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WORKING SESSION 7 -

“Combating racism, xenophobia, and discrimination; combating anti-Semitism and intolerance and discrimination against Christians, Muslims and members of other religions; Prevention and responses to hate crimes in the OSCE area.”

**Statement of Francesco Di Lillo, Head of the European Union Office of
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints**

Madame/Mister Moderator,

I would like to address how tolerance and mutual understanding can be promoted to value the full diversity of national, ethnic, cultural, religious or belief communities, as well as non-believers.

Societies are made of majorities and minorities. Whether by choice or by birth, people belong to groups. We live our lives and express our purpose through religious, racial, political and cultural communities. All of them are different. All have their place. But not all have equal power. Some are bigger, older, richer and better connected than others. This imbalance pits belief systems against each other, but a peaceful society puts the strong and the weak on a level playing field.

Sometimes this tension plays out in drastic ways.

Open Doors, an organization that tracks religious persecution, reports that “the suffering of Christians simply because of their faith is taking place on a staggering scale.” In

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the 50 strictest countries, over 200 million Christians undergo high levels of persecution. “The sad toll of Christians being killed,” says the report, continues “in more countries than ever before.” Christians are being driven from their ancient communities in the Middle East, murdered in Nigeria and marginalized by a growing religious nationalism in Asia. All this exacerbates the world’s refugee crisis. “Never before have so many Christians been on the move.”¹

And it’s not only Christians. In countries across the Middle East, Muslims have been killed and persecuted by Islamic militants. Vulnerable minorities have been forced from their homes by despots and terrorists. Sectarian conflict has sparked a cycle of kidnappings, harassment and displacement.² According to Open Doors, “religious persecution is a significant driver of forced global migration.”³ Amid this chaos, Muslim refugees flee for their lives. In Myanmar the Buddhist majority is cracking down on the small Rohingya Muslim community.⁴ Assaults against Muslims have increased in the United States,⁵ and views toward Muslims have grown more negative across Europe.⁶

Perhaps more than any other people throughout history, the Jews have experienced enormous persecution as a minority scattered around the world. Anti-Semitism is still a problem today. One report documented 1,883 attacks against Jews, synagogues, and Jewish cemeteries in Canada, the United States and 44 countries in Europe and Central Asia in 2014.⁷

Minorities do not have it easy.

Racism, with all of its clear and subtle expressions, is morally wrong and sinful, and we condemn it. Anyone who promotes or pursues racist behavior is not in harmony with the

¹ See Open Doors World Watch Report 2017, “The Persecution of Christians and Global Displacement,” pp. 3-5.

² See Katayoun Kishi and Angelina E. Theodorou, “6 Facts about Religious Hostilities in the Middle East and North Africa,” Pew Research Center, July 7, 2016.

³ See Open Doors World Watch Report 2017, “The Persecution of Christians and Global Displacement,” p. 3.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, “Burma: New Wave of Destruction in Rohingya Villages,” Nov. 21, 2016.

⁵ Katayoun Kishi, “Anti-Muslim Assaults Reach 9/11-era Levels, FBI Data Show,” Pew Research Center, Nov. 21, 2016.

⁶ See Richard Wike, Druce Stokes and Katie Simmons, “Europeans Fear Wave of Refugees Will Mean More Terrorism, Fewer Jobs,” Pew Research Center, July 11, 2016.

⁷ Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Hate Crime Reporting, Anti-Semitism, 2015 report.

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teachings of the Church. A statement made by a Church leader a decade ago still resonates for our time. He powerfully and clearly taught this principle: "No man who makes disparaging remarks concerning those of another race can consider himself a true disciple of Christ. Nor can he consider himself to be in harmony with the teachings of the Church of Christ."

As Latter-day Saints, we reaffirm that teaching today and the Savior's admonition to love our neighbor.⁸

But freedom of religion or belief can help. The worth of a right is found in its ability to protect both majority and minority. This freedom operates on two fronts. As law it secures the free exercise of religion; as social norm it fosters respect for differences and disagreements. No country is perfect at this. But by bestowing dignity on our beliefs, religious freedom ties us all together, including those who profess no religion.

Consider an example from the West African country of Cameroon. Under threat of terrorist attacks, Christian and Muslim congregations took turns protecting each other. On Fridays Christians guarded the mosques during community prayer, and on Sundays Muslims guarded the churches during worship services.⁹

Such reciprocity is vital because the majority and the minority often trade places. What is popular at one time becomes unpopular at another. Every religion and movement undergoes the fluctuations of prominence and obscurity. The cultural group that enjoys privilege today may lose it tomorrow. Power is not permanent. So, a religious freedom that protects the little guy is also the best security for the big guy. Safety is not in numbers; safety is in justice.

There are consequences for repressing the beliefs, practices and aspirations of minorities. Imbalance provokes instability, breeds resentments and sharpens divisions. Alienation creates strangers, and those strangers range the world in search of support. The

⁸ "Church Issues Statements on Situation in Charlottesville, Virginia," Link: www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/church-statement-charlottesville-virginia

⁹ Terry Turner, "Christians Protect Mosques on Fri., Muslims Guard Churches on Sunday," Good News Network, Jan. 29, 2016.

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code of hospitality found in the Bible holds us accountable to the least among us. And since we are all sojourners in a strange land, if we befriend a stranger we may discover “angels unawares.”¹⁰

Religious freedom only for some is really religious freedom for none.

We often feel threatened by differences. And we don't have to go far to find them. A family from another country moves next door and doesn't speak your language. A group of Muslims bow and pray in your neighborhood park. A rally on campus challenges your political beliefs. Colleagues at work don't believe in God and question why you do.

How should we react to such situations? Evade or engage? The answer may determine whether we flourish or splinter as a society.

Sometimes the fear of differences threatens us more than the actual differences.

A society where many religions, political ideologies, ethnicities and worldviews coexist under one government is called pluralism. The various groups may not agree with each other, but they find ways to live together. Our crowded public square means, for example, that Christians and atheists can't avoid one another and that conservatives and liberals must listen as well as talk. Our differences can enrich our common existence as long as they harm or coerce no one.

Without an active citizenry, however, pluralism collapses to mere diversity. Differences themselves matter, but engaging those differences matters more. People can disagree and still have productive relationships. Civil society creates public space for people to interact with one another and grow familiar with the unique identities around them. We become smoother by bumping into each other's rough edges.

This is not all new. Pluralistic societies have existed at various times in history, but today the flow of business, technology and people across the world has increased in a process called globalization. As a result, cultures have more opportunity to clash. Pluralism seems to

¹⁰ Hebrews 13:2.

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be moving everywhere. For example, it is estimated that China has 100 million Christians, outnumbering members of the Communist party, and that 16 million Muslims live in countries throughout the European Union, a number that continues to rise. In addition, secular notions of freedom and justice mingle with religious understandings of human purpose.¹¹

Communities around the world strive to accommodate diverse ideas, beliefs and cultures without compromising shared values. People acting on their own initiative help make this possible. An example of this occurred in 2015 when, after an attack on a synagogue in nearby Denmark, a group of Norwegian Muslims joined others to form a shield around Oslo's synagogue. This demonstration to protect the Jewish community is the best face of civil society.¹²

Our differences have more meaning when they enter into conversation with other differences.^{13 14}

In the New Testament, Jesus said: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 22:37–39). The Book of Mormon teaches "all are alike unto God" (2 Nephi 26:33).

Bridging distances may be hard and will always take courage, but we have no choice but to keep trying.

Thank you.

¹¹ See Peter L. Berger, "The Good of Religious Pluralism," *First Things*, April 2016.

¹² Balazs Koranyi, "Norway's Muslims form protective human ring around synagogue," *Reuters*, Feb. 21, 2015.

¹³ "A Bridge Between the Strong and the Weak," Link: www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/international-religious-freedom-bridge-strong-weak

¹⁴ "Engaging the Differences Among Us," Link: www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/civil-society-engaging-differences