Inclusive Citizenship:

Archbishop Mouneer Anis
Archbishop of the Anglican Province of Alexandria

Inclusive Citizenship is a dream of many people in our world today. The definition of inclusive citizenship, as I understand it, is the granting of full rights of citizenship to all people regardless of their religion, ethnicity, gender, color, socio-economic status etc. It signifies not just peaceful coexistence between different people groups, but the acceptance of a *culture* that promotes harmony and cooperation between such groups for the common good of society. Our world is still far from achieving this dream, and religious leaders have an important role to play in making inclusive citizenship a reality, rather than a dream.

<u>The Challenge Today</u>
During recent years, polarization has increased between religious groups. The emergence of extremist groups like ISIS, which propagate their ideology especially among young people, has led to religious discrimination, violence, and terrorist attacks. Many countries still retain a "state religion" in their constitution and in practice, which inevitably leads to the exclusion of people who do not follow the religion of the state. As a result, our world today is groaning under the heavy weight of terrorism, violence, extremism, mass migration, displacement of people, discrimination, minority status, and so on.

Such challenges are on the increase. The mass migration of Syrians and Iraqis, Christian and Muslim, is a phenomenon which the world has never seen before. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya people have been forced to migrate outside Myanmar because of persecution. Many Somalis have fled from the wars in Somalia to neighboring countries. There are many more examples of this happening in the world today.

Let me illustrate the challenge from the place I know best—my own country Egypt. There, Christians and Muslims generally lived together in harmony for many centuries. Christians were appointed to very high positions in the government such as Prime Minister and Cabinet Minister. However, fifty years ago, when the extreme ideologies started to creep in, we began to hear voices suggesting that

Christians should not be appointed to leadership positions. As a result, quite a number of Copts emigrated to the Western World in order to receive fairer opportunities for education and employment.

After the 11 January 2011 revolution in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood and other political Islamist groups gained a lot of power. Christians and moderate Muslims were excluded from political activities. The Islamists did not see moderate Muslims as true Muslims. As a result, many more Christians and some Muslims emigrated from Egypt, some of them seeking asylum. For the first time, churches were attacked and burned. I must also say that the terrorists who attacked churches also attacked some mosques, police stations, and military checkpoints.

Many of these tragedies I have just mentioned could have been avoided if the concept of inclusive citizenship had taken root in the thoughts and behavior of people in our region. Inclusive citizenship allows people to accept diversity and pluralism within their societies.

<u>Biblical Basis for Inclusive Citizenship</u>
Inclusive citizenship is not a new concept. It has been at the heart of God's purpose since creation. We, as the children of Abraham, realise that God has loved and still love all nations. This is very clear in God's call to Abraham: "***Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.***" (Genesis 12:1-3) In these verses God is not promising a blessing for Abraham and his family alone, but for *all peoples* on earth, *through* Abraham.

In the Old Testament, it is written, "***When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the L<small>ORD</small> your God***." (Leviticus 19:33-34). This is a clear concept of inclusive citizenship. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus stressed the importance of loving the neighbor who may be very different from you, or whom you think is defiled. He went further, in the Sermon on the Mount: "***You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in***

heaven…If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?" (Matthew 5:43-47). The teaching of the Bible, both throughout the Old Testament and in the words of Jesus, is clear about encouraging and affirming the concept of inclusive citizenship.

Today, there are many followers of many religions living in the world, and we have to ask ourselves how the covenant of God with Abraham can be fulfilled through us, his children. We must ask how we can receive blessing and bless each other in the context of such religious pluralism. We also must ask how we can live out Jesus Christ's teachings about loving our neighbours, even those who are different from us.

Obstacles to Inclusive Citizenship

There is no doubt that religious pluralism often leads us into difficult situations. Followers of different religions want to be free to believe and worship according to their doctrines. They may also want to share their faith with others. This can create conflicts between people of different faiths. It can also lead to polarization and fanaticism. The following are some other factors that hinder inclusive citizenship:

1. No official separation of religion and state
2. An official separation of religion and state that is not reflected in practice. This leads the majority of the people to view minority groups as less fully citizens than themselves.
3. Migration of people from different cultures (both recently and in the past) which increases diversity and tension within a society
4. Fear, at the governmental or societal level, of reactions from extremist groups towards the giving of equal rights to citizens from different cultures or religions
5. Tribalism
6. Ignorance and lack of education, which constitute fertile soil for the growth of extremism
7. Wrong interpretations of religious texts
8. Poverty and limited resources, which promote fear that the "new groups" will take jobs

These, and more, constitute the *very reasons* for the need of inclusive citizenship

<u>Moving Forward: What should Religious Leaders do?</u>
So what can we do? What are the ways that religious leaders can help to overcome such obstacles and promote inclusive citizenship? Unfortunately, many governments try to tackle extremism through legislative and security measures alone. While these might be important steps, we need to tackle the ideologies themselves with rigorous thought and dialogue. It is also important to encourage reformers who challenge wrong teaching and misinterpretations.

In my opinion, we might well find a helpful solution by reflecting on the phrase '**Allahu Akbar'**, 'God is the greatest'. He is capable of guarding and protecting the truth, and does not need us to protect Him. As we realise this liberating fact, we need to encourage the following to happen:

1. Constitutions need to state very clearly that the right of citizenship is granted to all citizens, regardless of religion, ethnicity, gender, color, socio-economic status etc.
2. The application of such constitutional provision in practice. For example, in choosing presidents, local governors, ministers etc, the people of the nation should choose their leaders because of their abilities and competence rather than because of their religion, ethnicity etc.
3. Affirming the freedom of belief and worship
4. Improving the standard of education
5. Combating wrong interpretations and spreading sound teaching
6. Applying the rule of law wherever there is injustice
7. Cooperating with media in promoting citizenship
8. Developing an attitude of accepting diversity and pluralism as a way of enriching society

9. A council or commission ought to be created, both to promote citizenship and combact discrimination when it occurs. This commission should be given the authority to take corrective decisions in order to deal with all sorts of discrmination. This Council would be similar to the national council of Human rights but would be tasked specifically with preventing and addressing incidents of dicriminations.

We can look to many countries like the united states, Australia, countries in the EU, armenia , singapore and others who already have council like this to provide a model

In conclusion, religious leaders can, *if they are convinced*, play a major role in promoting equality and justice within any society. They can do this in cooperation with politicians, media people and other opinion leaders. We need to trust that, "The God of heaven will give us success [if] we his servants will start rebuilding…" (Nehemiah 2:20).

I hope this was helpful to you. We need all to work to promote Inclusive citizenship and this will enrich our societies and our diversity. God bless you.