

# Walking with Palestinian Christians in Holy Justice and Peace

Conference in Ginghamburg, Ohio

August 7 - 8, 2014

By Linda Hiebert Sekiguchi

In early August, Julie Harris of the Friends of Wadi Foquin Steering Committee, Rev. Michael Yoshii, and I, members of the Israel/Palestine Task Force of Northern California/Nevada Annual Conference, were privileged to participate in a unique conference for United Methodists. "Walking with Palestinian Christians For Holy Justice and Peace" was the result of a collaboration with the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) and the Ginghamburg Church, a Methodist "mega-church" that is one of the largest of our denomination in the US, pastored by Rev. Mike Slaughter. The church and its many volunteers were most welcoming and organized.

The focus of the conference was to increase awareness of the Palestinian plight, educate participants on the positions and actions that the United Methodist Church has already taken on the "situation" in Palestine/Israel, and present ways that the church can take the next step toward helping to bring peace to the Holy Land. How inspired I felt to hear and interact with Christians who had come directly from the West Bank and East Jerusalem. What lessons we are learning from them. Without exception, they expressed hope—hope for the future and hope because of the support of Christians around the world. They told of their faith and the legacy that has been passed on to them as descendants of the very first Christians in the Holy Land. They have been "holding down the fort," so to speak

In our opening devotional time, participants sat in grief as the names of Palestinian children, killed in recent weeks, were scrolled on the screen. We stood solemnly as we sang a moving arabic version of The Lord's Prayer.

Addressing the conference's theme, "Walking with Palestinian Christians in Holy Justice and Peace," Lynne Hybels of Willow Creek Church stressed that it is possible to be both pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian. Conflicting narratives require listening with discerning ears. While there are divergent theologies of the land, Biblical theology leaves room for Palestinians and Israelis to live

together in peace, she said. Violence and violations of human rights creates insecurity on both sides. She believes that violence doesn't reflect the hearts of people on either side. In her many trips to Israel/Palestine, Hybels has met with Jewish, Christian, and Muslim peacemakers who are working for transformation.

In light of the ongoing aggression against Gaza, it was apparent that conference attendees felt a palpable sense of urgency, along with the conviction that this is truly a "*Kairos* time" (Greek word meaning "God's time") in which we need to stand in solidarity as Christians and begin to take actions that will truly make a difference towards bringing peace and justice to all in this very troubled land.

Thomas Kemper, General Secretary of GBGM, invited participants to "join hands with fellow Christians [and discuss] how we can contribute to holy justice and peace among people of all faiths," while Bishop Ivan Abrahams, General Secretary of the World Methodist Council, reminded conference participants that "Tears and outrage alone cannot stop the violence." Bishop Abrahams, a native of South Africa, drew parallels between the Apartheid era in that country and the Israeli occupation of Palestine, which many believe is more devastating.

A number of Palestinian Christians were present to speak for themselves to the suffering that they endured just to live their every-day lives. "Living in Palestine is living under the shadow of the cross – all the time," said Grace al-Zoughbi, a young professor at Bethlehem Bible College. Wisam Salsaa one of the few Palestinian tour guides in the Holy Land urged his audience to "be the voice for those who cannot speak; be the ears for those who cannot hear. We are human; we deserve to live just like everyone else on this globe," he added.

Rev. Alex Awad, Dean of Students at Bethlehem Bible College and GBGM missionary, presented a "Biblical Call to Action," suggesting that religion and politics are inexorably intertwined. He cited numerous examples of "political scripture", beginning with Moses' "Let my people go," which remains applicable to the present day occupation.

And what are United Methodists doing? Presenters from the General Boards of Pensions, Church and Society (Susan Henry Crowe) and Global Missions all spoke to how their respective agencies are responding to General Conference resolutions that date back to 1964. Most recently, those resolutions have centered on Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), a movement that started in Palestine in 2005. You may recall that Northern

CA/NV conference passed a divestment resolution in 2009 engaging companies that support the military occupation of Palestinian territories. The issue of divestment received increased focus in the United Methodist Church when a resolution asking the Church to divest from companies profiting by the Occupation was brought to the floor of General Conference in 2012. The resolution was unfortunately defeated. However a resolution to boycott products made in settlements passed, and has been incorporated into the UMC *Book of Resolutions*.

As those following this issue are aware, the Presbyterian Church passed a divestment resolution at its Conference earlier this summer, and eyes are now on the United Methodist Church, the largest Protestant denomination in the US, wondering if we will follow suit when we meet in Portland in 2016. With one voice, the Palestinian Christians speaking to the conference, urged us to take this action. "The Occupation is profitable for Israel," Awad said.

Another action that conference participants were asked to take was to "come and witness." The Methodist Church has had a missionary presence in the Holy Land for many years. There are no Methodist churches in that part of the world (a conscious decision made so as not to further dilute the already diminishing Christian population.) Missionaries work with the local Christian communities, as well as with Muslims and Jews who are working for peace in the region. Janet Lahr Lewis, United Methodist missionary for many years completed her tenure in the West Bank this year. Kristen Brown is now on site and is hopeful that United Methodist groups will coordinate their travels with her as they plan visits to the Holy Land. "Come and witness; see and help," said Awad. Many conference participants have been privileged to travel to the region and have experienced the extravagant hospitality of the Palestinian people. For me, I felt most gratified to be participating with like-minded Christians who had witnessed for themselves the dire circumstances of life under occupation.

Break-out groups gave additional insight into more specific topics. Julie Harris and Rev. Michael Yoshii led their groups to learn more about how to Save Wadi Foquin: a Palestinian Village Under Siege The Wadi Foquin partnership was started in Cal-Nevada Conference and is now an Advance Project supported by GBGM and is its first international community development site.

Other topics included: Christian Zionism and Its Impact on Palestinian Christians, Women as Peacemakers, Promoting Equal Rights Through Nonviolent Action, Global Methodist Initiatives Seeking Just Peace in the Holy Land...

Above all, conference participants were asked to encourage all their colleagues to pray for the situation in the Middle East and for all who live and work in this troubled region. Praying is something everyone can do.

A delicious Palestinian meal prepared by a group from the local Dayton mosque was enjoyed by all.

Following the conference, the United Methodist Kairos Response (UMKR) met to worship and organize United Methodist response to "Walking with Palestinian Christians." Rev. John Wagner, chair, Rev. Michael Yoshii, and other members of the UMKR steering committee led our various discussions. As in previous meetings, our emphasis continues to be on the Palestinian Christian call for non-violent action that will impact the circumstances of all Palestinians living in the Holy Land. We will continue to emphasize: educating United Methodists, encouraging inclusive tourism, and continuing the boycott and divestment campaigns.

More information about UMKR may be found at: [www.kairosresponse.org](http://www.kairosresponse.org).