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**Australia has important role to play as bridge builder in Middle East
– ACBC inter-religious congress hears**

Australia could play an important role in building bridges for peace in the Middle East, a landmark congress of Christians, Muslims and Jews heard today.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference brought together key people from the Christian, Muslim and Jewish religious traditions for the day-long congress to discuss The Role of Religion in Achieving Peace in the Middle East.

Speakers at the event were Archbishop Elias Chacour, Mr Jeremy Jones and Dr Mohommad Sammak.

Mr Sammak is the Secretary-General of the Lebanese Christian-Muslim Committee for Dialogue and Secretary General of the Islamic Spiritual Council in Lebanon. Archbishop Chacour is the Melkite Catholic Archbishop of Akka, Haifa, Nazareth and all Galilee. Mr Jones is the Director of International and Community Affairs for Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council.

Archbishop Chacour said he had come to Australia as a beggar – not for money, but for friendship and for solidarity with the Christian community in the Middle East.

“We do not need wars for peace, we need bridges and we invite you to be bridges,” he said.

Archbishop Chacour urged Australians who visit the Holy Land to go beyond the shrines and holy places to spend some time with the local Christian communities.

“I can’t understand Christians who go to the shrines and don’t go to see the local Christian community. We need your solidarity – that you come and see us, see that we exist and pray for us,” he said.

Archbishop Chacour who established a school at Ibillin in the Galilee region which takes in Muslims, Jews and Christians, said that his background as a Palestinian who found himself living in the new State of Israel more than half a century ago throws up many contradictions.

“I am a Palestinian, a proud Palestinian. There is nothing to be ashamed of in being a Palestinian. I have no bombs. I am a Palestinian Arab Christian – that complicates things already. But to add to this picture I am as forcefully a Palestinian Arab Christian who is a citizen of the State of Israel.

“These four facets of my identity are not always at peace together. There are apparent contradictions.”

Archbishop Chacour said that the conflict in the Middle East has never been a religious conflict or a social or racial conflict.

“It is about the identical claims of two nations on the same territory,” he said.

The majority of Arabs and Israelis want peace and security, he said.

“But both Jews and Palestinians to my mind have made a major mistake – they wanted their old peace and their old justice. Unless we all learn how to belong to the land, maybe we have only one solution – to be buried together in different ways in the same land.”

Archbishop Chacour said the role of Christianity was to bring forward an alternative to the pervading culture of death in the Middle East.

“We want to welcome the otherness of the other as a brother, not as an other,” he said.

“The Church will never go into any trench. We will stand between the trenches and beg you to stop killing each other. Our responsibility as Christians in that part of the world is to bring alternatives to the militaristic attitudes of both sides.”

Jeremy Jones paid tribute to the extraordinary depth of inter-religious dialogue in Australia and said it was the envy of much of the world.

“We don’t only meet together as Christians, Jews and Muslims, but we discuss things that bother us too,” he said.

In one year recently, labelled the Year of Tough Topics, the inter-religious dialogue in Australia focused on topics such as Zionism, Jihad and the Trinity.

“Religious bodies and faith communities are dynamic. Serious religious thinking people are not trapped by time. There is wisdom to be sought, wisdom to be learned and more work to be done,” he said.

Mr Jones said one of the key roles of religious leaders in the political process is to pray, to try to imbue any political debate with a moral dimension and a forward thinking dimension.

He warned against the tendency for people to cherry pick from religious beliefs.

“It is easy to cherry pick religion without looking at what is meant and without taking a holistic view,” he said.

Some of the roadblocks to peace in the Middle East include feelings of personal insecurity and suspicion of motives, he said.

“It has to be very clear that most people, certainly the people meeting here today are not looking to achieve a political outcome but working together to achieve a common aim.”

As the final speaker, Dr Sammak spoke of the role which Australia could have in helping to promote peace in the Middle East.

“This initiative taken by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is to me of great importance, because I believe that this country can play the role of a bridge which we are looking for, but which we are not finding, the country which has the capacity to play that role,” he said.

“Australia has no history of religious conflict but Australia can make history in a role of promoting peace and reconciliation. I believe that Australia can play this role of bridging not only in the Middle East, but all over international communities.”

Dr Sammak said the problems in the Middle East were not problems with the three religions, but were political problems. And he expressed deep concern at the fact that many Christians are leaving the Middle East.

“If we ask ourselves the role of religion in the Middle East we should ask what will be the role of Christians in the Middle East. Can you imagine Jews and Muslims living side by side in the Middle East without the Christians? Christians are of the utmost importance there,” he said.

“There will be no settlement in the Middle East through religion. Settlement in the Middle East will come between the people of the Middle East and the countries of the Middle East.

“But it is people who influence the decision-makers and it is religion which influences these people.”

The forum was an initiative of the Bishops Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-religious Relations and was chaired by the Commission Chairman, Bishop Michael Putney.

The President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Archbishop Philip Wilson gave the official welcome at the event, which was attended by about 90 people representing the Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious traditions.

Tomorrow night (Thursday, May 3), there will be a public event at Notre Dame University of Australia’s Broadway campus, featuring the same speakers. It will be chaired by Her Excellency Professor Marie Bashir, the Governor of NSW.