



**Uniting Church in Australia - Middle East National Conference**  
الكنيسة المتحدة في استراليا - المجمع الوطني للشرق الأوسط  
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Rev. Sharon Hollis - UCA President  
Coleen Geyer - UCA General Secretary  
Rob Floyd - UCA Associate General Secretary

Dear Sharon, Colleen and Rob,

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

We write this letter on behalf of the Middle East National Conference (MENC) to reflect on our six years of service and to address several of our ongoing concerns.

While MENC carried out many wonderful initiatives in its earlier years, it subsequently ceased to have the full support of the Assembly to continue its good work.

One of the pillars of MENC which was never fulfilled despite significant efforts from the MENC Committee was the wish to establish a partnership with the churches in the Middle East. We are deeply disappointed that this has not eventuated and believe it has not succeeded because of a lack of interest and support from the Assembly.

Prior to MENC's first national conference in 2016, the then-UCA President Stuart McMillan met with the Committee twice to discuss several issues, including the situation in the Middle East, the refugees coming to Australia, the possibility of establishing partnership with the home churches and a visit of the UCA President with a small delegation to Lebanon. The President asked MENC to act as a reference group to Assembly agencies in matters relating to the Middle East. In principle, it was agreed to establish a partnership with the churches in the Middle East. As a first step it was agreed to plan a visit to Lebanon in early 2017 with a small delegation.

In January 2017, a delegation including the UCA President Stuart McMillan, Rob Floyd Uniting World National Director, Rev. Gaby Kobrossi, Rev. Dr. Krikor Youmshajekian and Rev. Dr. Emmanuel Adisho from MENC went to Lebanon to visit the country's President and the heads of several churches.

As a result of the visit, Uniting World made an appeal to the UCA congregations to fund the education of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. From the funds that were raised, \$10,000 was sent through ACT Alliance as a first instalment. Unfortunately, one part of the funds did not reach the intended recipient. According to our knowledge, another \$30,000 was sent, but it never reached the recipients. After multiple enquiries from MENC, it is still unclear what exactly happened, and to date, we do not have clarity on this issue. Unfortunately, it's the refugees who suffered from the Assembly's lack of commitment to follow up on the issues with sending the funds. We find this deeply saddening.

During the same visit to Lebanon, His Holiness Aram I Catholicos, the Patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church, expressed an interest to send one of the clergymen to Australia to study a Master of Theology at Charles Sturt University at UTC. This project was adopted by the Armenian Missionary Association of Australia and the proposed candidate arrived and studied for two years (2019-2020) and graduated with high distinction. The total cost was well above \$100,000 which was raised entirely by the Association, without any support from the UCA sources.

MENC's second national conference was held in November 2018. The past President Stuart McMillan and the President at the time Dierdre Palmer, Rob Floyd, as well as other representatives of UCA attended. The NSW Synod Moderator Rev. Simon Hansford was the guest preacher. We were not able to have our third annual conference due to COVID-19, but it is clear that the Assembly's interest in MENC had already declined at that point.

While we were glad to see Rev. Hrayr Cholakian from Lebanon participate in the 15<sup>th</sup> UCA Triannual Assembly in 2018 as a guest of the UCA Assembly, all further attempts from MENC to establish the partnership with churches in the Middle East were disregarded by the Assembly.

MENC invited two young leaders from Lebanon to participate in the UCA President's National Young Adult Leaders Conference in January 2019 in Adelaide. The young leaders were the guests of MENC, participated in the conference and visited Willoughby Armenian Uniting Church as well as Bankstown Uniting Church. Unfortunately, the UCA did not provide any financial assistance towards the travel expenses and about \$6000 in travel costs were covered by personal contributions. That's despite this having been a wonderful occasion for the UCA young adults to learn about churches in the Middle East and form a cross-border and cross-cultural connection with the two young leaders.

After the second annual conference, the MENC Executive met with the Uniting World National Director, Sureka Goringe to find out what happened to the funds to support the Syrian refugee students in Lebanon, and to follow up with the partnership matter and what we could do to move the matter forward.

Unfortunately, we received no answers about the funding. Ms Goringe explained in detail about the steps how to establish the partnership, but no further action was ever taken, and four years have since past with no follow-up nor renewed interest from the Assembly. The Middle East church leaders contacted the MENC Executive several times to see if we had any progress on the partnership, and we had to relay to them that no action was being taken by the Assembly. This was a frustrating and disappointing outcome for all involved.

Financially, we only ever received the Assembly's three-year allocation of \$2000 and another \$700 as a first instalment of the second three-year allocation. The current balance in our accounts is \$941.63.

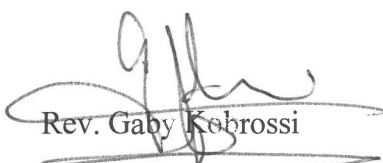
Over the last two years, the MENC executive had several meetings to discuss the next steps, but these efforts were overshadowed by a disheartening lack of interest from UCA. It felt like our commitment to building links between the Middle East and Australia was being ignored and unappreciated. Neither the UCA, Uniting World and the National Director of the Assembly Multicultural and Cross-Cultural Ministry have shown any concern for our initiatives in these recent years. This is despite close collaboration in our earlier years.

Reflecting on these past six years of several important achievements, but also ongoing frustrations and disappointments with the Assembly, the MENC executive has made the heartbreaking decision to resign.

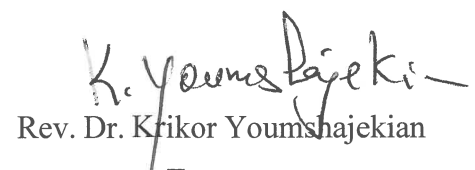
We believe this is an enormous lost opportunity for the Assembly, overlooking the potential for a partnership with some of the oldest Christian communities in the world is a gross oversight. Also, considering the large population of Christians in Australia who identify with a Middle Eastern cultural background, the lack of commitment to our mission reflects a broader disregard for this community.

With this letter we pass on our decision of resigning and ask the Assembly to dissolve the Middle East National Conference.

We wish you well.

  
Rev. Gaby Kobrossi  
Chairperson

  
George Fattal  
Member

  
Rev. Dr. Krikor Youmshajekian  
Treasurer