

Reflections on Visiting Israel & Palestine On an MCC Learning Tour

Introduction

1. A group of sixteen persons (*) from Canada participated in an MCC Learning Tour to Israel-Palestine, February 28 to March 11, 2010. The MCC staff arranged for an excellent array of contacts, and took the time to travel with us and to interpret what we were hearing. We have cherished the opportunity to learn about the history and the relationships between the people of Israel and Palestine. We heard from those who reach across barriers of religion, culture and race, and from those who remain fixed in their isolationist paradigms. These contacts have broadened our awareness of the situation.
2. The following paragraphs tell you something of our observations and suggestions. We share these with MCC (Manitoba, Canada, and Bi-National) and with those in our circles of influence who might benefit from our insights and concerns. The limitations of such a brief visit are acknowledged.

Between Despair and Hope

3. In conversations with Palestinians and Israelis we heard familiar words repeated many times: hope, fear, promise, catastrophe, land, Zionism, occupied territories, settlements, fences, walls, maps, refugees, check-points and more. These words took on new meaning as we learned of the realities of life in the Holy Land, and as we dared to ponder the possibility of peace and justice between and among its peoples.
4. People in Israel and Palestine spoke with conviction and passion, and we listened with respect and appreciation. While we did not always understand the context out of which they spoke, we expressed empathy with their plight and affirmed their vision of peace.
5. It became evident to us that many people, both Palestinians and Israelis, carry deeply held fear over their uncertain future. They are desperate to find solutions. As attacks and counter-attacks continue and accelerate on many levels, these threaten to destroy the morale and the dignity of both peoples.
6. We observed and heard of the lack of respect for human rights and disregard for international law on the part of Israelis. This is evidenced in the demolition of Palestinian dwellings and the encroachment of Israeli residential developments into Palestinian territory. The situation is exacerbated by inordinate delays at checkpoints, detainment of Palestinians, harassment of children on their way to school, arbitrary cutting of electrical and water services, and more. It appears that many Israelis are fixed on security and expansion, with little commitment to reconciliation with neighbours.
7. Even in the face of what appears as a hopeless situation, we have seen courageous expressions of hope. It has been encouraging to witness the work of organizations and individuals who call these wrongs into question and seek to rectify them. We have witnessed both Palestinians and Israelis reaching out to each other for reconciliation, and offering forgiveness in the face of extremely difficult circumstances. We are greatly encouraged by individuals and groups seeking to build good relationships through advocacy, mediation, education, and the promotion of nonviolence. We have met brave persons resolved to live by the Biblical promise and vision of justice and peace.

Biblical Learnings

8. In coming to terms with the question of who has the right to the land of Palestine, we learned that the Lord's promise of blessing for creation (Gen 1:28-31) was renewed through Abraham *to all nations* (Gen 12:1-3). The land was entrusted to the people of Abraham not as their sole possession, but as the place where *all* people who dwell there

- can experience the blessings of God. In short, we cannot be supportive of a Zionist position, whether 'Christian' or secular, that claims possession of the Holy Land for Israelis alone.
9. We were confirmed in our understanding that *all people* are created in the image of God, and that this Biblical truth calls for all people to love God with heart and soul and mind, and to love their neighbours as themselves (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18; Matt 22:34-40). This implies that an essential task for Christians is to foster peace by contributing to the breaking down of 'walls of hostility' among all peoples (Eph 2:14).

A Word to Political Leaders

10. With appreciation, we have noted the Canadian Government's policy that supports Israel's right to live in peace with its neighbours within secure boundaries, as well as the Palestinian Authority's right to self-determination. Yet we are concerned about our government's cautious tone and its hesitancy to promote peace between these two peoples. We call on our political leaders to be more proactive in support of justice in Israeli-Palestinian relations.
11. The ongoing and increasing tension between Israelis and Palestinians arising from border disputes concerns us deeply. We call on the leaders of both governments to work aggressively for a just and lasting peace with stability. Possibilities for a just settlement are greatly increased when both governments and their people desist from aggressive attacks and other tactics. It is crucial that Israelis and Palestinians are able to live within secure boundaries, and that the Palestinian Authority be afforded the right to self-rule.

A Word about and to MCC

12. Our tour group is highly appreciative of MCC's presence in Israel and Palestine. We admire the integrity and long-term commitment of its service workers and the quality of its projects.
13. We urge MCC to be even more proactive in describing to its (our) constituency the situation in Palestine and Israel as it exists, and to do so with integrity and balance in the interests of peace and justice, above all being faithful to the witness of Scripture.
14. We encourage MCC to engage with vigour in bridge-building dialogue with stakeholders at many levels both in Israel-Palestine and in Canada and USA. This should include dialogue with representatives of governments and with leaders of religious communities involved in this conflict.
15. MCC's support for partners engaged in working for peace between Palestine and Israel is noteworthy. We encourage MCC to continue to affirm such initiatives as are consistent with MCC's mission, and to lend support as they are able.
16. We are very appreciative of the action taken by Palestinian Christian leaders in drafting the *Kairos* document: *A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering* - www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1685. The document is a prophetic voice among those crying out for peace. We encourage MCC and its constituencies to give support to the intent reflected in the *Kairos* statement.

(*) Tour Participants: Marvin Hamm, Walter Hamm, Helmut & Irma Harder, Herta & Neil Janzen, Irma Janzen, Wesley & Connie Midget, Brenda Penner, Harold & Marianne Penner, Elsie and Peter (Leader) Rempel, Charlotte and Ernie Wiens

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