



**Endorsement of the Conference of European Churches Governing Board of the Final Communiqué on the Issue of the Places of Worship and Holy Sites in Europe and the Middle East**

*Status: Adopted*

*24 November 2017*

In the run up to the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018, the Governing Board of the Conference of European Churches endorses the communiqué on the legal status and protection of places of worship and holy sites issued at a conference in Nicosia, Cyprus from 9 to 10 November 2017, organised by CEC and hosted by the Church of Cyprus.

The CEC Governing Board would like to use this opportunity to increase public awareness of the importance of places of worship and holy sites as an integral part of religious freedom or belief, as well as of their relevance for the common cultural heritage of humanity. The CEC Governing Board emphasizes the understanding that religious buildings including, churches, chapels, monasteries, synagogues, temples and mosques or sites including monuments, cemeteries, routes of pilgrimages, should be regarded as places of worship or a holy sites.

The CEC Governing Board is called to take steps in dialogue with state authorities to offer strong and effective protection of such sites in national as well as international law so that these sacred sites are free from illegitimate interference, such as the denial of access, the obstruction of religious ceremonies, damage, plundering and trafficking of artifacts, destruction and desecration, both from state agents and/or other divisive parties. Special attention should be paid also to the prohibition of unlawful, disproportionate, discriminatory or otherwise unjust dispossession.

The CEC Governing Board calls on all members of the CEC, and all other churches and communities of religion or belief in Europe and the Middle East to:

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- seek the spirit of peace and understanding, and a common understanding in particular, on the handling of such sites that are of religious or spiritual significance to more than one denomination. This applies to religious engagement as well.
- engage in dialogue on how religious actors can raise political awareness together about the importance of these sites, while forestalling a politicisation of religious sites in conflicts,
- join in common action to defend each other's rights. This includes taking the stand on minority concerns.

The CEC Governing Board urges the European institutions and the Member States of the European Union, in cooperation with other international actors<sup>1</sup> to:

- use the upcoming European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 to increase their efforts to ensure respect and protection for places of worship and holy sites. This should be reflected both in EU law, its Common Foreign and Security Policy; and in the law of other countries in Europe and the Middle East.
- work towards a comprehensive international framework of legal protection, building on a better understanding of the fundamental right to Freedom of Religion or Belief, including a common definition of such places and sites, as well as legal solutions to ensure proper implementation. In particular, religious communities must be able to acquire or build, own and administer, maintain or restore, and access and use such places.

The CEC Governing Board urges the member states of the Council of Europe to put their signature to the Council of Europe Convention on Offences relating to cultural property.<sup>2</sup> It also urges non member-states who participated in its elaboration, and any other country who wants to fight against illicit trafficking and the destruction of cultural property, as an integral part of the fight against terrorism and organised crime to do the same. The Treaty has been open for signature since 19 May 2017.

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<sup>1</sup> For example the UN Human Rights Council's resolution 6/37 (9e).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/0900001680710435?desktop=false>