

Church Head in Unprecedented Meeting With Turkish MPs

In an unprecedented meeting, the head of the Greek Orthodox Church in Turkey last week expressed his concerns and hopes for the country's **Christian minority** to members of the Turkish Parliament.

The visit took place in Ankara after Speaker of the Parliament Cemil Cicek invited Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I to meet with a parliamentary commission responsible for revising the country's constitution. Christians in Turkey are hoping that the new constitution will guarantee them the ability to **worship**, educate their communities and conduct their religious activities with the same rights as their Muslim-majority counterparts.

The Feb. 20 meeting is a sign that progress is being made, but more progress is needed, said the patriarch, who as "archbishop of Constantinople" is "first among equals" in the Eastern Orthodox Communion.

"It is the first official invitation to non-Muslim minorities in Republican history," Bartholomew told reporters after the meeting. "We don't want to be second-class citizens. Unfortunately, there have been injustices in the past. These are all slowly being rectified. A new Turkey is being born."

The invitation is one of several actions the government has taken that Bartholomew has welcomed. In August, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that Christian and Jewish groups that had their properties seized in a 1936 government directive and a subsequent 1974 court order could apply to have them returned.

In a statement released shortly after the decree was issued, Bartholomew said the new order represented "the restoration of

an injustice.”

Problems with the government, however, remain. In 1971, the Orthodox-run Halki Seminary was closed because of a court order dealing with the regulation of private universities. Under the court order, all private schools, including the seminary, had to be run under government supervision.

In response, the Patriarchate closed the seminary, rather than have it fall under government control. Bartholomew brought up this issue at the meeting with Parliament officials.

Also critical to Bartholomew and other **Turkish Christians** is the issue of what is known as “legal personality.” There is no method under Turkish law for a church group to establish itself as a legal entity. This limits a congregation’s ability to raise funds, transfer foundation deeds and own or, in some cases rent, land.

If minority religious groups do not already have foundation status, their only recourse is to apply to establish an association, which is routinely granted but not recognized as a “church” or “**place of worship**.” In contrast, the Turkish government runs a “Directorate for Religious Affairs” that funds and controls mosques and the training of Islamic clergy across the country.

In the closed-session meeting, Bartholomew expressed those concerns and then delivered an 18-page document outlining the Greek Patriarchate’s suggestions for the new constitution. The patriarch said he was extremely grateful for the meeting and left it “with hope.”