



Central
District
Conference
A conference of
Mennonite Church USA

Reporter

KNOWING
CHRIST'S LOVE
– ANSWERING
GOD'S CALL

JANUARY 2016

Praying for peace in Israel-Palestine

By James Rissler,
Pastor at Atlanta Mennonite Church

“Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem” or
“Fear, Stronger than Walls” or
“Hatred Borne of Blindness”

Apartheid at best.
Fear, stronger than walls, prevents
seeing the other.

Fear has created a segregated society in Israel-Palestine that encourages ongoing ignorance, suspicion, and even hatred of the other. In this environment, shalom, just peace, is hard to imagine. The haiku above was composed by a few of us participating in a Come and See Tour of Israel-Palestine over breakfast on one of our last days there, summarizing our sense of what we had seen. Come and See Tours are a response of Mennonite Church USA, with the support of Mennonite Mission Network, Mennonite Central Committee U.S., and Everence, to the plea for awareness and solidarity from Palestinian Christians in “Kairos Palestine: A Moment of Truth” (www.kairospalestine.ps). In November of 2015, 15 persons, 13 of us pastors, spent eleven days in Is-



Photo by Janeen Bertsche Johnson

rael-Palestine, guided by MCC staff. We listened to Israelis and Palestinians, to Jews, Muslims, Christians, and secular folks. We witnessed their lives, we prayed, and we sang together our lament and hope. Here are some of my reflections, written in my own voice, but reflecting observations I'm confident would be shared by all of our group.

I was most surprised by the degree to which Israelis do not see or know Palestinians. Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger told us that for 35 years as a settler, “I did not see them. They were invisible to me.” Of

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Photo by Gwen Gustafson-Zook

The CDC Reporter will be highlighting Central District Conference congregations and individuals' efforts focused on creation care.

Have a story to share?
Contact the CDC Editor at
marlys.weaver@gmail.com

An open air cage: *Collected Quotes from Israel-Palestine*

By Joel Miller,
Pastor at Columbus Mennonite Church

Throughout our days in Palestine and Israel, my left hand got a workout taking pages of notes from our conversations and observations. Below are a few of the direct quotes I managed to get down.

“This is the wild wild West (Bank).”

-Palestinian Dr. Jad Isaac of the Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem (ARIJ)

“They take pictures and write reports that nobody reads.”

-Our Hebron tour guide, Hisham Sarabati's, response to a question about the presence of blue vehicles marked TIPH, Temporary International Presence in Hebron.

“The energy has changed from frantic to tired and depressed.”

-Christian Peacemaker Team member Chloe describing the present mood of Palestinians.

“It doesn't fit in with our image of ourselves.”

-Israeli settler Rabbi Hannan Schlesinger on his growing awareness of Palestinian oppression at the hands of Israel.

A Note from the Treasurer: *Starting 2016 with Thanks*

By Roger Nafziger,
CDC Treasurer

Many thanks to all the Central District Conference congregations and individuals who supported the conference financially in the last quarter of 2015, particularly in December.

While revenue was lagging significantly behind the plan a couple months ago, by the end of December, it was close to being on goal. In the month of December alone, individuals gave \$7,820 to CDC! Thank you!

On the expense side, in the first six months of our fiscal year, we spent \$8,777 less than the plan allowed. The net result is a small gain year-to-date for which we are most grateful.

Seven Central District Conference pastors and leaders spent eleven days in Israel-Palestine through Mennonite Church USA's Come and See Tour. Those who attended from CDC were Janeen Bertsche Johnson of Eighth Street Mennonite; Joel Miller, pastor at Columbus Mennonite; Cyneatha Millsaps, pastor at Community Mennonite of Markham; Deron Brill Bergstresser, pastor of Faith Mennonite; Dawn Yoder Harms, pastor at Assembly Mennonite; James Rissler, pastor at Atlanta Mennonite; Phil Dick from Mennonite Church of Normal, and Eric Kurtz of Assembly Mennonite and MCC Great Lakes.

To invite one of these seven to preach or share with your congregation, contact James Rissler at jamesrissler@gmail.com.

“Every Palestinian city is an open air cage.”

-Palestinian-American businessman Sam Bahour.

“This is not a complicated case. There is no nice way of doing occupation with settlement expansion.”

-Girard Horton of Military Court Watch.

“I have to prove myself all day, 24-7.”

-Ramallah tour guide Jamal Juma' regarding his and other Palestinian's relationship with Israeli soldiers.

“We refuse to say, ‘My pain is bigger than your pain.’”

-Israeli Yigel and Palestinian Morya who have both lost family members to violence between their people, members of the Parent's Circle Family Forum.

“Please excuse Ruth for not being in school today, she's sick of the war in Vietnam.”

-Israeli peace activist Ruth Hiller recounting a note her parents wrote for her during her formative childhood years.

“Today I don't have hope, but I do hope that that I'll have hope tomorrow.”

-Omar Haramy of the Palestinian liberation theology organization Sabeel when leading us on a contemporary Stations of the Cross.

“In a free society, some are guilty, all are responsible.”

-A quote from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel shared with us during a morning devotional. 2

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course, he passed Palestinians every day on the road, at checkpoints, in stores. But they were not human persons to him. They were Other. He assured us that this blindness to Palestinians was shared by 99% of settlers.

As a settler in the West Bank, Rabbi Schlesinger at least passed by Palestinians regularly. For Israelis living in Israel proper, it is quite easy to literally never see Palestinians. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are walled off and not allowed to travel into Israel. Those living in East Jerusalem are permitted to travel in Israel, and 20% of Israel's citizens are Palestinian. But they go to different schools, do not serve in the army as most Israelis do, and are generally concentrated in the north of Israel.

This blindness encourages fear, and fear builds walls, literally and metaphorically. Because Israelis do not interact with Palestinians, they assume that most Palestinians are like the few who have turned to violent resistance. It becomes easy to label Palestinians as terrorists, and to assume that all Palestinians, if not terrorists themselves, support those who are. We heard many times from Israelis that Palestinians, and the Arab nations surrounding Israel, want to "push Israel into the sea." We did not hear any Palestinian express anything like this sentiment.

Rather, Palestinians expressed their own fear. They unanimously expressed support for the right of Israel to exist peacefully as a nation alongside a Palestinian state, but they mostly expressed fear and frustration at the many ways in which Israel undermines the possibility of such a peace.

Palestinians cannot ignore Israelis as Israelis ignore them, because they are the occupied, rather

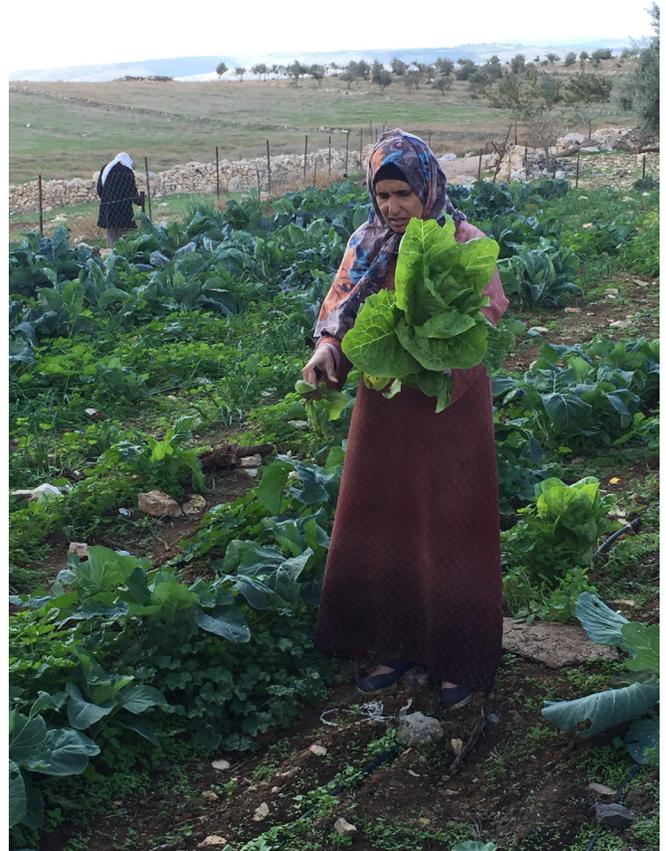


Photo by Eric Kurtz

than protected by an occupying military. They see the Israeli soldiers everywhere; they slowly move through checkpoints to travel from town to town, or to go to school, or church. They see the settlements continually encroach on their ancestral land. The village of Frush Beit Dajan, deep in the West Bank, but in the Jordan Valley whose fertile land Israel covets, once farmed 3500 acres. The small settlement of Hamra near them, comprised of about 15 families, now controls 2300 of those. The villagers of Beit Dajan irrigate their orchards with hidden retaining ponds which will be destroyed if found by Israeli soldiers because building anything without a permit is illegal, and permits are almost never given. In Jerusalem, we were told that the 400,000 Palestinians living there are given less than a dozen building permits per year, while Israelis receive 70,000.

Palestinians cannot help but see Israelis. But their seeing is also blinded by fear. Israelis are settlers bent on taking their land and soldiers who seize their young men in night raids to discourage stone throwing. It is easy to assume that all Israelis desire

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Photo by Gwen Gustafson-Zook

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all of the land from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River, and support policies that encourage ethnic displacement. Most of the Israelis we spoke to would also like to see peace with justice for Palestinians in a future state of Palestine, and for those currently living within Israel.

Some of us on the tour have had some training in trauma counseling, or have some knowledge of family systems theory and the ways in which characteristics of systems can be passed on to successive generations. We talked about our sense that the trauma that the Jewish people have experienced throughout their history, and especially in the Holocaust, is being revisited upon the Palestinian people.

Rabbi Ian Pear told us that he became a Zionist who supports the nation of Israel because only as a nation-state can Israel hope to influence the world to accept the ethical monotheism that can form the basis for universal peace. And after the Holocaust, when the world did not protect the Jewish people and when they were turned away as refugees by almost all nations (including the United States), the realization grew that Israel needed to provide for its own security through military force. Quoting Isaiah 49:6, he told us that only Israel, secure as a nation, could be a “light for the nations” as God intended.

And yet because of its intensely focused reliance on military power, because it became a nation by expelling many of the Palestinian people living in the land, because it is an occupying power, Israel is not a light for the nations. And at some level, many Is-



Photo by James Rissler

raelis know it...

The second biggest surprise I found in our interactions with Israelis and Palestinians was how deeply they desire the approbation and support of the international community. We heard this from many Palestinians, which I expected. Pastor Ashraf sent us from the Sunday morning service we attended at the Beit Sahour Lutheran Church with a passionate benediction: “We are your brothers and sisters in Christ. This is our most important identity. We are fighting for our existence. Please help take this message with you. This is your responsibility.”

But we also heard it expressed with deep emotion by Israelis. Our Jewish guide, Aviva, thanked us profusely, with tears in her eyes, for risking visiting Rachel’s Tomb, a site so close to the “dangers of the West Bank.” “You don’t know how much your support

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Mark your calendars for the CDC Regional Gatherings

The Central District Conference Regional Gatherings provide a time for CDC congregations to meet with regional neighbors for a time of worship and reflection. This year’s theme is “Abounding in Love... Abiding in Grace.”

The 2016 Regional Gatherings are set for:

CDC West Regional Gathering: Feb 13, 2016 at Community Mennonite Church, Markham, Ill.

CDC Central Regional Gathering: Feb 20, 2016 at Faith Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind.

CDC East Regional Gathering: March 5, 2016 at Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship, Berne, Ind.

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for Israel means to us,” she said, before our polite questions led her to wonder if our support was as fervent as she’d assumed. Other Israelis told us that U.S. support is increasingly important, as Europe and the rest of the world “have turned against us.”

At some level, Israelis recognize that the world has, in general, condemned their refusal to work for peace with the Palestinians who were driven from their lands to form the state of Israel in 1948. (What Israelis call Independence Day, Palestinians remember as Nakba (Catastrophe) Day when 700,000 Palestinians were expelled or fled from their land. Their refugee descendants now number several million, spread primarily throughout the Gaza Strip, the occupied West Bank, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria.) When the Palestinian Authority sought United Nations recognition as a “non-member observer state” only nine countries voted against it: Israel, the United States, Canada, the Czech Republic, Panama, and four tiny Pacific Island nations.

I was surprised by how much Israelis feel besieged by public opinion, and how ardently they were concerned with making sure we understood they were in the right. The photographer who sat beside two of us on our plane into Tel Aviv with her ready list of why “there is no partner for peace;” the soldier in Hebron who heard our tour guide mentioning a shooting that had happened a week ago, and interrupted to explain why the shooting had been justified - I mourned that he seemed to me more concerned with being right than with the life lost; Rabbi Pear, who readily admitted that injustices were occurring, but clearly expected us to agree with him that “civil rights must suffer for security.”

Luke 19:41-42, in which Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, saying “If only you knew the things that lead to peace,” and Ezekiel 13:10, in which God condemns false prophets “because they lead my people astray, saying ‘Peace’ when there is no



Photo by Philip Dick

peace,” were almost constantly in mind as I traveled. One of the most moving presentations for me was from Gerard Horton, of Military Court Watch, who detailed all the ways that the Israeli Defense Forces have “perfected ages old techniques of mass intimidation and collective punishment,” and ended by asking, “How did you think it was being done?” It was clear to all of our group that the injustices we saw and heard described were not primarily personal, but rather involved “cosmic powers of this present darkness.” (Eph. 6:10)

There is not primarily ill will between persons in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Primarily, there is fear and ignorance of the other, there is trauma not yet healed, there is hatred borne of these, and there are policies of segregation that rise above any

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Photo by Eric Kurtz

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individual's personal feelings, and encourage and exacerbate them.

How then, may we hope to respond? I will boycott Israeli made goods, and explore whether I can divest retirement funds from Israeli companies and companies that profit from the occupation. I don't believe that boycotts often work, but given how much concern I heard for the opinion of the world from Israelis, perhaps this one will. Israeli peace activists that we heard from had mixed feelings about the Boycott-Divest-Sanction movement, but several supported it as a nonviolent tool to bring pressure on Israel. I hope that Mennonite Church USA will pass the resolution on Israel-Palestine that we tabled in Kansas City, which while not fully endorsing BDS, expressed care about how our financial lives are enmeshed in policies of occupation.

But I have relatively little hope for such efforts. Indeed, I am largely drained of human hope. Ephesians 6 goes on to say, "Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication." I sometimes find appeals for prayer trite, especially if they are accompanied by invitations for other types of "practical" support. I do not feel thus here. When I reflect back over our learning tour, I find myself prone before the cross that represents the depth of divine love and our call to such love. My heart throbs, my eyes burn with tears, and the only hope I can muster is my faith that God can do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine. (Eph. 3:20)

So pray. Pray that Israelis and Palestinians will see each other as children of God. Pray that God might heal the trauma that Israelis and Palestinians have suffered for generations. Pray that Israel would truly seek the peace of the nations, whether

as a result of global pressure or because of Isaiah's words. Pray that leaders will somehow find the imagination and strength to reach out to each other with hope rather than fear. Pray for shalom, for the shalom of Jerusalem and all it might be, a city shared by Israelis and Palestinians, Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Please pray.

Hively exploring Bible study for 2016

Hively Avenue Mennonite is having a "Year of the Bible," "a year-long program to read through the Bible and enhance our knowledge of the Word," according to Hively's pamphlet on the 2016 theme.

"We will encourage one another, enjoy activities together and follow a plan to gain new insights into the Word of God," reads Hively's information.

Hively is encouraging members of the congregation to read the Bible throughout the year, using a chronological Bible Reading Plan, participate in Bible discussions with others, and attend Year of the Bible events and activities.

CDC unveils new website

Do you know how Central District Conference supports your congregation or what resources it offers? Learn about CDC and find CDC news on the new CDC website at www.mcusacdc.org.

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