatories on the letter. Among 34 other signers joining in were eight representatives of Catholic organizations.

"The United States and the world will become safer as confidence grows that the U.S. is willing to take leadership and work cooperatively with the United Nations and other nations to resolve this conflict," the letter said.

The letter was initiated by Churches for Middle East Peace, a Washington-based coalition of 21 public policy offices of Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox national churches and agencies seeking a nonviolent solution in Israel and Palestine.

The leaders were sharply critical of the "grave situation" created by the security barrier being constructed by Israel, a system of fences, trenches and walls designed to stop Palestinian terrorist attacks.

"With the construction by Israel of the separation barrier, many of the faithful - both Christians and Muslims - are excluded from the Holy City, and Jerusalem is severed from Bethlehem," they said.

They urged Bush to "work with Israelis, Palestinians and the international community to guarantee access to Jerusalem's holy places and religious liberty for

all peoples.”

“Resolving the status of Jerusalem is key to achieving a workable two-state solution,” they added.

Bishop Wenski said Christian leaders in the Holy Land have asked U.S. Christian leaders to call the president’s attention to the difficulties caused by the separation barrier. “One particular concern for Christians is the stark reality that Jerusalem is severed from nearby Bethlehem,” he said in a statement released to the media with the text of the letter.

The letter told the president, “We commend your vision of a viable, contiguous Palestinian state living as a peaceful neighbor alongside the state of Israel, with both nations secure and recognized by their neighbors. With your active engagement, this vision could reignite a passion for peace that can overcome the appeal of violence, vengeance and exclusivity.”

Besides Bishop Wenski, other chief signers of the letter were Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori of the U.S. Episcopal Church; Archbishop Khajag Barsamian, primate of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church; and Bishop Dimitrios of Xanthos, ecumenical officer of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

Joining in signing were top leaders of several other Christian churches and church agencies and the Rev. Bob Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, and the Rev. Michael E. Livingston, NCC president. The NCC sent copies of the letter to media and posted it on its Web site.

Catholics who joined in signing included: Ken Hackett, president of Catholic Relief Services; Monsignor Robert L. Stern, president of the Pontifical Mission for Palestine and general secretary of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association; Dominican Father Dominic Izzo, president of the Council of Major Superiors of Men; and Sister Mary Dacey, a Sister of St. Joseph and president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

Also among them were: Sister Simone Campbell, a Sister of Social Service and executive director of Network, a Catholic justice and peace lobbying agency; Marie Dennis, director of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns; Franciscan Brother Mark Schroeder, president of the English Speaking Conference of the Franciscans' international Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Council; and Auxiliary Bishop Gabino Zavala of Los Angeles, bishop president of Pax Christi USA, the U.S. branch of an international Catholic peace movement.