



**World Council  
of Churches**

### **Report of the WCC Living Letters team visit to Israel & Palestine**

Living Letters are small ecumenical teams visiting a country to listen, learn, share approaches and challenges in overcoming violence and in peace making, and to pray together for peace in the community and in the world. A team consists of 4 - 6 women and men from around the world who have witnessed violence in its various forms and are engaged in working for just peace. A Living Letters team will be successful when those visited can affirm "we are not alone!" - and when team members feel they have received much from those who they visited to encourage.

"You show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us,  
written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not  
on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."

*(2 Corinthians 3:3,RSV)*

## **REPORT OF THE LIVING LETTERS VISIT TO PALESTINE AND ISRAEL 7-14 MARCH 2009**

### **Greetings from the Living Letters Team:**

Grace and Peace to the churches world wide. We, the Living Letters sent by the World Council of Churches to Palestine and Israel thank God as we recollect your faith and the firmness of your hope as has been expressed in loving and practical ways during this Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace (2001 to 2010).

Dear brothers and sisters, we were privileged to be a living letter from you to the Christians and all the people in Palestine and Israel, from 7 to 14 March 2009. We visited and lived with Palestinian Christian communities and we came away with hearts filled with sadness as we saw how their basic human rights are flouted and abused and yet we saw them live their faith with bold confidence in our God, announcing the Gospel in the midst of great struggle. (1 Thessalonians 2:2).

We want you to know that our brothers and sisters in Palestine have been continuously struggling for peace with justice with fearless faith in spite of the many threats they face, working side by side with their Muslim brothers and sisters and often weaving links of solidarity with justice and peace initiatives in Israel – with men and women of Israel committed to just peace.

We appeal to you our brothers and sisters around the world, to assess with care and diligence and political relations of your own countries to the Israeli government and the Palestinian people. We also appeal to you to ceaselessly confront all theologies that justify the occupation of Palestinian territory or give divine legitimization to the occupation of the land. This we can witness to you is done with oppression and violence; with total disrespect of international laws that seek peace; and the Palestinian peoples' right to their land and home.

Dear brothers and sisters in Palestine – Christians and Muslims – we share with you our solidarity as you live the horror of the occupation of your territory for over 60 years by the military forces of Israel; witnessing the inaction of the international community to ensure the fulfilment of the agreements that would enable the existence of the Palestinian State. We were deeply pained when we heard some of you say to us that Israel really does not want peace and there really does not seem any hope at all for the future. We met you at checkpoints and refugee camps and saw the many restrictions to your movement in your own territory. We heard the deep concern expressed by many of you of the diminishing presence of Christians in this land where Christians have continuously existed for over 2000 years. We commend you for the many positive efforts of peaceful resistance that we saw and your great courage. We as living letters to you will share with the churches all over the world stories of your amazing resilience, and your deep faith in a God who will not let you down.

We call on all the churches all over the world which are inextricably linked with the people of Palestine to pray - and pray without ceasing - for our brothers and sisters in this land. We appeal to you to study in depth and analyse the conflict in that land, and to strengthen initiatives of solidarity with the people and churches in Palestine. Our hope and faith must remain firm because we are participants in the suffering and struggles for just peace in Palestine-Israel.

**Words of thanks:** The Living Letters team places on record its deep thanks to all the women and men of Palestine and Israel who gave of their time and shared with us their painful stories of oppression but also their stories of resistance and courage. We thank the Church leaders of all the major Christian denominations for the time they gave us and their honest sharing of the role they try to play in those difficult circumstances and the challenges they face to keep Christianity alive and growing. We thank representatives of the many organisations (Palestinians and Israelis) who came to meet with us and told us of their work in the search for just peace. We give special thanks to the colleagues of the Jerusalem Inter-Church Centre, to the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Israel-Palestine (particularly the courageous Ecumenical Accompaniers) for not just organising for us a full and very meaningful programme, but for accompanying us on this visit.

**The team:** His Eminence Laurentiu Streza, Metropolitan of Transylvania,  
Romanian Orthodox Church  
Rev. Dr Emmanuel Clapsis, Ecumenical Patriarchate,  
Holy Cross College, Boston, USA  
Prof. Dr. Nancy Cardoso Pereira, Igreja Metodista no Brazil, Brazil  
Ms Nancy Adams, Scottish Episcopal Church, Scotland  
Halgren, Intern, (Australia) WCC Communication  
Dr. Aruna Gnanadason, (India), Executive Director, Planning  
and Integration, WCC Staff

(Mr. Cyprian Ioan Streza, accompanied the team as interpreter for Metropolitan Streza. Two persons had to drop out at the end, Ms Margareta Brosnan, Roman Catholic, Australia and Ms Jerda Djawa, Indonesia)..

### **LEARNINGS AND REFLECTIONS FROM THE TEAM:**

- **Right to equality:** The Living Letters team felt that ‘equality’ of all the people within the lands known as Israel/Palestine must be the central tenet of any negotiations – be they for a one-state or two-state solution – and of any sustainable future settlement. Acknowledging our equality as human beings is implicit in what it means to be truly human. Indeed, ‘equality’ for all people is explicit in the Israeli Declaration of Independence and needs to be honoured with integrity. Sadly, the reality today is that there is no equality of access to anything; even the most simple but necessary element of life – a drop of water. This imperative needs to be placed at the top of any agenda if there is to be lasting peace with justice for all.

- **Children:** The Living Letters team was deeply concerned about the situation of children in both Israel and Palestine – growing up in a culture of violence and fear. They feel the sorrow and the rage around them but having no voice, they are often powerless to change their circumstances. The church has a special responsibility to the children, who are the future. This includes the necessity of supporting groups which are trying to increase government awareness of the importance of learning about each other's religions, history and culture to ensure these are included in the education of all young people in Israel and Palestine.
- **Building hope among communities:** The Living Letters team was impressed by the many initiatives we met and the conversations we had where the motif was on building hope among the people – those who resist being reduced to victims by the encroaching settlements, the dividing Wall, and the severe restrictions on their movements by developing alternative ways of living and coping e.g. those who use art and media to work with children and those who promote ethical alternative tourism etc. We were inspired by the courageous grass roots and resistance movements among Palestinians organisations we met with – all of which are building a sense of hope for a better future for themselves and their children based on human dignity and self-worth.
- **Values rather than political alternatives:** The Living Letters team recognised the hesitancy of some to speak too quickly of political solutions to this long conflict and appreciated the focus on developing a language of shared values on which future political solutions should be built. These include equality, dignity, trust, integrity, freedom, justice, peace and mercy.
- **Right to security taking precedence over shared human rights:** The Living Letters team recognised that for some in Israel the emphasis on their right to security (by focussing on perceived threats to their lives) has tended to dominate the discourse whereas the right of all citizens to human rights and dignity of life is overlooked. They were also concerned that there is a distinction in Israel between who is considered a 'national' (only Jewish people) and a 'citizen' as well as the ways in which different ethnic groups within Israel are treated, with different laws being applied to them.
- **Just peace:** The Living Letters observed that for many of the people we spoke to peace is achieved only when there is justice. When a future Palestinian land is realised just peace should be its governing principle so that inequalities of religion, gender, race and class can be erased. The future Palestine must live gently with all its peoples, with its neighbours, and with the earth.
- **Diminishing Christian presence:** The Living Letters team heard the concern of many – particularly the church leaders – of the diminishing numbers of indigenous Palestinian Christians – now less than 50,000 people in this ancient Holy Land of the birth and life of Jesus. They also heard of the concern that so many Christians outside of the Middle East do not realise there are indigenous

Palestinian Christians trying hard to maintain a presence and witness to the Gospel in the land where Jesus lived, as they have been doing for 2000 years.

- **Role of churches:** The Living Letters team heard the call from many Christians in the pew that the churches in Israel/Palestine and all over the world should be proactive and not reactive in resolving the political situation and in accompanying the daily struggles of the people. The visit of the Pope is viewed with some amount of concern – “if he can apologise to the Jews, will he not also apologise to us Christians who live here in these difficult situation”, one person asked us. They also acknowledged there are still issues which divide the local Christian churches in the Middle East and that reconciliation of these differences need to be addressed with humility and compassion.
- **Solidarity groups among the Jews:** The Living Letters team was impressed and inspired by the courage of the representatives of the Jewish and Israeli groups and movements with whom we met, using non-violent techniques to resist the settlements and the demolition of Palestinian homes, challenge Zionism, and engage in political actions with their government. Their voices gave us hope though even they acknowledged that they are a small minority.
- **Appreciation of the WCC’s efforts in Palestine Israel:** The Living Letters team has come away proud of the efforts of the Jerusalem Inter-Church Centre and of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Israel-Palestine and particularly of the ecumenical accompaniers who, on behalf of the churches all over the world, work in difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions standing in solidarity with the people of Palestine.
- **Challenge to the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation:** The Living Letters team came away convinced that the conflict in Palestine-Israel challenges many Christian theological assumptions about peace, security and human rights. The Christian groups we met with reminded us of the power of reconciliation and justice that lie embedded in our faith. Indeed, the churches cannot miss the opportunity the IEPC offers to learn from this context, but also to recommit ourselves to work for peace in this region, in solidarity with all the communities there.

A brief narrative report of the people and groups we met with follows.

### **I. Meetings with Church leaders:**

Throughout the week the delegation met with local church leaders Patriarch Theophilus III of the Holy City of Jerusalem and All Palestine, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Fouad Twal, Bishop Munib Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land and the Rev. Robert Edmunds, representative to the Anglican Bishop Suheil Dawani in Jerusalem. The leaders told the group that many factors were contributing to the high rates of emigration of Palestinian Christians, and to the suffering of Palestinian

people as a whole. These included discriminatory housing policies, the demolition of Palestinian homes to make way for Israeli settlements, high rates of unemployment, and violence from Israeli settlers.

In addition, a strict permit system imposed by the Israeli government severely restricts, or in many cases prohibits, the movement of Palestinians within (and to and from) the West Bank. These restrictions affect all aspects of Palestinian life, making everyday activities like selling farming produce, obtaining access to medical treatment and education and visiting friends and relatives difficult, hazardous and often impossible. Patriarch Fouad Twal said that after 60 years of occupation, there was a strong sense of powerlessness among Christians in Palestine. Patriarch Theophilus III said that a strong Christian presence in the Holy Land was extremely important, and that his Patriarchate was working hard to promote reconciliation in the region. He felt that Christians need moral support – they need to feel that they are not alone. One very important contribution to the peace process is education – initiatives that allow young people to get together, to get to know each other's religious symbols, to remove prejudices. Bishop Munib Younan said it was important to understand that injustice now could fuel extremism in the future, across all three religions in the region. Already this was being manifested in numerous ways, he said – for example, in the rise to power of ultra-orthodox personalities in the Israeli government, in the strong support for Israel by Christian Zionists, and in the quest for power among Islamic fundamentalists.

Nowhere was the impact of these tensions clearer than in the recent war on Gaza, said Bishop Younan. A team of clergy recently visited the Gaza Strip. What they saw there in the wake of the December to January Israeli air strikes was destruction on a monumental scale, and a people traumatized by the violence they had experienced. He spoke of the “children without a smile” in Gaza, which he had just visited. “The children of Gaza cannot smile. Where is the conscience of the world?”

The time for negotiations had passed, he said, and it was time to act. He called for prophetic voices from the churches to speak more clearly on justice, the sharing of Jerusalem, an end to the occupation, and a viable state for Palestinians.

## **II. Organisations and communities**

### **a. JIC and EAPPI – Churches' role in Palestine and Israel:**

Yusef Daher from the Jerusalem Inter-Church Centre (JIC) introduced the work of the Centre which is an initiative of the churches in Jerusalem with the Middle East Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. The building of JIC also houses the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). Yusef Daher, who staffs the JIC with Kjell Johansson, outlined for us the challenges facing churches and Christians in Palestine and Israel, and the role of the churches there.

The churches in Palestine and Israel come from four church families – Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. There are around 150,000 Christians,

making up just over 2 per cent of the population. In Palestine (Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem), there are 50,000 – less than 2 per cent of the population. Of the 750,000 Palestinian refugees who were driven out of their homes in 1948, 50,000 were Christians. Since then, emigration amongst Palestinian Christians has increased substantially, largely due to occupation and oppression practiced against the Palestinian population by Israeli policies, the deterioration of the economic situation, high unemployment, the high cost of living including education and inadequate housing availability, especially in Jerusalem.

Churches in the area are very active on the issues facing Palestinians, particularly health, housing and education, which have been identified as the most serious challenges. This action takes the form of both **provision of social services** (for example, local churches manage more than 65 schools, run five hospitals and dozens of clinics, and supervise numerous charitable, social and youth organisations); and **advocacy** (for example participation in the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, press releases and other communications, receiving delegations and inter-church groups).

The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) is one very practical way in which the JIC, together with the WCC, works to promote peace and justice. Through this programme, people from all over the world can spend three months in the Holy Land as "Ecumenical Accompaniers" (EAs) to work alongside both Palestinians and Israelis in their actions for peace, and carry out advocacy to try and bring an end to the occupation. There are around 25 EAs in each intake, and four intakes each year.

The JIC has initiated an Ecumenical Circle of Friends – a group which meets regularly to share information, pray for unity, and get to know the work of other denominations and religious groups – so as to develop common projects and to work together in advocacy efforts.

They believe that the future of Jerusalem is a key concern. Jerusalem should be open to everyone and become a shared city, an open city, not just for the three religions, but for everyone. The presentation ended with a very moving video produced by two young women aged 16 and 18 that traces the history of the occupation.

#### **b. Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD):**

In preparation for our visit to Silwan, Jimmy Johnson from the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD) shared with us his organisation's involvement as a non-violent, direct-action secular peace activist organization of Israelis involved in active resistance to the demolition of Palestinian homes, land expropriation, the expansion of illegal settlements, construction of 'settler by-pass roads', and the uprooting of olive and fruit trees. He explained how ICAHD's activities have centred around three inter-related areas of (i) protesting and resisting alongside Palestinians in the Occupied Territories; (ii) trying to inform Israeli society of the high human and financial costs to both sides of the continued Occupation; and (iii) encouraging the international community to become more actively involved in implementing a just sustainable peace with security, dignity, freedom

and economic opportunities for all. These include 'alternative tourism', house rebuilding, exhibits, and providing information in a variety of forms to raise the awareness of people within Israel and tourists wishing to be more well-informed.

ICAHD, in the past, had promoted the concept of a Regional Confederation of Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and perhaps Syria, Lebanon and Egypt, within the context of a Middle East Peace Process. However, they are becoming ever more concerned that the 'facts on the ground' (the Wall, the Israeli-only roads, the settlements, the land and water expropriation) which are making it increasingly more difficult for the consideration of a 'two-state solution' based on a viable contiguous Palestinian state alongside an Israeli state. They are alarmed at the rapidly expanding settlements and the accelerated numbers of Palestinian homes being demolished. All of this mitigates against just peace being achieved while encouraging higher levels of anger, frustration and hatred against the Occupiers. The situation today is becoming increasingly dangerous for all of the people of the land.

### **c. Visit to the demolition sites: Silwan**

We were taken on a minibus tour of East Jerusalem, stopping in Silwan to visit two neighbourhood communities. Our first stop was at a large apartment block, housing 135 men, women and children, that has recently been given a demolition order to evict them and destroy their homes within the next couple of weeks. Several of the men explained to the Team how unjust the 'permit' system is and how helpless they are against a "Catch 22" situation where a range of antiquated laws are used against them that go back to the Ottoman Empire and the British Mandate era, and when these are not sufficient, they are supplemented by newer Israeli laws. The result is that whereas Palestinians are unable to get permits to build on their own land, or to expand their homes on their own land, their homes get demolished to make way for settlements for Israelis which are considered illegal under International Law! It seems so utterly absurd and defies all logic based on the concepts of 'justice' and 'equality' and 'human rights' in what is considered to be a democratic country. Yet these demolitions are carried out almost daily under the new government.

One of the female members of the Team went and spoke to the women who were sitting together while their children played on the patio below street level. They pleaded with her: "what can you do for us? what will you do now that you have spoken with us and heard our stories? can you help us? please? otherwise we and our children will be made homeless; we have no where to go." This is our challenge: what can we do to answer these heart-wrenching cries for help?

The second stop was just down the hill at a tent set up by the community to provide information about the proposed plans for evictions to enable archaeological digs by the Israeli government to excavate more of the City of David. Grass-roots awareness raising and non-violent protest may help them fight the powerlessness they feel, but we wonder: will it have any effect on the determination by the Israeli government to move

relentlessly forward in the Israeli policy to take as much Palestinian land as they can but with as few Palestinians on it as possible.

**d. Taybeh – Fr. Raed Abu Sahlieh and his community projects**

The village of Taybeh, 14 kilometres north east of Ramallah on the West Bank, is a Christian village in Palestine, and is mentioned in the Old Testament under the name "Ofra". Like villages all over the West Bank, Taybeh is suffering as many of its people decide to emigrate, seeing no other choice given the economic and physical hardship they suffer under Israeli occupation. Whereas in the 1960s the town had a population of 3,400, the population today is 1,300.

The dynamic and very energetic Father Raed Abu Sahlieh is priest of the Latin Catholic Church of Taybeh. He has put in place a range of projects to empower the local people spiritually and economically. One of these is the Peace Lamp Initiative, which makes use of an abundant local product – olive oil – to unite churches all over the world in prayer for peace in the Holy Land. The lamps are produced in a workshop in Taybeh, providing jobs to 20 young men and women. The goal is to place a Peace Lamp (with accompanying olive oil and a small candle) in every church in the world, and in this way, to encourage prayer and solidarity with the people of Palestine.

The church runs a school, a medical centre, a hostel for pilgrims, and church services and youth activities. Each year around 100 groups of pilgrims visit Taybeh. Around 50 young people aged between 5 and 15 sing in the youth choir. The choir has produced a CD called *With One Voice*, and in 2006, eight children from the choir participated in a musical tour of France, performing 14 concerts throughout the country. He believes that every effort is like a drop of water in the ocean of this conflict. Through these various activities, he hopes to give the local people a reason to stay in Taybeh – to give them hope.

The Living Letters team visited another local marvel, the Taybeh Brewery. Palestine's only brewery, it was established in 1995 and now exports beer to Japan, England, Germany and Belgium, and has a franchise brewery operating in Germany. Each year it runs an Oktoberfest celebration featuring many local musical and dance acts. One of the proprietors, David Khoury, is also mayor of Taybeh. He said that while the brewery is stable at the moment, it has been a struggle – particularly after the beginning of the second intifada, when the business almost closed. Israeli policies add to the difficulties. While Israeli products, including beer, flow tax-free into the West Bank, Palestinian export products are delayed for hours at checkpoints and often sent back, which means no income is made that day. There concern is that many Christians are leaving Taybeh to go abroad. But he hopes the brewery can provide some hope to the people of the region. In their understanding the Palestinian people live on hope, determined to live in peace, in the Holy Land.

**e. Tent of Nations – Mr. Daoud Nassar:**

The Nassars, a family of Palestinian Christians, have owned 42 hectares of land south-west of Bethlehem since 1924. In 1991, they learned that the Israeli Government was planning to confiscate the land. Since then, the Nassars have been locked in a costly legal battle with the Israeli Government, despite the Nassars possessing all the land registration documents and other paperwork necessary to prove their legal ownership of the land. So far, the family has spent some \$140,000 in legal fees trying to protect the land from confiscation.

The Living Letters team met with Daoud Nassar and enjoyed wonderful hospitality from his family. Daoud explained that along with the huge financial cost to his family over the past 18 years, they have endured attacks from nearby Israeli settlers, including the uprooting of 250 olive trees, and a gun threat to Daoud's mother.

Despite this, the family made an important decision – that rather than respond violently, or pack up and leave, they would *refuse to be enemies*. This slogan is proudly proclaimed at the entrance to the farm and has formed the basis of the Tent of Nations project. This peace-building project invites people from all over the world to visit the Nassar family's land, bringing it to life and helping to protect it from confiscation. Visitors get involved in tree-planting, art projects, and other activities. Summer camps for children from Bethlehem are designed to re-connect children with the land. A women's project aims to equip local women with English, computer and other skills to make them employable, so that they can continue to live and work in the area. These are just a few examples.

The Israeli Government has prohibited construction of any more buildings on the site, and the use of electricity. Undeterred by this, the Nassars have fitted out the numerous caves on their land, attaching them to electricity from a generator, so that they can be used for meetings and other gatherings. They believe that what they are doing in a simple way, is to motivate the people and show them there is a future.

**f. Aida Refugee Camp and the visit to the Wall:**

We were treated to an inspiring presentation about the work of the Lajee Centre in the Aida Refugee Camp which is run by volunteers who want to ensure that the younger generations have opportunities they never had. Young people put on theatrical plays, learn traditional Palestinian folk dancing, and learn IT skills in the computer lab. Additionally, they have published two books of photos taken by the children. As we walked through the narrow streets of the densely populated refugee camp we were never far from the 8 metre high concrete Wall, known variously as the 'Separation Wall', the 'Apartheid Wall', the 'Separation Barrier' or the 'Security Fence' depending on who you are talking with. This ugly grey structure is within metres of the homes of the refugees, and it has cut the children off from what had been their playing fields and their only taste of the luxury of walking and playing amongst trees within some semblance of nature. Now they are surrounded by nothing but grey: the Wall, the streets, their houses. However, their imagination and creativity has not been stifled: they have painted marvellous murals on the walls which line their streets. Some are of the villages their parents and grandparents were forced to leave behind in Israel; some are a silent protest

to house demolitions, evictions, and the Wall. These children have learned to use their artistic talents in non-violent protest to the injustices which encompass their young lives.

**g. Bethlehem University.**

On a morning visit to Bethlehem University it was a wonderful privilege to meet with three young women, all undergraduates studying English Literature, as well as university staff including the new vice chancellor, Peter Bray from New Zealand. The young women students we met were a real inspiration and sign of hope for the future. They spoke honestly of the challenges of living under Israeli occupation, and painted a realistic picture of their employment prospects after graduation, when finding a job in their field of specialisation would be almost impossible, and even finding a job at all would be difficult. “But being here and getting an education is our way of resisting the occupation,” said one. She said that most young people wanted to stay in the region, but their situation really did not encourage it – and this was exactly what the occupiers wanted. But despite the difficulties, all expressed their commitment to remaining in Palestine. They spoke of their sense of hopelessness, but of their commitment to stay there and work for a better Palestine.

When asked about what it was like to live alongside Jewish people when there was such animosity from them towards Palestinians, they explained that because of the separation between Israel and the West Bank, they in fact rarely encountered Jews, apart from the soldiers guarding settlements. They believed that most Palestinians would willingly try to see the face of God in all people – but it is not an easy exercise. She talked about a peace camp she attended several years ago where she met many young Jewish people and got along with them well. However, these same youth were doing their military training at the time, and she knows that there is every possibility that the young men she had met and liked were earlier this year flying the planes that dropped bombs on the people of Gaza.

**h. Holy Family Hospital, Bethlehem:**

We were met by Dr. Robert H. Tabash, General Director, of the hospital. With a power point presentation he related the hospital’s history and the key role it is playing in Bethlehem. The hospital was started as a general hospital but has gradually become specialised in maternity care and offers its services to both Christians and Muslims in the region. In 2007 they had over 3250 deliveries in the 63 bed hospital which includes a 18 bed neonatal intensive care unit. Apart from its very well equipped and sophisticated services in the hospital itself, it also has a mobile clinic to remote areas. It is a teaching hospital recruiting and training Palestinian doctors and nurses. While those who can pay are encouraged to do so, the hospital does not turn any patient away because they cannot afford its services. Social workers are always available to help poor patients receive care. Dr. Tabash shared with us his concern about the worsening political and economic situation and its impact on the community. He told us of the fears they always live with remembering the direct attacks on the hospital during the siege of Bethlehem on April 1, 2002.

**i. Bible College, Bethlehem:**

We were introduced to the college and its programmes by its founder Director Rev. Dr. Bishara Awad, and the Dean of Studies, Rev. Dr. Youhanna Katanacho. They told us that the college was started with an evangelical vision, but has since expanded to become more inclusive of other Christian traditions. It has facilitated dialogue between evangelical theologians and messianic Jews. This is not always easy for example at the time of the attack on Gaza, a letter was sent to messianic Jews raising concerns of Christians on what is happening there. Refer. <http://www.comeandsee.com>. The college sees itself playing an important role as Messianic Jews have very little interaction with other Christians – several reasons for this include doctrinal differences. Dr. Katanacho asked that the WCC play a role in bringing together Council of Evangelical Churches in Israel with MECC member churches.

Dr. Katanacho told us that the Israeli education department set up a committee to develop a curriculum for Arab Christians in Israel, but left out evangelical churches. The college has been working with the department appealing to them to build a common understanding among Christians. He believed that we need to stay in dialogue with each other rather than exclude each other. He was challenged by a member of the team to recognise that sometimes our proselytising mission could be at the detriment of other Christians.

Two processes the college is presently engaged in are:

- A international theological conference on the issue of land
- The Kairos theological process initiated by the WCC – Middle East Focus staff – which brings together a wide spectrum of Palestinian Christians to prepare a theological text for the times. (Such as the one brought out by the South African churches during their struggle against apartheid).

**j. Dinner with host families organised by the Alternative Tourism Group:**

The meeting with The Alternative Tourism Group (ATG) of Beit Sahour, Bethlehem, and the dinner with host families was one of the highlights of our time in Bethlehem.

The ATG has produced a publication which is more than just another ordinary tourist guidebook. The book “Palestine & Palestinians” provides an in-depth, updated journey through the entire range of Palestinian culture: ancient and modern history, archaeology, religion, architecture and politics, including the daily realities of Israeli Occupation. It describes places rooted in Palestinian memory: sites which bear witness to a history and identity created from contact with civilisations of the Middle East, Mediterranean, Europe and Arab Peninsula. It also presents the contemporary tragedy and struggle of a people seeking recognition of their rights and details of their ongoing search for an end to injustice through viable peace and statehood. This group, along with other similar groups, has launched The Palestinian Initiative for Responsible Tourism (PIRT) as a network of organisations, associations and public bodies committed to advocate and work

for responsible tourism in the Holy Land. Representatives of the following non-governmental organisations and institutions: the Holy Land Trust, Siraj Centre for Holy Land Studies, Alternative Tourism Group, Network for Christian Organisations in Bethlehem, Joint Advocacy Initiative and the Jerusalem Inter-Church Centre have together developed a code of conduct for tourists to the Holy Land – a code that calls for “responsible and just forms of tourism” and which will “inform pilgrims of the reality of Palestine and Palestinians and to seek their support in using tourism to transform contemporary injustices.”

ATG organised, for the team, dinner with two Palestinian families – for all of us this was an enriching experience as we could talk to the people and hear from them first hand their struggles under occupation and share a meal with them and their families.

**k. Checkpoint in Bethlehem:**

This early morning start to the day (6.30 am) to meet the 2 Ecumenical Accompaniers (EA) who monitor the checkpoint on the Bethlehem side every weekday morning had been postponed from the day before. There had been three days of celebration in Jerusalem for the Jewish holiday of Purim. But these festivals for the Israelis mean hardship for the Palestinians, because for ‘security reasons’, the checkpoints are then closed to the 2500 Palestinians (mostly men) who would normally travel to Jerusalem each day for work. In this instance, three days of wages were lost to them. However, Thursday morning we found long queues of men, some of whom arrived as early as 2.30 – 3.00 am to wait for the gate to open at 5.00 am for them to pass through the checkpoint to work. The EAs had arrived at 4.30 am and were easily recognized by their distinctive vests/jackets emblazoned with the letters EAPPI (for Ecumenical Accompaniment in Palestine and Israel) as well as World Council of Churches.

For our Team, this was probably our most difficult morning: it was literally heart-wrenching to see the way these human beings – these men -- were herded together in between metal cages where they waited and waited and waited for the red light at the metal turnstile to turn to green. The young heavily armed female soldier in the booth behind the bullet-proof glass window does not even look at them as they eventually are allowed, in small groups, to show their permit and pass on to the next stage. The men break into a run (in a way that resembles cattle being released from their enclosure) to cross the short space to the huge warehouse with another long snake-like passage that ends at a series of 12 metal detectors (of which only 2 are open this morning in spite of dozens of soldiers walking around on the ‘catwalks’ above us). Again they wait... and wait. Eventually they pass through the metal detectors to reach the final control booths. Here, permits, magnetic ID card and hand prints are checked by young soldiers who often shout abuse at them as though they are not human. Because we had already waited for half an hour, and because of our tight schedule, we did not pass on to this next stage. However, we were told that the finger/hand print technique does not work well, and many of the men have to try several times before their print is cleared. But sometimes, because of the wear and tear on their hands because of their work, their prints change and they

are denied passage until they get a new print done, which will cost them dearly in lost wages.

As we retrace our steps back along the queue of silent waiting men we feel helpless and shamed: where is the evidence of our common humanity in this unnecessarily harsh treatment? what are these men thinking as we pass? is there anything we can say to relieve their humiliation? the degradation of their dignity? Each of us manifests our sorrow in different ways: a couple of the Team weep silently; another is angry; another stands speechless in disbelief; another feels the pain in her stomach – her gut – just like the Good Samaritan did in the parable in the Bible. We are sharing their suffering and their pain: this is what it means to be fully human.

### 1. **Meeting with the Jerusalem Centre for Jewish Christian Relations and Rabbis for Human Rights (JCJCR and RfHR):**

The Swedish Theological Institute, which is situated in a beautiful house on Prophet's Street offered us hospitality to meet with **Rabbis Daniel Rossing (from the Jerusalem Centre for Jewish Christian Relations) and Arik Ashcherman (from Rabbis for Human Rights)**. We listened with a growing sense of unease as Rabbi Daniel summarized some of the research results of a public survey of "Attitudes among the Adult Jewish Population in Israel regarding Christianity, Christians and the Christian Presence in Israel". The results can be found in the following link:  
[http://www.jiis.org.il/imageBank/File/publications/attitude2christianity\\_eng.pdf](http://www.jiis.org.il/imageBank/File/publications/attitude2christianity_eng.pdf)

He acknowledged that his Centre has a considerable amount of work to do to try to educate the Israeli public about Christianity, and he cited some of the many initiatives that have been undertaken to address this huge gap in the understanding of Jewish Israelis about their Christian neighbours. However, in terms of initiating dialogue, he noted three inherent weaknesses in trying to be in 'Tri-ologue' – between the three major faiths in Israel: a) it tends to try to focus on what is common to all, which can narrow down the dialogue; b) it can only succeed if all of the partners are fairly equal (which they are clearly not); and c) it tends not to address bi-lateral problems.

Rabbi Arik Ashcherman began by quoting from one section of the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel in 1948: "*...it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.*"

Sadly, he noted, this is not what we see being implemented today within the State of Israel. Rabbis for Human Rights was established with a two-fold mandate: i) to be "the rabbinic voice of conscience in Israel" by trying to introduce into Israeli society a more humanistic understanding of the Jewish tradition; and ii) giving voice to the Zionist ideal and the Jewish religious tradition of human rights. In a country that is increasingly

nationalistic and becoming more polarized, they try to be the human voice of Judaism by concentrating on working with the more vulnerable sectors within society and focusing on the values of freedom, justice, peace and equality. The RfHR are active in this pursuit by helping guarantee Palestinian access to their agricultural land; opposing the route of the Wall; working to prevent demolitions; engaging in interfaith dialogue; fighting the trafficking of women; and working to safeguard the holy places of all religions.

He spoke of the necessity for Jews to take responsibility for their actions, using the 'Doctrine of Minimal Defense' – the minimum necessary force to protect themselves, while not harming civilians after trying every non military solution possible. He defended Zionism as a Jewish liberation movement, but wondered if "we will lose our soul in the process." He closed with the need to maintain HOPE... hope for all the peoples of Israel and Palestine that there ARE people on the 'other side' who feel the same way about aspiring to reach what is possible in terms of a just peace for all.

#### **m. Hebron with Ecumenical Accompaniers:**

In Hebron, we joined three Ecumenical Accompaniers from the EAPPI. They explained that Hebron is divided into two sectors, H1 and H2. H1 is under the control of the Palestinian Authority and is home to around 120,000 Palestinians. H2 is under Israeli military control, which places major restrictions on the Palestinians who continue to live there. Many roads are open only to Israelis and patrolled by soldiers; and curfews and checkpoints make daily life very difficult for Palestinians.

The EAs do some wonderful work in the region. For example, they accompany Palestinian children to make sure they reach school safely (the children are forced to scramble over rocky outcrops in order to reach school, as they are not allowed to use local roads, and they are often subjected to harassment from settlers on the way).

The EAs took us to meet a local Palestinian man, Hashim, and his wife and children, who live just below an Israeli settlement. Our conversation with Hashim was moving and deeply troubling. He told us of the years of harassment he and his family have endured from the nearby settlers – ranging from uprooting olive trees, cutting off telephone lines and dumping rubbish outside the home, to break-ins, theft and worst of all, the rape of his wife while Hashim was forced to look on, unable to defend her as he was physically attacked at the same time.

A walk through the old town of Hebron was also sobering. What was once a bustling place is now all but abandoned, with shopkeepers having been forced out of their premises.

#### **n. National Coalition of Christian Organisations in Palestine (Jerusalem Church related organizations)**

One of the successful efforts of the Jerusalem Inter-Church Centre is the setting up of an informal coalition of Christian Organisations in Palestine. These organisations which

often work in isolation have found the coalition very useful as it draws together the efforts of Christian organisations providing them the opportunity to work together on some issues. We met with a representative group of the Coalition at the JIC offices. **Andre Batarseh, General Secretary YMCA, Jerusalem** which has played a leading role in both building the leadership of Arab Christian young people but in also sharing with the world updates on the situation in the region affirmed the role this ecumenical network plays in mobilising their voices. **Rafoul Rofa of the St Ives Support Unit** told us that his organisation works with communities on the ground on providing Palestinians legal help on house demolitions, freedom of movement, unification of families divided by the Wall, registration of land, identity cards etc. **Nora Karmi representing Sabeel**, the ecumenical liberation theological centre in Jerusalem spoke of the need for 'interfaith' work which must no longer focus on 'dialogue' but 'co-existence for life,' seeking out positive common denominators and values by which people can live alongside each other in peace. **Hanna Sahhar of the Arab Orthodox Club** told us how the wall had brought their work to a stop but once they moved their centre to the East of Jerusalem, they have been able to work with Palestinian young people giving them a sense of hope for the future.

The discussions that followed their presentations were far from easy: They said that, sadly, the churches in Jerusalem, themselves, are divided. If Christians are to have an effective presence in the region, they need to remain in Jerusalem, which must remain the spiritual capital of the faith groups. But for this to occur, unity among the churches and various ecumenical groups in Jerusalem must be strengthened. Christian witness began with 12 disciples and Christians have offered a continuing witness in the Holy Land for the past 2000 years. If it is to continue into the future, the international community must help support the witness of the rapidly diminishing number of Christians remaining in the land.

### **III Conversations around the table while sharing food**

Over the week we had the honour of the company of a several individuals at some of our meals during which the conversation touched on many issues, some of which are noted below.

#### **Dr Bernard Sabella, MECC Department of Service for Palestinian Refugees:**

Dr Sabella painted a rather bleak but realistic and honest picture of the current situation. Our discussion included the following: i) Hamas, if it is going to be taken seriously, cannot be left to form an Islamic Palestinian State; ii) being kind to Israel or treating them nicely does not work: based on their actions over the past 60 years they appear to only understand force; iii) Christians have a place in the current Palestinian political structure, but overall leadership is lacking; there is little trust in the current PA leader because he is too conciliatory to Israel; iv) Christian aid to Palestinian Action of Churches Together must be unconditional (i.e., not just for Christians) to be used in service to any Palestinian refugee; v) many international organizations operating in the West Bank and Gaza are ineffective; vi) water is a huge issue for Israel and control of water resources will

become ever more important; vii) the importance of influencing and raising the awareness of American Christians who remain fairly ignorant of the Palestinian plight because of media bias in the USA. Is there any hope? The consensus was that America holds the key to putting pressure on Israel because change is unlikely to come from within Israel.

**Dr Mustafa Abu Sway, Muslim theologian:** Dr Abu Sway, who has been very involved in interfaith dialogue over the past years was even less hopeful about the future. Some of the issues discussed included: i) some theologians have pulled out of some of the interfaith dialogue groups because they no longer have any faith in its effectiveness; ii) being involved in interfaith dialogue while the oppression by the Israeli government intensifies has become a source of tension within Palestinian families; iii) every aspect of Palestinian life is controlled by the Israeli military regime and domestic violence is on the rise in Palestinian families as the men, women and children take out their frustrations on those closest to them; iv) children are becoming more angry, violent and bitter which does not bode well for the future; v) a dramatic change in people seems to occur when they assume positions of political power - particularly when the political structures are inherent with corruption – with the risk that they ‘lose their souls’; vi) already under the new Israeli government, increasing numbers of house demolitions are taking place, but in different places each week so people are not making the connections as to the numbers of people being evicted and made homeless; vii) Israel is acting with absolute impunity, without regard to International Law or International Human Rights Resolutions, which they have signed; viii) hope amongst the people is diminishing as their lives become more constricted and there is no concerted international action by the USA or Europe to put pressure on Israel to comply with United Nations Resolutions or the Arab Peace Initiative; ix) prolonged negotiations are working against the Palestinians as settlements keep expanding and demolitions keep happening and more and more Palestinians are being restricted in their movements.

When asked about whether the Palestinians had any options left to them, he suggested: challenge Israel! If they see a 2-state solution as being the way forward then give them a specific time limit (6 months) to implement it, after which there would be no more talks, no more negotiations by the Palestinians, and they would have to accept the reality of one state. The Palestinians would have to give up the concept of ‘nationhood’ but they would instead insist on full equal citizenship of Israel. They would then finally have equal access to their basic human needs; a common humanity would have to be acknowledged if the Israelis did not want to be accused of racism. It would not simply be ‘one person – one vote’ but more importantly ‘one person with equal access to one drop of water’. But whether the Palestinians who had assumed positions of power within the PA would ever relinquish that power is the challenge. Was there light at the end of the tunnel? “Not only do I see no light, I cannot even see the tunnel...”

**Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek from Sabeel:** Rev. Ateek had just launched his new book, “A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation” in Ramallah the previous night. One theme of our dinner conversation centred on the desperate need for prophetic voices, particularly Christian ones. Inherent in being a prophetic voice is that some element of

suffering often accompanies speaking out with integrity. There was also a need for real leadership to challenge Israel's current disastrous policies in respect of the Occupation. Some hope was expressed that President Obama would provide such leadership; there was a suggestion that a delegation from the WCC should visit him raising their prophetic voices of insisting on *equality* as a basic human value not just in the Middle East but globally if justice is to be done. The danger of continuing to merely 'talk' and not 'act' was that extremism within the region is increasing at alarming rates. The political problem of 'secular Zionism' has now been joined by the religious problem of 'Jewish Zionism and Christian Zionism'. Add to this some factions of Islamic extremism and the danger levels rise for all of the people in the region. Israel has become a highly militaristic state, and the economic, social and psychological health of the nation is being compromised. International leaders need to help Israel 'hear' that pursuing this path will mean ultimate destruction for Israel and Palestine along with much of the Middle East with repercussions reverberating beyond the region.

What might be a way forward? Rev. Ateek echoed what others have said on our visit of the vision of a confederation relationship between Israel and Palestine and other neighbouring states as a way forward towards a sustainable peace in the region. But time is running out...

**Ms. Viola Raheb:** During lunch in Bethlehem, we heard more about the vision behind the work of institutions such as International Centre in Bethlehem (ICB) from Ms Viola Raheb who has been part of the reference group of the WCC's Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV) and now lives outside Palestine. (This is because she is married to a Palestinian refugee living in Lebanon and he is not allowed to enter his own country. She was in Palestine in order to register her son so that he will be able to return when he so desired.) Believing that "only we Palestinians can change our situation" she rephrased Gandhi's vision of '*Be the change you want to see in the world*' into the Palestinian context: "We must shape today so tomorrow might be different."

She believes the focus needs to be on strengthening the institutions in Palestine to give people hope so that they will still believe that there is something worth waking up for; to still have faith even though "all tunnels of light might still be off at the moment." ICB has been a powerful instrument for Palestinian women, providing employment and self-esteem to better enable them to care for their families as well as a forum for supporting each other to own the present and help create the future. She noted that "Women have always played a key role – offering an alternative to helplessness – saying YES to life during the intifadas; not allowing the destruction to have the last word." She, like many others, has become doubtful of the value of interfaith or group dialogue. She believes that people in both Palestine and Israel need to believe in their own country's ability to make life worthwhile living; each in their own community. Then, in the future, they might be able to envision a future together. We were so inspired by her energy and her steadfastness in the face of such darkness; she has truly been an admirable role model of what is possible if people believe in themselves enough.

**Mr Sami Awad, Holy Land Trust:** Over a meal in Bethlehem, Sami Awad from the Holy Land Trust told the group about the various ways his organisation works to empower and encourage the Palestinian community to work towards a better future. The Holy Land Trust was established in Bethlehem in 1998. It is committed to nonviolence and actively promotes this as a means to ending the Israeli occupation through its Nonviolence Program which works with people of all ages to train them for peaceful agents of change

Another key project is the Palestine News Network, an independent web, audio and video news agency which covers news not normally dealt with by mainstream media. Two new community-based television and radio stations have recently been set up.

Both the Holy Land Trust and the Siraj Centre for Holy Land Studies are part of the Palestinian Initiative for Responsible Tourism, a network of organisations in the Holy Land working to overcome some of the difficulties and threats that the Israeli occupation poses to tourism, promote a balanced and enriching experience for travellers and achieve a more equitable distribution of tourism revenue.

These organisations have developed a Code of Conduct for Tourism in the Holy Land, which provides guidelines both for travellers to the Holy Land and for the Palestinian tourism sector. The Holy Land Trust runs a travel and Encounter Program which offers custom-designed travel programs for people of all backgrounds who are visiting the Holy Land.

**George Rishwami, Siraj Centre:** George Rishwami is coordinator of this organisation which works with communities in Bethlehem and throughout the West Bank. He is passionate about the Palestinian land and about sharing its beauty with visitors to the region. When he met with the group, he had just been mapping out a new hiking trail to lead travel groups on. Alternative tourism is one of its key projects.

Among the many other activities of the Siraj Centre is the Youth Exchange Program which brings together youth from all over the world with the youth of the Holy Land for face to face interaction and to learn about each other's cultures.