

Statement Concerning the Hagia Sophia

July 22, 2020

On July 10, 2020, Turkey's Council of State annulled the Turkish Cabinet's 1934 decision to establish Hagia Sophia as a museum. That same day Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan subsequently ordered the reclassification of Hagia Sophia as a mosque rather than a museum.

Hagia Sophia is part of the Historic Areas of Istanbul and is a UNESCO World Heritage site. The Director-General of UNESCO, Audrey Azoulay, has noted her deep regret of the decision and has called for the universal value of World Heritage to be preserved.

Already on 30 June 2020, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, of the Eastern Orthodox Church, had stressed that as a museum Hagia Sophia can signify meeting, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence of peoples and cultures as well as mutual understanding between Christianity and Islam, especially necessary in the modern world.

The Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca, interim General Secretary of the World Council of Churches sent a letter to the Turkish president on July 11, noting that, "I am obliged to convey to you the grief and dismay of the World Council of Churches ... at the step you have just taken. By deciding to convert the Hagia Sophia back to a mosque you have reversed that positive sign of Turkey's openness and changed it to a sign of exclusion and division."

Pope Francis also spoke about these developments on July 12, saying that when he thinks about Hagia Sophia he is very saddened.

The President and General Secretary of The Canadian Council of Churches, too, are saddened by these developments.

Bearing the name "Holy Wisdom," the Hagia Sophia is a microcosm of both the beautiful and painful aspects of global cultural history. The structure was constructed in the sixth century as a Greek Orthodox cathedral and later converted into a mosque under the Ottomans. For over a millennium it has been a place of worship for both Christians and Muslims. Since it began operating as a museum in 1934, it has served as a site of encounter, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence of peoples and cultures.

This spirit of understanding, dialogue, and encounter between Christian and other religious communities is one The Canadian Council of Churches seeks to emulate and nourish. Peace requires mutual recognition, trust, and respect. We fear that by taking this step, the Turkish government is undermining fragile relations between Christians and Muslims both within and beyond Turkey.

As this situation continues to unfold, we call for continued dialogue and encounter among the world's religions and reflection together on the lessons learned from the centuries-old witness of Hagia Sophia, which itself means Holy Wisdom. We pray that a path to respect, trust, and cooperation will be restored; and that those who lament these developments will be comforted and know peace.



The Rev. Stephen Kendall, President, The Canadian Council of Churches



Pastor Peter Noteboom, General Secretary, The Canadian Council of Churches