



By MOHAMMAD SAMMAK

From Tampa with love

When I received an invitation from the United Church of Christ (UCC) in the USA to speak to its General Assembly, I accepted the invitation with pleasure, for at least two reasons;

The first is the ideology and the background of the church; which is known for being open, transparent, moderate and above all tolerant. The UCC is highly respected for taking the courageous decision two years ago in favor of the Palestinian people. The decision called for divestment in Israel as a means to pressure the Israeli government to move towards a just and peaceful settlement.

The second is the place of the meeting. The church, which counts some 1,200,000 members, chose Tampa, Florida to convene. It is well-known that Florida is the state where Pastor Terry Johns committed the foolish act of burning a copy of the Quran (March 20, 2011) after judging it as anti-Christian and as a terrorist stimulator.

The United Church asked me to speak about Christianity and Islam, and about Christian-Muslim dialogue in the Middle East. That is why I found in the invitation an occasion to clarify the misunderstandings which Pastor Johns and his followers believe in, and to portray a true image of Islam to a group of devout Christians coming to Florida from different states.

I'll publish part of my paper about Christianity in Islam next week. But now I

would like to speak about the outcome of the convention, which was attended by more than 3,100 delegates.

It is well-known that Islamophobia has spread all over the USA, especially after and because of the crime of 9/11. American Muslims are suffering from segregation and racial and religious discrimination. But contrary to this new phenomenon, the United Church of Christ, which condemned this negative and destructive reaction, called on its followers, and on all Christians in general, to respect, love, and live together with Muslims, in the USA and the world over.

The decision, which was approved by an overwhelming majority of 98.3 percent, says: "The General Synod of the United Church of Christ expresses its clear support for neighbours in the Muslim community, both in the United States and around the world, who feel the impact of anti-Islamic rhetoric and action; and denounces actions against Islam or Muslims based on ignorance or fear";

"The General Synod encourages all settings of the United Church of Christ to seek ways to learn more about Islam, to engage in relationships with Muslim Americans, and to work to counter what has been labeled Islamophobia. The national setting of the United Church of Christ makes available resources to learn about and engage with people of other faiths, and Muslims in particular.

"Finally, members and

settings of the United Church of Christ speak out against religiously- and racially-motivated hatred, violence and actions, such as the desecration of religious symbols and sacred texts, and support public policies that ensure the value of religious diversity in the United States."

After the final vote on this resolution (728 in favor, 10 opposed), I answered the invitation to address the General Assembly by offering thanks on behalf of the Christian-Muslim Committee for Dialogue in Lebanon, of which I am general secretary. I said: "The passage of this resolution shows clearly that the UCC is up to the standards of the Christian values that the church is promoting, and the United States of America is also up to the standard of the humanitarianism it always speaks about."

Because of the rise of fundamentalism and extremism in the Middle East, Christians of the Middle East suffer. And because fundamentalism means "monopolizing God, monopolizing truth and refusing all other beliefs, Christians and Muslims suffer together."

By adopting this resolution, "you send a clear message to the peoples of the Middle East and the whole Islamic world, that this is Christianity... and this is a message not only of tolerance but of love."

After all, this is the principle on which Christian-Muslim relations should be based. ■