



Middle East Network Newsletter

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Israeli occupation puts strain on Palestinian Christians Report of WCC Living Letters visit to the Holy Land

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Father Raed Abusahlia, Catholic priest in the West Bank village of Taybeh, presents a Peace Lamp to the Living Letters team. It is part of an initiative which calls people of faith around the world to pray for peace in the Holy Land. Photo: Emma Halgren/WCC

Israeli occupation puts strain on Palestinian Christians

By Emma Halgren (*)

Churches around the world must speak out and act for justice in Israel and Palestine, church leaders told members of an ecumenical delegation visiting the region from 7 to 14 March.

Members of the delegation - a Living Letters team visiting on behalf of the World Council of Churches (WCC) - learned of the many ways in which churches in the region cooperate to provide social services and advocate for peace and justice. But as the already low Palestinian Christian population continues to dwindle, and life becomes increasingly difficult for Palestinian people living under Israeli occupation, the work of churches is coming under strain, and support is desperately needed, the delegation was told.

"Living Letters" are small international ecumenical teams travelling to locations around the world where Christians strive to overcome violence. Their goal is to express the solidarity of the ecumenical family and learn how people are dealing with the challenges that face them.

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.



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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.

"Don't leave us alone", plead church leaders

Patriarch Fouad Twal said that after 60 years of occupation, there was a strong sense of powerlessness among Christians in Palestine.

"We still pray," he said. "And we believe in the power of prayer. We are hopeful with the new U.S. administration. But we need countries around the world to support us."

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.

"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," he said.

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.

"I've travelled a great deal in the world, and this is the first time I've seen children without a smile," said Bishop Younan. "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. "The churches must not keep quiet about this. They must be prophetic voices. Don't leave us alone in our struggle. Help us by raising your voices to speak more clearly on justice, the sharing of Jerusalem, an end to the occupation, and a viable state for Palestinians, living side-by-side with the state of Israel."

Rev. Dr Naim Ateek, founder and director of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem, issued a similar call during an evening meeting with the Living Letters team. Ateek, whose book *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation* had been launched the previous night, said there was a desperate need for prophetic voices on the Israel-Palestine issue, particularly Christian ones. "If all the churches were willing to speak up, we could work miracles here," he said. "We have great weight, which we have not used."

Courage needed to challenge occupation

The need for U.S. leadership on the issue - and the importance of advocacy by U.S. churches to encourage this leadership - was a recurring theme throughout the visit. The Rev. John Thomas, general minister and president of the United Church of Christ (UCC) in the United States, was



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also in Jerusalem and the West Bank in March as part of a visit to ecumenical partners in the Middle East. He and two UCC staff members accompanied the Living Letters team on several of their meetings with church leaders and human rights organizations.

He was struck by the changes that had taken place since he last toured the area in 2005: the expansion of illegal Israeli housing settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank; the transformation of once-makeshift checkpoints into elaborate terminals through which Palestinians must pass in order to enter Jerusalem; and the growth of the Separation Wall which now cuts deep into the West Bank.

Thomas said the Palestinians he met expressed little hope of a change in their situation. "The sense of abandonment and vulnerability is profound, the sense of political powerlessness pervasive."

He challenged members of his own church to speak out on the issue. "The question for us is whether we can be brave enough to challenge an occupation seeking to claim the souls of all involved, and that demeans and dehumanizes even those it seeks to privilege," he said.

"As citizens of the nation that provides billions of dollars a year to support the occupation, we are deeply complicit, and therefore called to a particular responsibility to say, 'No longer in my name!'"

Education is crucial in bridge-building

To get an idea of the overall health and well-being of a society, you should look at how its smallest minority is being treated. That's the theory Rabbi Daniel Rossing holds to, and in the case of Arab Christians - a minority group in the Holy Land - the indicators are deeply troubling.

Rabbi Rossing, executive director of the Jerusalem Center for Jewish Christian Relations (JCJCR), knows that lack of understanding is at least partly responsible for this.

The JCJCR recently conducted a public survey of attitudes among the adult Jewish population in Israel to Christianity, Christians, and the Christian presence in Israel.

The results showed a strong correlation between levels of education and tolerance of Christians, and indicated the high degree of segregation that currently exists in Israeli society - more than 50 per cent of respondents said they had no Christian friends or acquaintances in Israel or abroad. Younger respondents showed significantly lower levels of tolerance of Christianity.

The JCJCR, which has a staff of two Jews and two Christians, works to overcome some of this prejudice and foster greater understanding between the different religions. It runs numerous educational programmes for both Christian and Jewish audiences, teaching them about key aspects of the other religion including doctrine, worship and the history of that religion's presence in the Holy Land.

Staff members organize seminars on Christianity for government ministries, Israeli Defence Force educational units, police, journalists, and other audiences, and produce resources in Hebrew and Arabic about the Christian and Jewish faiths respectively.

The centre also runs "encounter groups", in which Jews and Christians with something in common - for example age, gender, profession or geography - are brought together to discuss



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the issues affecting them, to share information about their culture, and to discuss opportunities for collaborative social action.

The rabbinic voice of conscience

Rabbis for Human Rights is another organization working to build better relationships. Established with the aim of being "the rabbinic voice of conscience in Israel", it takes practical action on issues like house demolitions and women's rights.

One key project, Agricultural Access, brings together teams of international and Israeli volunteers from all religious backgrounds to plant, prune and harvest olive trees. This helps Palestinians maintain access to their trees and reduce the incidence of violence and theft during the harvest season.

"If our first mandate is to promote human rights, then our second and no less important mandate is to introduce into the mindset of Israelis a different understanding of Judaism," said executive director Rabbi Arik Ascherman.

"We have to break down the stereotypes that Palestinians have of us, and with the help of Palestinians, break down the stereotypes that we have of them. That's the only way we have a better future."

Rabbi Rossing said the encounter between Jews and Christians in the Holy Land was a deeply complex one, but that there was potential for cooperation.

"As much as religion can be used to fan the flames of conflict, it can also extinguish the flames of conflict," said Rabbi Rossing. "We believe that the Arab Christian population, as small as it is, can serve a bridging role, but only if the majority religions have at least a minimal understanding of who these Christians are."

(*) Emma Halgren, WCC Communication intern, is a member of the Uniting Church in Australia. For more on the Living Letters visit, go to www.oikoumene.org.

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