

Dove Tales

Who is "in" and who is "out?"

by Timothy Seidel

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

—Ephesians 2:14

“On a pleasant Sunday afternoon in July 2000, members and pastors belonging to local Palestinian Evangelical congregations from the Palestinian territories gathered at the Bethlehem Hotel to celebrate the formation of their council. An American woman who was present at the meeting approached one of the pastors and asked him if she could say a few words to the assembly. When the lady took the microphone, I couldn't believe the words that came out of her mouth. She professed to the Palestinian Evangelical Christians assembled there that she had a word from the Lord for them. 'God,' she said, 'wanted them all to leave Israel and go to other Arab countries.' She added that they must leave to make room for God's chosen people, the Jews. She warned the pastors and the audience that if they did not listen to the instructions that God had given her, God would pour his wrath on them. When her agenda was recognized, one of the pastors came and whisked her away from the pulpit, but not before she served the whole assembly a mouthful of what is known today as Christian Zionism.”

This story, related by Alex Awad, the Palestinian pastor of the East Jerusalem Baptist Church, poignantly reveals the extent to which some Christian voices invalidate the concrete historical realities of their Christian brothers and sisters living under occupation. Such Christian Zionist voices not only ignore the

realities of dispossession that have marked the experiences of both Christian and Muslim Palestinians past and present, but also go so far as to justify violence, dispossession, and discrimination perpetrated against Palestinians.

Stories like these reveal our need to be constantly vigilant about how we read Scripture and how we do theology. We need to ask basic questions about our identities, the agendas that we bring to the text, and about who benefits from our reading and interpretation, so as to avoid doing violence to others.

When we talk about Christians in Palestine-Israel, it is important to pay attention to our language of who is “in” and who is “out.” As the story above indicates, some people may not see our Palestinian brothers and sisters as being “in.” From one perspective, Palestinians, be they

Mission Statement

The mission of Peace and Justice Support Network of Mennonite Church USA is to proclaim and promote God's desire for justice (Micah 6:8), Christ's call to peacemaking (Matthew 5:9), and the Spirit's reconciling work (Ephesians 2:11-22).



Palm Sunday in Jerusalem.

Photo by Grant Rissler

Christians or Muslims, are usurpers who should leave the land. A reading of Scripture that erases Palestinians from the land is tantamount to a biblically-justified ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people.

Reflecting biblically on these lines we draw, if we take a look at the ministry of Jesus and the witness of the early church, we see that all people are invited to become part of God's household. In the book of Ephesians, Gentiles are welcomed into "one new humanity" (2:15) because Christ has made peace between Jew and Gentile.

For Christians living in the United States, it is sometimes difficult to think about the church as the new multiethnic, multiracial people of God. Many Christians have a hard time seeing and relating to Christianity in the Arab world as living, vibrant communities of faith with rich spiritual and theological traditions. This may be partly due to our lack of understanding about the shape of Christianity in other parts of the world and may also be partly due to our often racist and ethnocentric notions of what a Christian should look like.

Christianity in Palestine-Israel today is experiencing what many describe as a crisis. This crisis is not due to the growth of so-called Islamic fundamentalism or the persecution of "believers" by their Muslim neighbors, misrepresentations that are unfortunately used to distract from the realities of military occupation. Instead, the plight of the Palestinian Christian is very much connected to that of the Palestinian Muslim in that both, whether in the Occupied Territories or inside Israel itself, are experiencing daily injustices in the form of oppressive policies imposed on them by the Israeli government. Palestinian Christians, like their Muslim brothers and sisters, have experienced a long history of dispossession and have not been immune to Israeli policies of occupation and discrimination. If anything, they have felt more strongly the feelings of forsakenness, knowing full well that many Christians in North America and Europe support without question the state of Israel in its oppression of their people. Meanwhile,

daily experiences of humiliation at checkpoints, of land confiscation to make way for the separation barrier, the illegal occupation and colonization of Palestinian territory, lack of mobility and access to basic services, unemployment, poverty, and no sense of hope for a better future for their children all contribute to a growing emigration of Palestinian Christians from the historical land of Palestine.

Struggling with the tensions of feeling forsaken while seeking a critical hope is a great challenge. Despair in the Holy Land is very real, and learning how to talk about God in the midst of such pain requires recognizing that the starting point of any relevant theological reflection must begin with the question, "My God, why have you forsaken us?" For Western Christians concerned with justice, peace and reconciliation in Palestine-Israel, discovering our role as one of listening seriously to the cries of despair while being a witness to critical hope begins with seeing our inextricable connectedness—it begins with us not forsaking each other.

As Christians who come from a privileged part of the world, our convictions should compel us to listen to the voices of our Palestinian brothers and sisters, voices too often silenced. As we learn from Jesus' experience of "God-forsakenness," we should also learn from Palestinians who share their lives with us—their despair and their hopes—what it means to participate in God's reign of peace and justice.

Timothy Seidel is Peace and Justice Ministries Director for Mennonite Central Committee U.S. He and his wife, Christi, served as peace development workers with MCC in the Occupied Palestinian Territories from 2004 to 2007. This article is taken from his chapter, "Palestinian Christians: The Forgotten Faithful," found in Under Vine and Fig Tree: Biblical Theologies of Land and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict (Cascadia Publishing House, 2007).



Dove Tales is a tri-annual publication created by the Peace and Justice Support Network, Mennonite Church USA, to resource individuals and congregations in our collective peace and justice work. Ideas, articles and reports can be sent to the editor.

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Open letter to Mennonite Church USA congregations Becoming peacemakers in Israel-Palestine

June 2007

In response to the discernment of the Peace and Justice Partnership Council of Mennonite Church USA of the need for a common conversation among various parts of Mennonite Church USA, a delegation of 10 people (see below) traveled in Palestine-Israel, May 11-24, 2007. We visited many important centers in the region and engaged in dialogue with Christians, Jews and Muslims. During the visit, we listened to our partners, talked with leaders of other agencies, and heard from ordinary people as well as coworkers of Mennonite-related agencies.

We affirm that:

- The situation in Israel-Palestine today confronts us with profound theological issues that challenge the roots of our faith.
- Our experiences confront us with new questions about our understanding of God and what it means to be peacemakers in this context. Throughout the Bible, God calls the people of Israel to express care for “the other” and the stranger and to work for justice for everyone living on the land. The prophetic tradition repeatedly emphasizes that the people of God are accountable for exercising justice and compassion. The current situation in Israel-Palestine calls us to reject the temptation to reduce God to a tribal god who cares only for the well-being of one people.
- The biblical witness testifies that God chose a particular people for the purpose of bringing blessing to “all the families of the nations.” We did not find blessing between peoples in Israel-Palestine. Rather, the situation we encountered impressed upon us the urgency for rediscovering God, as revealed in both the Old Testament and in Jesus, as the One whose compassion and care extends to all people, all of whom have been created in God’s image.
- Christians have inflicted horrific suffering upon the Jewish people through the millennia, including the Holocaust. Tragically, Christian anti-Semitism continues. It is reprehensible. It cannot be reconciled with the biblical message, nor is it consistent with our vision of anti-racism.

We renew our commitment to God who disavows human vengeance, calls us to love our enemies, and requires us to pursue reconciliation and peacemaking with all people. We understand this to be the essence of God’s nature and healing purpose in the world. Questions about the connection between financial investments and God’s call for justice challenge us to reexamine our understanding of Christian stewardship in light of the realities of life in Palestine and Israel.

We became keenly aware of our need as God’s people in



Palm Sunday in Jerusalem.

Mennonite Church USA to recognize that true security can be found only in God. Both in this region and in North America, people have tried to find security through military power. The result has been the needless destruction of human lives that we have seen in Iraq and Palestine by occupying armies. In both places, the senseless response of suicide bombers adds to the death and suffering.

We observe that:

- The continuing Israeli military occupation and the dispossession of Palestinians are sinful, responsible for unjust suffering, and the major cause of the ongoing conflict.
- The Israeli government has consistently violated international law; the United States government has supported violations of human rights and international law by Israel.
- The Wall of Separation being constructed through the West Bank segregates Israelis from Palestinians and separates Palestinians from each other, causing undue hardship. This wall, 30 feet high and 436 miles long, will not ultimately satisfy Israeli security needs.
- The Israeli economic strangulation of Palestinians by Israeli military restrictions on the free movement of goods and people, and the international sanctions imposed on Palestine are causing great suffering and deprivation.
- Christian Zionism has under girded the occupation, reinforcing sentiments that have resulted in grave injustices for Palestinians.
- The Christian community in Israel-Palestine, the place of the birth of Christianity, is being eroded by the hardships created by the occupation.
- Suicide bombings by Palestinian extremists cause fear, insecurity and death for Israelis and work against possibilities for peace.

- In spite of the challenges, we heard the hearts of many Israelis and Palestinians still longing for peace.

In light of these disconcerting realities, in congregational education we encourage:

- Mennonite Church USA pastors and leaders to visit both Israel and Palestine and to deepen their understanding of the current situation in this region.
- Congregational groups and Sunday school classes to use study courses like Under Vine and Fig Tree (Cascadia) to counter the distortions of land and promise in Christian Zionism.
- Intentional and continued initiatives to meet with and listen to a range of Israeli and Palestinian voices.
- Use of resources on Mennonite understandings and responses to the Middle East and Israel-Palestine for further study and reflection (see www.MennoniteUSA/peace).

In economic engagement, we encourage:

- Groups visiting Palestine-Israel to consider staying in Palestinian communities, including Bethlehem and Nazareth, for at least a part of their time in the region to encourage economic development in Palestinian communities.
- Church institutions to gain greater understanding of their investments in this region and to avoid invest-

ments that violate international law and promote violence. We encourage exploring ways our investments and our role as investors can be used to provide hope and promote peace in this region.

In peace building (political advocacy, public witness and accompaniment) we encourage:

- Mennonite-related agencies working in Israel-Palestine to coordinate their work in the region.
- Congregations and agencies to challenge U.S. military and economic support for the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and to advocate for justice and protection of human rights for all people in the region.
- All parts of the church to strengthen our commitment to bridge building between the alienated factions in this region.

Delegation participants: Daryl Byler (MCC Washington office), Ron Byler (Mennonite Church USA Executive Leadership), Ed Epp (MEDA), Kim Vu Friesen (MC USA Executive Board), Stanley Green (Mennonite Mission Network), Rachele Lyndaker Schlabach (MCC Washington office), Rich Meyer (Christian Peacemaker Teams), Mark Regier (Mennonite Mutual Aid), Carol Rose (Christian Peacemaker Teams) and Lee Schmucker (Mennonite Mission Network).

Support PJSN

I stared at my computer screen six years ago, not wanting to watch as the World Trade Center smoldered and then collapsed . . . not wanting to think just yet about the days ahead. I felt melancholy and knew something of what was ahead. In those days, I checked www.mennoniteusa.org/peace almost daily for a new sermon . . . a new resource . . . a source of encouragement for the days ahead.

I still check the Web site for the Peace and Justice Support Network for something new. I read PeaceSigns and Dove Tales to learn from some of the best thinkers in the Mennonite Church and to pray with others who care deeply about peace. I skim through the e-mails received through the MennoLink listserv for encouragement and thoughtful words from you – the Network in PJSN. I depend on all of you who are members of PJSN for strength and courage for the days ahead.

And the Peace and Justice Support Network depends on you, its members, to support the Network's activities. This year, PJSN is:

- Working with the leaders of Mennonite Church USA as they speak prophetically about justice issues.
- Cosponsoring the Migration and Trade Learning Tour to the Arizona-Mexico border.

- Supporting the Christian Peace Witness for Iraq as this ecumenical partnership inspires us to continue opposition to war as a way to “win the war on terrorism.”
- Encouraging new peace and justice projects through Spread the Peace grants.
- Writing materials for Peace Sunday about Zacchaeus and salvation.
- Publishing Dove Tales and the e-zine PeaceSigns.
- Sustaining and praying for the work of Leo Hartshorn, Minister of Peace and Justice, and Susan Mark Landis, Peace Advocate, as they provide us with new resources and new avenues for peace building in our communities, in our nation, and on God's earth.

Through the end of August, members of PJSN have donated almost \$29,000. We hope to raise about \$100,000 this year. With this increased level of funding, we (and God) will create a new thing (or two).

Please donate to PJSN so that God's kingdom can come near.

—Melonie Buller, Treasurer, PJSN

Peace Advocacy

by Susan Mark Landis

Christian Peace Witness for Iraq, most recognized for the mass witness on March 16 at the Washington National Cathedral followed by a prayer walk to the White House, invites you and your congregation to pray, vigil and witness for peace. The goal is to have someone praying for peace in Iraq around the clock. Mennonites have volunteered to cover Wednesdays. Invite your congregation to a time of public witness and prayer, your youth group to “Walk-a-mile for peace,” or set your alarm clock and pray alone during the wee hours of the morning. Your creativity is invited! Information and resources are on the website, www.ChristianPeaceWitness.org.

Native American apology

bill: Mennonite Church USA delegates at San Jose 2007 passed a resolution asking both houses of Congress to pass the “Native American apology bill.” The congressional bills “acknowledge a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the United States Government regarding Indian tribes and offer an apology to all Native Peoples on behalf of the United States.” Find the full resolution and information on how to contact your Congress people at:

www.sanjose2007.org/delegates/pdf/sanjose/NativeAmericanApology.pdf.

More congregational resources MIGHT be ready by Thanksgiving.

Israel/Palestine: In response to the discernment of the Peace and Justice Partnership Council (PJPC) of Mennonite Church USA of the need for a common conversation among various parts of Mennonite Church USA on the issue of the Israeli occupation of



MCUSA delegation at displaced village.

Palestine, a delegation of ten persons traveled in Palestine/Israel, May 11-24, 2007. They visited many important centers in the region and engaged in dialogue with Christians, Jews and Muslims. During the visit they listened to our partners, talked with leaders of other agencies and heard from ordinary people as well as co-workers of Mennonite-related agencies. See their compelling “Open Letter to Congregations,” recommendations and resources: www.peace.mennolink.org/resources/palestineletter

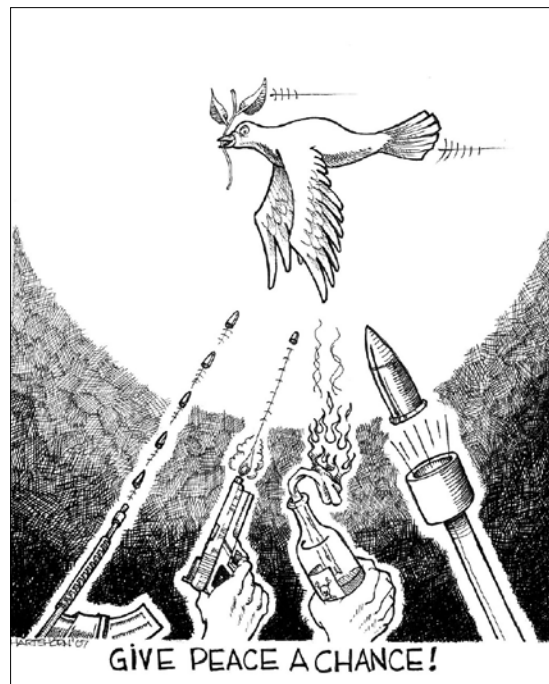
Identity: The delegate-proposed resolution reads, “We, the delegate body of Mennonite Church USA gathered for San Jose 2007, have been challenged to consider both the promise and peril of living faithfully as Christians in the USA. As a recently-created national body of Mennonites, we call upon the Executive Board to formulate a process that helps us explore our identity as Mennonites living in what many consider to be the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth. We ask for resources that help us live faithfully in Christ-like ways, sometimes at odds with our national culture, acknowledging that no culture is either completely redeemed or completely fallen.” As you think about how to respond, take time to read the sermon that inspired the resolution, on the San Jose 2007 website: www.sanjose2007.org/

Resources for Congregations

Artisans of Social Change

We are surrounded by a “cloud of witnesses,” says the author of Hebrews (12:1). Many of these witnesses are saints or holy persons who have made an art of peacemaking, justice building, and social transformation. In this series of posters Leo Hartshorn has created images of these “artisans of social change,” along with their memorable quotes, as a visual inspiration for those who continue to run the race for just peace and social transformation.

These artisans of social change can be downloaded at peace.mennolink.org/artisansposters.html.



The turkey plant tour

by Titus Peachey

This visit was a unique experience for the PJSN leadership team. Dressed in hair nets, white coats, hard hats, goggles, ear plugs and boots, we trudged through the West Liberty Foods turkey processing plant in West Liberty, Iowa. Turkeys in various stages of “disassembly” danced past our heads as we observed workers and machines cut, slice and de-bone the chilled turkey carcasses.

Fascinating as this was, we were more directly concerned about the way this large plant with 900 employees deals with immigration issues. In a meeting with the plant manager and the director of the Human Resources department, we learned that more than 70 percent of the employees come from Latino, Vietnamese and other racial/ethnic groups, which reflects the population of nearby towns. As required by law, the Human Resources department checks all employee documents during the application process to make sure that they have legal status.

The company’s policy requires that all communication with its workers be done in the language of any immigrant group that makes up 10 percent or more of the work force. At present, English, Spanish and Vietnamese are the required languages. The company has regular safety meetings and check-ins with employees at all levels to determine how the work environment might be improved.



Photo by Matt Friesen

PJSN Leadership Team at West Liberty Foods

We realize that a meeting with employees might help provide a more complete picture of the work and environment at West Liberty Foods. Our primary focus, however, was the immigration issue. We were struck by the pragmatic approach of this business in wanting a simple, streamlined process for new workers to become legalized. In this one short visit we certainly didn’t plumb the depths of all the issues related to immigration, migration, trade, human rights and economics. However, it left us wondering if God’s call to welcome the “stranger in our midst” might also make good economic sense.

**Editor’s note: The Peace and Justice Support Network Leadership Team meets face-to-face bi-annually in different regions in the United States. Our fall meeting in 2007 was at Crooked Creek Christian Camp, Washington, Iowa. Since we have immigration as a focal goal, we decided to dialogue with a local business on immigration and employees.*



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