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Greeting from the Chair of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany

The issue of religious freedom is dear to the heart of our church members. It is one of the central responsibilities of the church to work for a situation where Christians can freely practise their faith all over the world. It is for that reason that, in 2013, the Evangelical Church in Germany issued a report on Freedom of religion, for the first time jointly with its Roman Catholic sisters and brothers. This report shows that Christian communities in many countries are discriminated against or persecuted. In Turkey too, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant sisters and brothers cannot live out their faith in complete freedom.

Positive freedom of religion takes a community forward and does all its members good. That applies not only in the heart of Europe but also in Turkey. We hope that things will develop towards religious pluralism in that country. We welcome the progress in the area of justice that was noted by the European Commission in its most recent report on Turkey. Furthermore, the returning of landed property to the Syrian Orthodox monastery Mor Gabriel at the end of 2013 and the ecumenical service held in summer 2014 in Panteleimon Church in Bursa, Asia Minor, would seem to justify the hope that Turkey is developing towards greater openness in the field of religious freedom.

Every year we offer intercessory prayers for our oppressed and persecuted brothers and sisters all over the world. Besides the political commitment to Christians being able to practice their faith freely everywhere, it is prayer that gives them strength and encourages them to bear witness to the gospel in their home countries. So this year let us remember the Christians in Turkey, bringing them and their situation before God in prayer.

Why pray for oppressed and persecuted Christians?

In different parts of the world, churches, Christian communities or individual believers are oppressed and persecuted. The repressions include discrimination and legal uncertainty, the restriction of certain fundamental rights, such as religious freedom, and even threats to life and limb.

Not every conflict in which Christians suffer has religious roots and not every case of violence against Christians is caused by their faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore we use the concept “persecution of Christians” after careful examination of the situation and check our sources. Often the causes of the harm reported are ethnic, political, social, cultural, economic, criminal or geostrategic. However, in the case of the Christian minorities in Turkey, it is particularly difficult to distinguish between ethnic and religious factors since the Turkish legislature confuses religious with ethnic identity.

By differentiating, we do not want to play down the suffering and oppression. The Evangelical Church in Germany feels compassion for the suffering sisters and brothers in the conflict regions of this world. Here do not look alone at the difficulties in their countries of origin but also know that many Christians live among us in Germany after fleeing from oppression and persecution.

We advocate for oppressed and persecuted Christians in public campaigns and through political diplomacy. So we work at different levels on improving the human rights situation. At the same time, we are careful to avoid any stereotyping that will spawn new enemy stereotypes since our aim is to promote mutual respect among all people. Our advocacy for oppressed and persecuted Christians thus crosses denominational and political borders: religious freedom is something that concerns us all.

Religious freedom in Turkey

Since the start of access negotiations between Turkey and the European Union the question of religious freedom in Turkey has also been an issue in the German public. On 16 October 2013 the European Commission issued a communication to the European Parliament and the Council accompanying the Turkey 2013 Progress Report.¹ This report does not just describe the political and economic aspects of developments in Turkey, but also looks at the human rights situation – and freedom of religions, as part of that.² The Norwegian Helsinki Committee's latest report on religious freedom came out in January 2014.³ Our description of freedom of religion in Turkey relies on these two sources. The two reports agree in listing the following violations of religious freedom:

- **Religious communities do not have the status of a legal person.** This applies equally for Muslims, Jews, Christians, Baha'i and other religions and violates the human rights which Turkey has undertaken to respect. Since the administrative organs of the religious communities, e.g. the Ecumenical Patriarchate or the Armenian Patriarchate cannot obtain the status of legal persons, problems arise in connection with acquiring property, jurisdiction, fund-raising and employing foreign clergy. Nor may religious communities take legal action; they can only be represented by individuals since they have no status themselves as legal entities.
- **The state only assumes maintenance and operating costs for Muslim religious buildings,** and not for other religions. It is no surprise in this connection that the churches have extremely restricted scope both for building new church buildings or maintaining existing ones.
- In addition, there is **no right to object to military service in the Turkish army on grounds of faith and conscience.**
- Furthermore, it is not possible to train non-Muslim clergy as there are no **state-recognized training institutions.** All religious education is subject to a state monopoly; it consists of Sunni religion and ethics. Private educational institutions are not allowed to offer religious education. In spite of numerous announcements by members of government, a Greek Orthodox theological school in Halki that was closed in 1971 has not yet been reopened. Recently government representatives linked reopening the university to the erection of a mosque in Athens. The training centre of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Üsküdar, closed in 1969, is not yet open again, either. However, with its "democratization package" proclaimed in 2013 the government extended the possibility of education in the mother tongue, which had previously only been accorded to minorities under the Treaty of Lausanne.⁴

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2013/package/tr_rapport_2013.pdf (18.10.2013)

² Regional Organizations' Religious Freedom Commitments: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/169989.pdf>

³ <http://www.nhc.no>

⁴ The Treaty of Lausanne was concluded in 1923 between Turkey, the victorious powers of World War I - France, Italy, Japan and Britain – along with the Balkan states Romania, Greece and Yugoslavia. The treaty contained provisions on the exchange of population after the Greek-Turkish war and the rights of religious minorities in Turkey. The provisions of the treaty identified religious affiliation with ethnic and national origins.

- **Identity cards and documents continue to contain information on religious affiliation,** which promotes discrimination, particularly in the case of converts.

The European Court of Human Rights has handed down rulings on religious education, training clergy and conscientious objection to military service that have not been transposed into Turkish law to date.

Besides these problems, there are also positive developments. In August 2011 the government raised the possibility of returning confiscated goods or, alternatively, of compensation payments. With the same decree, it became possible to establish new religious foundations. Since 2010 the governments have conceded the possibility of holding services once a year at historical sites that have been turned into state museums. For different reasons, city mayors, too, are pushing for such opportunities to be granted more often.⁵

⁵ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2012, p. 50; US State Department: Religious Freedom Report 2012. Human Rights Watch: Annual Report 2013, p. 487ff.

The Christian churches in Turkey

In the last few years the situation of Christians in Turkey has been discussed more extensively in Germany in connection with the idea of Turkey joining the European Union. The media have mainly focused on three thematic complexes that are considered indicators of the extent to which Turkey would commit to a new attitude regarding religious freedom. They are the possibilities of

- reopening Christian churches for the pastoral care of local Christians and tourists
- repealing the closure in 1971 of the Theological School of Halki built in 1844 for the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople
- working through the genocide of 1915 against Armenians and other Christian minorities such as the Syrian Orthodox Christians and the Pontic Greeks.

Although 99% of the population are Muslims, Islam is not officially the state religion of Turkey. However, it must be regarded as a strong social force striving to increase the influence of Muslim faith in the life of the country. Christians in Turkey today form a small minority but can look back on a long history, featuring the origins and historical identity of Christian churches and times in which Christian life flourished. The history of the Ecumenical Patriarchate can be traced back to the year 330 when Emperor Constantine moved his headquarters from Rome to the small city of Byzantium, which was soon to develop into the most important church centre, in the eastern part of the empire, after Rome. During the Byzantine Empire the city of Istanbul was called Constantinople. Its landmark is the Hagia Sophia, that from 641 served as the church where the emperor was crowned and was purged of Christian symbols in 1453 after the Ottoman conquest, adapted to serve as the main mosque and equipped with extensions. Since 1935 it has been a museum, but at the end of 2013 the conservative Islamic government started calling for it to be turned back into a mosque.

Within the small minority of Christians there is still a great range of different churches of western and eastern tradition, with their own identity and history, and whose position in the Turkish state is likewise very varied.

The following communities may be regarded as indigenous churches: the **Armenian Apostolic Church** is the largest, with approx. 65,000 members. It is part of the community of Oriental Orthodox Churches. The **Armenian-Catholic Church**, stemming from the 17th century, numbers approx. 3000. A small group of Armenian Protestant Christians today participates actively in Turkish Free Churches. The **Ecumenical Patriarchate** based in Phanar has approx. 3000 Greek Orthodox members resident in Turkey, but the Patriarch is the honorary head of Eastern Orthodoxy and the worldwide leader of the Orthodox churches which have not been assigned any other head. The Christians in the **Syrian Orthodox Church** stem from the area of Tur Abdin in southeast Turkey, but now very few still live there; the majority of the approx. 10,000 Christians live in Istanbul. There is also the **Syrian-Catholic Church** with approx. 1200 members and the **Chaldean Catholic Church** with approx. 1000, whose number is growing thanks to the refugees from Iraq, the home of this church.

The other communities may be considered typical expatriate churches:

The **Roman Catholic Church** with approx. 15,000 members from different countries of origin. The **German-speaking Protestant church** celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2011. The **Anglican Church**, the **Presbyterian Church** and the **Union Church** are English-speaking and often with a North American flavour. Supported by North American and Korean free churches, recent years have also seen

Turkish Free Churches springing up, operating on the fringe of the statutory ban on propaganda with their missionary efforts.

All churches suffer from an unclarified, difficult or non-existing legal status as communities. Expatriate churches existing before 1914 and whose legal and property status is recognized and provable, find it easier to employ clergy. Other non-indigenous churches, including the Protestant and Catholic churches, can often only guarantee a safe status through connections with foreign embassies.

The following are regarded as national religious minorities under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne: Armenians, Bulgarians, Greeks and Jews; all other churches and religious communities are not recognized and cannot acquire legal status. There seems to be a positive development towards changes to the law on ownership questions. The Aramaic Christians, who are not specifically mentioned in the Treaty of Lausanne, do not yet have the guaranteed right to teach their children in their native and liturgical language.

In all, the number of Christians may be estimated at approx. 100,000 among the approx. 76 million overall population. Publicly working through the 1915 genocide of Armenians and other Christian minorities and other Christian minorities (Syrians, Pontic Greeks) is no permitted; the topic is taboo.

Case study: The Ecumenical Patriarchate

The problems arising from the above legal situation have an impact on the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in five core areas:

1. Election of the Patriarch

The Turkish government requires that candidates for the office of Patriarch are of Turkish nationality. In view of the dwindling number of Orthodox Christians in Turkey the Ecumenical Patriarchate regards this provision as direct intervention by the Turkish state in the internal affairs of the world Orthodox Church. However, the Turkish government in 2010 awarded Turkish nationality to fifteen metropolitans working abroad on behalf of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. This measure, which is fundamentally to be welcomed, does not change the fact that the above law gives the Turkish government the opportunity to influence the election of patriarch.

2. Recognition of the supra-national status of the Patriarchate

In the spirit of nationalism of the 19th and early 20th century Turkey did not recognize the supranational status of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Through this anachronistic view, Turkey ignored the fact that the Ecumenical Patriarch is not the leader of a national church but is the head of 300 million Orthodox Christians all over the world.

3. In Turkey the Ecumenical Patriarchate does not have the status of a legal entity

Through this provision, property rights for the churches and residence permits for non-Turkish priests may be suspended by arbitrary decision of the authorities. The small staff of the Patriarchate can be considerably restricted in its operations by the state not granting entry visas. However, at the end of 2008 non-Turkish staff of the Ecumenical Patriarchate were granted the opportunity to obtain a visa for one year instead of the tourist visa that had been the norm (only valid for three months).

4. Closure of the Theological School of Halki

The closure of the Theological School of Halki in 1971, which has not been repealed up till now, deprives the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the opportunity to train its own clergy in Turkey, too, at the very seat of the Patriarch. There is a striking contradiction between this step and the state demand that the Ecumenical Patriarchate be a purely national institution. The Orthodox clergy of the Patriarchate, which in the eyes of the Turkish state is a "Turkish" church, have no opportunity to train in their "home country", and so, in order to be able to work in the "Turkish" church, they have to go abroad to study.

5. Confiscation of real estate by the Turkish authorities

Numerous cultural heritage sites connected with the Ecumenical Patriarchate were confiscated during past decades by the Turkish authorities. Indirectly, this step also jeopardized the Greek Orthodox Church at the local level, which used many of these buildings. In 2011 Prime Minister Erdogan decided, following a judgment by the European Court of Human Rights, to return expropriated property such as the orphanage on the island of Büyüküda. Today it accommodates the head office of an international environmental foundation under the patronage of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Commemoration: the Armenian genocide

In November 1914 the Ottoman Empire entered the First World War at the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary. According to the testimony of German diplomatic files, the Sublime Porte (central Ottoman government) assessed the situation in the eastern provinces of the empire near the Russian border as instable. In particular the Christian minorities of Armenians, Syrians and Greeks were regarded as potential allies of the Russian adversary. As early as in summer 1914 German diplomats reported that there had been uprisings of Armenians, soon afterwards waves of arrests and finally also a declaration by the Ottoman interior minister Talaat Bey (1871-1921), “that the government wanted to use the world war to settle old scores with its internal enemies, without being disturbed by diplomatic intervention from abroad”.⁶

That was what led to the genocide of the Armenians, the “Year of the Sword” against the Syrians and the annihilation of the Pontic Greeks in 1915. Of the 1.4 million believers in the Armenian Patriarchate in Constantinople, the 300,000 in the Catholicate of Sis and the 100,000 in the Catholicate of Akhtamar before the First World War, about 800,000 were murdered, according to the calculations of the Ottoman interior ministry commission of 1919 – in some cases with the logistical support of the allied German military. Other estimates are considerably higher.

The Ottoman Empire recognized the crimes in 1919-1921 under pressure of the victorious allied powers. In due course the process of prosecution was initiated. However, the war against Greece as of 1921 and the founding of secular Turkey in 1923 marked the end of any readiness to deal with the crimes of the Young Turk movement against religious minorities. Today, on the eve of the 100th anniversary, the representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church along with the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Conference of European Churches (CEC) are calling for the public recognition of the Armenian genocide. The government regards it as a crime to raise the matter in public and speaks of “the events of 1915” and the “so-called genocide”.

Let us keep in mind that the identity of Armenian Christians today cannot be imagined without the genocide, so that making it a crime in Turkey to publicly refer to the genocide is a massive interference in the identity of Armenian Christians by the legal successors of the perpetrators.⁷ At the same time, punishing anyone who publicly talks of genocide effectively prevents any academic study of and appropriately engagement with it. For these reasons, the whole issue of the Armenian genocide cannot go unmentioned in the context of public advocacy for freedom of conscience, religion and belief.

The WCC therefore declared on 8 November 2013: “...the Vancouver Assembly stated: ‘The silence of the world community and deliberate efforts to deny even historical facts have been consistent sources of anguish and growing despair to the Armenian people.’ We honour the other 600,000 Christians of Aramean, Chaldaen, Assyrian and Greek descent, including Catholics and Protestants, who were also massacred along with their Armenian brothers and sisters.”⁸ The CEC Governing Board reiterated these words in its statement of 29 November 2013. The annual meeting of the Council of

⁶ Report by German ambassador Wangenheim (1858-1915) to Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg (1856-1921) of 17.06.1915, AA 1915-06-17-DE-003.

⁷ On the occasion of the 99th anniversary of the genocide, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan showed a readiness for reconciliation. Yet his statement “It is a human duty to understand and share the desire of the Armenians to commemorate their suffering during this time” does not imply a readiness to recognize the genocide.

⁸ Minute of the Busan Assembly. See also the Public Issues statement of the CEC Governing Board (both under Further Resources).

Christian Churches in Germany (ACK) in October 2014 endorsed these calls for recognition and encouraged its member churches to observe the centenary in 2015 through prayers and special services.

Anyone contemplating the events from a German perspective⁹ comes up against a history of guilt: the German government condoned the events of 1915/16. In addition, the German involvement in the genocide also covers complicity through the logistic support for the Ottoman units by the German army (Reichswehr) when deporting the victims. Officers serving in eastern Turkey during the First World War joined paramilitary units on their return to Germany and became supporters of National Socialism. This German assistance shows how the same mentality after the Armenian genocide extended right up to the Shoah.

⁹ Sources on the genocide: Wolfgang Gust, *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern 1915/16. Dokumente aus dem politischen Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes*, Springe 2005. Through the military alliance with the Ottoman Empire, the German Empire refrained protesting against the genocide under international law. The theologian and orientalist Johannes Lepsius (1858-1926) protested against the genocide and in 1919 documented the events after the First World War on behalf of the German Foreign Office – admittedly not without the intention of exonerating the German side from aiding and abetting genocide. The German embassy preacher and later founder of the German congregation in Istanbul, Siegfried Graf von Lüttichau (1877-1965), called for philanthropic support for the Armenians.

Interreligious dialogue as common commitment to religious freedom, peace and understanding: the example of Antakya

Antakya (Antioch) in southern Turkey is known in the whole of Turkey and the Orient as a city of understanding between people of different religions and cultures. This city lies in a region that only became part of Turkey in 1939 and where the co-existence of religions was not characterized by the secular Kemalism of the 1920s and 1930s. Sunnites, Alawites, Christians and Jews live together in this region, encountering one another in different ways. Church buildings (Syrian-Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant) and a synagogue stand by the many mosques; the Grotto of St Peter is still to be found at the outskirts of the city. It is said to be the oldest cave church in Christendom. People often hear the church bells ringing and simultaneously the call to prayer from the minaret. For years, regular inter-faith prayers have been offered at Antakya Peace House: Jewish in the morning, Christian at midday and Muslim in the evening. The Choir of Civilizations has become famous: the choristers come from many religious backgrounds. The choir has already performed widely abroad, including before the United Nations and the European Parliament in Strasbourg. The vision of Antakya is peace, caring for one another, and generosity.

Since time immemorial, the city has strongly influenced the history of Christianity and Islam. It was here that Jesus' disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26); here arose the influential Antiochian theology, that underlines Jesus' humanity. The Koran (36,14ff.) also mentions Antakya. When three Christians were persecuted Habib Neccar stood up for them. His grave is shown here in the Habibi Neccar Mosque.

In 2012, Kiel (capital of the German state of Schleswig Holstein) began a partnership with Antakya, which was already twinned with Aalen (in the state of Baden-Württemberg). The link with Kiel focuses on inter-faith dialogue, in addition to other fields (educational, environmental, economic). The partnership has already been extended to the metropolitan area of Hatay (1.4 million inhabitants). Hatay borders directly on Syria. The gruesome civil war there and in Iraq shows how vital it is for peace that there be understanding among the religions. That is what the cities of Antakya/Hatay and Kiel are working for. They give one another mutual support and learn from one another. For example, in Antakya residents of Kiel have become acquainted with mosques, churches and synagogues on "interreligious" guided tours. That gave Kiel the idea and now such tours have become a regular feature of interest in the German city too.

Suggestions for intercessory prayer

Merciful God,

We remember today our sisters and brothers in faith in Turkey. We are worried about them and unhappy that not all of them can live their faith in freedom.

- We pray for those who oppress others:
 - o Widen their hearts in the spirit of respect and tolerance.
 - o Turn their hate and rejection into understanding and acceptance.
- We pray for those with power and influence:
 - o Give them courage to stand up for religious freedom and solidarity.
 - o Help them to be honest and to fight corruption.
 - o Awaken in them the responsibility to protect minorities.
- We pray for all Christians in Turkey:
 - o Preserve in them a strong faith in your son Jesus Christ.
 - o Be their refuge in times of trouble, their hope in tribulation, their comfort in fear and grieving.
 - o Make people hear the call to take on responsibility as priests and pastors.
 - o Strengthen community and the living together of different religions and cultures.
- We pray for ourselves:
 - o Show us ways of expressing our close ties with our Christian sisters and brothers in Turkey in our lives.
 - o Open up avenues of assistance for them even from afar.
 - o Hear our prayer for oppressed Christians all over the world.

Merciful God, in your goodness and great compassion, accept these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Prayers by Christians from the region

Intercessory prayers based on the Liturgy of St James of the Syrian Orthodox Church

L: Liturgist

G: Congregation

L: Sisters and brothers, let us ever pray to the Lord for the angel of peace and calm, of mercy and compassion.

G: Lord have mercy.

L: Sisters and brothers, let us at all times pray to the Lord that peace may come to the churches, calm to the monasteries and safety to their priests.

G: Lord in your mercy, grant us your peace.

L: Sisters and brothers, let us at all times pray to the Lord that we may be true Christians who please God by good deeds and pure works of righteousness.

G: Lord in your mercy, make haste to save us.

L: Let us pray for peace among the states of the earth, the end of wars, rest for the deceased and the forgiveness of our debts and sins.

G: Gracious God, have mercy upon us.

An Armenian prayer to the Holy Spirit (said during the Eucharist)

Spirit of God,
who, having descended from heaven,
completes the mystery of the Son
through our action here:
through the shedding of his blood we pray:
Let the souls of those who have passed away
come to rest.

Further resources

In English

Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (Hg.): 2nd International Conference on Religious Freedom, December 4-5, 2013, Berlin, Germany

Conference of European Churches: Public Issues statement on the Armenian genocide
http://press.ceceurope.org/fileadmin/filer/cec/CEC_Documents/Gov_Bd_November_2013_docs/7_GB2013_Doc_14_7_CEC_Public_Issues_Statement_Armenian_Genocide_FINAL.pdf

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<http://nhc.no/?module=Files&action=File.getFile&ID=1695>

OSCE on freedom of religion in Turkey <http://www.forum18.org/analyses.php?region=68>

Turkey: Religious freedom survey, January 2014 (Mine Yildirim, Norwegian Helsinki Committee)
http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1916

World Council of Churches: Minute on 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide
<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/minute-on-100th-anniversary-of-the-armenian-genocide>

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Elpidophoros (Lambriniadis): Die Christen in der Türkei. Vortrag zum Dies Academicus, Kiel 2014 (masch.)

Gulich, Rudolf: Christen unterm Halbmond, Augsburg 2008

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Müller, Andreas (Hg.): Das Kreuz unter dem Halbmond. Orientalische Christen im Angesicht des „Arabischen Frühlings“, Studien zur Orientalischen Kirchengeschichte 50, Göttingen 2014

Oehring, Otmar: Christen in der Türkei. G2W 37, 2009, pp. 14-17

Oehring, Otmar: Zur Lage der Menschenrechte – Die Türkei auf dem Weg nach Europa – Religionsfreiheit? Aachen 2004

Sternberg, Thomas u.a. (Hg.): Zwischen Morgenland und Abendland. Der Nahe Osten und die Christen, Münster 2011

Tamcke, Martin: Christen in der islamischen Welt. Von Mohammed bis zur Gegenwart. München 2008

Thöle, Reinhard: Dramatischer Exodus der Christen aus dem Vorderen Orient, Ökumenische Akzente, 2014, pp. 35-40

Documents on German websites

Website der ACK

<https://www.ack.de>

Website der EKD

<https://www.ekd.de>

EMW: Dossier Nr. 1/2014 – Christen im mittleren Osten

http://emw-d.de/fix/files/EMW_Dossier_Syrien.pdf

Forum 18 zu Glaubens- und Gewissensfreiheit in der Türkei

<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=68>.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (Bedrängte Christen im Nahen Osten. Thomas Volk, Analysen und Argumente, Nr. 146, Sankt Augustin 16. April 2014)

http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_37500-544-1-30pdf?140422164804

Mission Länderbericht Türkei

<https://www.missio-hilft.de/media/thema/religionsfreiheit/laenderberichte/06-tuerkei.pdf>

Missio Menschenrechtsstudie 55 „Die Situation der Christen im Nahen Osten“

<https://www.missio-hilft.de/media/thema/menschenrechte/sudie/55-tagung-christen-naher-osten.pdf>

Ökumenischer Bericht zur Religionsfreiheit von Christen weltweit

http://www.ekd.de/download/religionsfreiheit_christen_weltweit_2013_07_01.pdf