

Promised Land or Land of Promise?



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PREFACE

In reporting the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, the focus in the American media has tended to be, since 2009, on three periods of intense military conflict between the Government of Israel and Hamas, the Palestinian faction in control of Gaza. In an effort to put an end to rocket fire into Israeli towns and villages by Hamas militants, Israel has launched three major military strikes deep into Gaza. In 2009, 2012 and the summer of 2014, the number of deaths and injuries, especially among non-combatants and children, along with destruction of property and infrastructure, have taken a highly disproportionate toll on the 1.8 million people of Gaza. While ceasefires and periods of relative calm have followed the 2009 and 2012 engagements, the seeds were sown for unending conflict. As before, a lasting peace agreement is in serious doubt.

Over the past five years, media reports on the West Bank, where 2.5 million Palestinians reside, have generally been confined to brief flares of violence between the Israeli Defense Force and stone-throwing protesters. Under Fatah, the governing party in the West Bank, there have been no major military actions to report. Yet a single death of an Israeli or Palestinian can kindle a powder keg. The recent unprovoked killing of three young Israelis and the revenge killing of a Palestinian youth have been well covered by the press.

No one can dispute the right of Israel to protect its citizens, or the right of the State of Israel to exist. For the average American, the situation seems abhorrent and insoluble, certainly beyond our control. Some have concluded that there *is* no peaceful solution—that more than 2000 years of conflict has been ordained to continue. Others are confused, or at the least conflicted in their sympathies. Beyond the headlines, only a small percentage of the American public has much understanding of the root causes of the violence.

For many years, the balance of mass media reporting has strongly favored Israel. Little attention has been given to the effects of the military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza since 1967 on the lives of ordinary Palestinian people. There can be no doubt that the vast majority of both Israeli and Palestinian people want what we all want, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—and to live at peace with our neighbors. Yet, 47 years of military occupation has denied the Palestinian people many of the basic human and civil rights we all take for granted—freedom of movement and assembly, political consent, equal economic opportunity, and most recently, freedom of worship. And it has denied the Israeli people that which we all seek--freedom from fear and the promise of a secure future.

With a few exceptions, virtually no media attention has been given to the efforts of peace-making of the Christian Church and Palestinian and Israeli non-governmental agencies that

quietly work behind the scenes to seek common ground and bring the two sides together. Only a small number of Americans have been able to see for themselves the consequences of the occupation from both sides of the chasm.

In this report, I have attempted to shed light on some of the effects of the occupation on Palestinian life and the peace-making efforts of unsung Palestinian Christians in their struggle for justice and peace. I have also relied upon many other witnesses for context and confirming observations and opinion. As an Episcopalian, I am most familiar with the work of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and will focus on their ministries, but I believe that Episcopalians are of one resolve with the many other Palestinian Christian denominations in the ceaseless effort to keep alive their steadfast hope for “liberty and justice for all.”

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Promised Land or Land of Promise?

In December, 2013, thirteen Episcopalians from the Diocese of Olympia returned from a two-week sojourn to “Come and See” the Holy Land. In addition to traditional pilgrimage sites in Israel and Palestine, the group, sponsored by the Bishop’s Committee for Israel/Palestine, visited numerous parishes, schools and healthcare institutions overseen by the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, a companion of the Diocese of Olympia since 1996. Following are personal observations and an attempt to make sense of some of the contradictions and conflicts which separate the children of Abraham and stand in the way of a lasting peace.

All was calm in Bethlehem’s Manger Square as hundreds of Palestinian Christian and Muslim families gathered together around a 30-foot lighted Christmas tree to sing carols and enjoy the beginning of the Advent season. Throngs would come again and again over the next four weeks to share the spirit of Christmas as they prepared to celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace.



But most of those awaiting the coming of Christ at the Church of the Nativity will not be able travel to Jerusalem’s Church of the Holy Sepulcher at Easter to celebrate Christ’s resurrection. Bethlehem is located in the Palestinian territory of the West Bank, and Jerusalem is off-limits to most West Bank Christians unless a special permit can be obtained. In fact, many of the Christian holy places, such as Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee (the locations of churches that commemorate the Annunciation, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes) fall inside the boundaries of the State of Israel, and most West Bank Palestinians are not allowed to enter or travel freely inside Israel.

The Christian population of Israel and Palestine now stands at less than 2 percent, but those who remain cling to the belief that one day justice and peace will come to the Holy Land. Their steadfast faith is their hope. Tourism, once the mainstay of the towns and cities with high concentrations of Christians, has been greatly reduced, but for the indigenous Christians, these ancient Holy places offer testimony to deep and continuous roots in the land, along with reassurance that peace will come in God’s time.

Who and where are the Christians of the Holy Land?

On a return flight from a recent visit to the Holy Land, I listened to a fellow passenger as she offered an enthusiastic account of her pilgrimage. Finally, I asked if she had met some of the Christians who live there. “Christians?” she asked in disbelief, “No, we didn’t see any Christians... we went to the places you read about in the Bible.” While her Israeli tour of the Holy Land had taken her to Jerusalem, Nazareth and Bethlehem, she was barely aware of a living Christian presence.

Where *is* the “Holy Land”? We now tend to think of the Holy Land as the strip of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea that became the State of Israel in 1948, after the United Nations partitioned historic Palestine into Israel and the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza. Historically, however, the “Holy Land” referred to a much larger part of the modern Middle East and included regions now found in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Egypt, all appearing in the Bible, but with different names and borders. Over the centuries since Abraham, there have been multiple geographic configurations—Assyria, Babylon, Samaria, Judea, Phoenicia, Edom, Moab, to name a few.

Christians, Jews and Muslims of the Middle East have a common ethnic heritage and are the modern descendants of Christians, Jews and other earlier inhabitants of ancient Palestine, which was strategically located at the crossroads between Western Asia, the Arabian peninsula and the Eastern Mediterranean. From Old Testament times, this desirable fertile crescent with its valuable trade routes was conquered again and again by Egyptians, Canaanites, Israelites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Ottoman Turks.

At the time of the Muslim conquest in the 7th century, many Jews and Christians converted to Islam, so the modern inhabitants of Israel and Palestine live in a melting pot of many origins. Today, there is an ongoing settlement of Jewish people from many ethnic and language backgrounds in Palestine and the State of Israel, where immigration from Europe, the old Soviet Union, Ethiopia and the United States has helped to create a very diverse ethnic mix. Despite successive wars and diasporas, roughly half the world’s Palestinian population continues to reside in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza.

How many Christians still live in the Middle East? Current estimates place the number of Christians living between the Nile and the Tigris and Euphrates rivers at about 14,000,000 (approximately 10 million are Egyptian Coptic Christians). An estimated 170,000 (representing all Christian denominations) reside in Israel and the Palestinian territories. Episcopalians in the Diocese of Jerusalem (which includes Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Israel and the occupied Palestinian West Bank and Gaza) now number only about 6,000 and are declining, as are all other Christian denominations. These include Greek, Armenian, Syrian and Ethiopian Orthodox,

Latin and Greek Catholic, Lutheran, and other Protestant groups. Between 50 and 60 thousand Christians had been forced to leave Palestine by 1948.

Palestinian Christians have deep roots in the Holy Land. There have been Christians living in historic Palestine since the time of Jesus; it is a sacred place for them. Resident Christians will tell you that they are often asked *when* they converted to Christianity. Somewhat bemused by the question, they say, “My ancestors have been here since Pentecost—they never left.” Some Palestinian Christians can trace their genealogy to the 1st Century. Susan Barhoum is both the daughter and the wife of Palestinian Episcopal priests, and she has written records of her own Christian family back to the 4th C. (Both Susan and her husband Samuel, Archdeacon of the Diocese of Jerusalem, along with her mother and daughter, have been visitors in the Diocese of Olympia.)

Israel? Palestine? Israeli? Palestinian? Arab? Christian? Commingling and confusion of terms abound. Do “Israeli”, “Jewish”, “Arab” and “Palestinian” refer to ethnicity, culture, religion, nationality or geopolitics? Can a Palestinian or an Arab be an Israeli? Can someone who is Jewish be Palestinian? Can Christians be both Palestinian and Israeli?

In current and common usage, “Jewish” refers to adherents of Judaism or born of a Jewish mother but more recently is taking on the guise of ethnicity, or race. “Israel” is the name of an ancient people living in Biblical lands or ancient Palestine and defines a community of faith, but since 1948, it has come to refer to a nation state. “Israeli” refers to citizens living in the State of Israel and includes as citizens all Jewish settlers living in the Palestinian West Bank. About 20 percent of the resident citizens of the State of Israel are Christian or Muslim Palestinians.

Today, “Palestine” refers to the historic lands from which the United Nations partition plan of 1947 created the State of Israel and the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza. More recently, “Palestine” has become the name for the much longed-for independent State of Palestine. “Palestinian” means anyone who is *not* Jewish and refers to all non-Jewish residents of both Israel and Palestine. (Christian and Muslim Palestinians living in the West Bank or Gaza are not citizens of Israel.)

“Arab” refers to people whose ancestors hailed from the Arabian Peninsula, but because of their common Arabic culture and language, all Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim citizens and non-citizens, are now described as *Arab**. Not all Christians or Muslims trace their ethnic ancestry to Arab lands, but there are “Arab Jews” whose descent is from Eastern Arab countries such as Iraq or Yemen.

So how would one describe an Episcopalian living Israel or Palestine? An Episcopalian citizen of Israel could be called an *Arab Palestinian Christian Israeli*, while an Episcopalian living in the West Bank or Gaza would be an *Arab Christian Palestinian*.

While Christians now represent a very small percentage of the population, the impact of the Christian presence in Israel and Palestine has been incalculable. Since the first Anglican Bishop arrived in Jerusalem in 1841, the teaching and healing work of the Episcopal Church has continued in spite of periods of intense strife and turmoil in Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon.

**"Arab" appears on identity cards*

Episcopal Presence in Israel and Palestine

Care of the poor, the widow, the sick and the stranger has been a touchstone of Christianity since its earliest days. By commanding us to love our neighbors as ourselves, Jesus calls on us to be merciful to the “the other” when he answers the question *who is my neighbor?* Since it was established in 1845, the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem has sought to respond to His call. Today, the diocese oversees an extended network of healthcare ministries, which provide compassionate inpatient, outpatient and specialty care to *all* neighbors regardless of political or religious affiliation or ability to pay, and educational institutions, which range from preschool to high school and include special schools for the blind, deaf or disabled. All play a vital role in maintaining respect and peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims and helping to reconcile Arabs and Jews.

In late November, 2013, thirteen pilgrims from the Diocese of Olympia embarked on an eight day visitation to *Come and See* Israel and Palestine with Iyad Qumri, a Palestinian Christian guide with 20 years of experience and a license to lead tours in Israel. Born in Jerusalem and a graduate of St. George’s School for Boys, he has deep roots in the land, and as far as he knows, is the only Episcopalian guide.

For a traveler in Israel and Palestine, it is easy to cover the ground in a short period of time because distances between one point and another are small, and tourists can usually pass without long delays through most of the checkpoints between the two. Along with visits to traditional Biblical sites, our group met with Bishop Suheil Dawani and his wife Shafeeqa, seven Palestinian Episcopal clergy and some of their parishioners, and the leaders of ten schools and health care institutions of the Diocese of Jerusalem.

The Diocese of Jerusalem has 24 parishes and operates 26 schools, clinics, and specialty rehabilitation centers in four countries. It hires about 1,500 employees, both Christian and Muslim; the K-12 schools serve some 6,400 students; and there are 160 beds in its two hospitals. In addition to liturgical, pastoral and administrative duties in at least one church, nearly every parish priest is in charge of overseeing a healthcare or educational institution. There is no secretarial support or office staff in the parishes, which rely heavily on volunteers.

The steady decrease in the number of Palestinian Christians (from up to 20 percent before Israel became a state to less than 2 percent at present) poses many challenges for the churches. Discriminatory laws, restrictions, and diminished employment and economic opportunities make everyday life very difficult and drive Christian emigration, especially among the young. Christian educational and healthcare institutions play a reconciling role in a land fraught with fear and conflict. We were inspired (and humbled) by the steadfast faith and hope of those who stay to put their faith into action.

Is it true that the Christians are leaving because of Muslim persecution? Dr. Bernard Sabella of Bethlehem University points to the contrary, writing in *Palestinian Christians—Challenges and Hopes*:

This tradition of good Christian-Moslem relations has evolved through centuries of coexistence and exchange in the cities of Jerusalem, Nazareth, Bethlehem, Ramallah and in the rural areas such as Zababdeh, Birzeit and other towns and villages where Moslems and Christians live side by side and interact in their pursuit of daily pre-occupations and concerns.

Responses to repeated inquiries of both Christians and Muslims in churches, schools and the marketplace firmly point to Israel’s oppressive military occupation as the cause. We share a common culture and language, they tell us—we may have our disagreements, but we are one people.



This conviction was born out again and again during our visit as we observed Christian and Muslim school children working and playing together and Christian and Muslim teachers and caregivers working in unison. Seeing classrooms at the Arab Evangelical school complex in Ramallah, a Christian speech pathologist working with a deaf Muslim teacher at Princess Basma School for Disabled Children in Jerusalem, or a Muslim nurse caring for a Christian patient at St. Luke’s Hospital in Nablus bore witness to the long tradition of bridging religious divides.

Child with cochlear implant at Princess Basma Center for Disabled Children, Jerusalem

It would be hard to conclude that the preservation of the historic Arab Christian presence and the peacemaking role of faithful Palestinian Christians are not vital to the future stability of the region. Unless the root causes for the exodus of the “living stones” are addressed, and soon, it is quite possible (as a clergyman remarked) that within another generation or two, evidence of the Christian presence will be found only in museums and designated holy sites.

Neonatal wing at St. Luke’s Hospital, Nablus



Peacemaking role of Episcopal Healing and Teaching Ministries

Palestinian people are known for their hospitality. As a stranger on your first visit, you will be warmly welcomed to their churches and homes with a friendly *ahlan wa sahan*. This is promptly followed by an offer of Arabic coffee (strong and unsweetened but laced with cardamom) or sweet tea flavored with sage. But even more welcome than your first visit are your return visits, which reassure your hosts that they have not been forgotten and express solidarity with their *samoud*, or steadfast determination to remain in their homeland. Each time you witness the work of the institutions of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, it is easy to see why support of their educational and healthcare ministries is so important in the quest for peace in Israel/Palestine.

Since 1996, the Diocese of Olympia has been developing connections with the people and institutions of the Diocese of Jerusalem. A formal companion relationship was first proposed in 1994 by the bishops of the two dioceses. The partnership was initiated in 1996 and 1997 with exchanges between St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Seattle and Holy Family Episcopal Church in Raineih, Israel. In 2000, the Bishop's Committee for Israel/Palestine was established to further implement the partnership. Since then, there have been numerous visitations in both directions, several pilgrimages, volunteer activity, and companion relationships between three parishes.

The Diocese of Jerusalem presently oversees the operation of 19 schools and 7 healthcare facilities in Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, and offers employment to about 1500 Palestinians. It serves tens of thousands in two hospitals (Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza and St. Luke's Hospital, Nablus) and a large outpatient clinic in Zababdeh, West Bank. Schools provide special education and rehabilitation services for the blind, deaf, and developmental disabilities.

For members of the *Come and See* visitation, the Arab Evangelical School and the Episcopal Technological and Vocational Training Center (ETVTC) in the West Bank city of Ramallah (pop. 60,000) offered the first glimpse of the educational institutions. In this traditionally Christian city (where Christians still number about 25 percent of the population), both schools serve a large Muslim population. At St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, we met with Fr. Fadi Diab, priest-in-charge of two Episcopal parishes (St. Andrew's and Birzeit) and chaplain for 800 K-12 students. Fr. Fadi also oversees the new diabetic clinic at St. Andrew's. (Several will remember Fr. Fadi from his visit to the Diocese of Olympia and the 2009 *Women's Connection* visitation to his previous church in Amman, Jordan.)

As we shared a cup of tea together, we also heard from with Sr. Najah Rantisi, director of the



Evangelical Home, preschool and daycare facilities and Mr. Iyad Rafidi, headmaster of the K-12 Arab Evangelical School, which has an enrollment of about 535 students.

At the ETVTC, we observed students working on IT, Autocad drafting, electronic and computer projects as the director, Giovanni Anbar, led us on a tour of his middle and high school classrooms. This program serves 380 students who come twice a week with their teachers from private Christian schools, then return to their home schools to apply what they have learned. The center also offers a program that prepares 11th and 12th grade students for careers in the hospitality industry, a technological summer camp for children 6-13, and music and ballet classes for girls 6-16.

In Nablus (about 20 miles north of Ramallah; pop. 250,000), we met Fr. Ibrahim Nairouz, priest-in-charge of St. Philip's Episcopal Church and the newer Church of the Good Shepherd in the adjacent community of Rafidia. Nablus was the scene of deadly clashes with the Israeli military during the 2nd intifada; old wounds are slow to heal, and bridges need to be built. Fr. Ibrahim emphasizes understanding and reconciliation in his programs for youth and young families. For the past two years, he has met at monthly lunches for interfaith conversations with sheiks and imams from 50 - 60 area mosques and recently has received invitations to attend engagement parties for their daughters, he said.



Fr. Ibrahim oversees the new Christian National Kindergarten classroom located in the basement of St. Philip's Church. The kindergarten serves 50 mostly Muslim children in this very poor Old City area. His relish in their progress was apparent as the children showed off their recognition of the English alphabet. So that they can continue to build on their skills, he hopes to add a grade level each year. During our visit, the children were learning simple computer skills and looking forward to Santa Claus.

Before leaving Nablus, we stopped at St. Luke's Hospital, a 50 bed full-service institution with 800 in-patient admissions per month. There we saw compassionate care in spite of the ongoing need for equipment and facility upgrades. The attending nurse was pleased to point out their two new incubators, both in use. When we came to the room of an 8 year-old boy on life support after a near-drowning accident at the age of three, the nurse asked us to stop and pray for him there. St. Luke's is a charity hospital, where a fee of 40-50 USD per day is charged to those who can pay. The hospital is hoping to expand operations by developing a neurosurgery specialty to take referrals from other area hospitals. The Diocese of Jerusalem also operates Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza, where efforts to develop a cancer care specialty are underway.

About 20 miles north of Nablus, we stopped at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in the market town of Zababdeh (pop. 4,000). Zababdeh has a two-thirds majority Christian population and is surrounded by olive groves, productive farm land and small rural villages. We were greeted by Deacon Salim Dawani, who would soon be ordained as priest. At St. Matthew's, efforts to build a small library and computer lab for their growing number of youth and children are underway. Located in the lower level of the church is Penman Clinic, an outpatient clinic and pharmacy that serves 12 nearby villages where no other medical care is available. The clinic, staffed by one visiting doctor (who comes once a week), a pharmacist and two nurses, also has a room for dental care when a dentist is available. The women of the parish welcomed us with a savory hot lunch of *musakhan* (chicken, onions, and pita bread seasoned with sumac). Two women from St. Matthews visited and spoke to parishes in the Diocese of Olympia in 2010.

East Jerusalem (part of the West Bank) is home to the Princess Basma Center for Disabled Children. Betty Majaj, who recently retired from 30 years as the director, led our tour through this exemplary institution. Founded in 1965 and run by the Lutheran World Federation, the center has been overseen by the Diocese of Jerusalem since 2000. Basma Center has become a comprehensive national referral center for the evaluation, rehabilitation and education of children and adults with special needs, the support and education of their families, and advocacy for the disabled.

Basma Center was a pioneer in establishing an inclusive educational program in 1987 and now provides integrated programs for over 650 students in grades K-12 (about one-sixth of them with significant physical or neurological disabilities). In 1999, a program for severely hearing impaired children was added, followed in 2011 by a program for autistic children. This program provides a *Snoezelen* room (or controlled multisensory environment) for children with autism, developmental disabilities, or brain injury. A sheltered workshop for developmentally disabled adults is also on-site. To maximize care for the greatest number, Basma Center provides a 2-3 week residency to empower and train mothers in therapeutic techniques that can be applied at home, and

rehabilitation outreach teams are sent to other communities in the West Bank. In meeting special needs, this center is a striking example of the creativity and synergy that can come from scarcity, both in financial and physical resources. There was little question that Basma's innovative educational practices (mainstreaming, parent collaboration and training, and community outreach) compare favorably with more heavily subsidized institutions in the US.

Also in East Jerusalem, we stopped briefly at St. George's School for Boys. This school provides high quality education and an environment of respect and tolerance for differences – of about 800 boys from K-12, Muslim students greatly outnumber Christians. Most of the graduates of St. George's go on to universities in the West Bank or other countries and hope that they will be able to return if they leave. There is a waiting list for admission to this school.

Leaving the West Bank for Israel, we were escorted by Fr. Nael Abu Rahmoun on a tour of Christ Church, Nazareth, and Christ School, a K-12 educational institution that serves about 1,300 students. The majority of students at Christ School are Christian, although the school is open to all in this multi-faith city, which has the largest concentration of Arab Israeli citizens in Israel. Classes are taught in Arabic, Hebrew and English, and Christian Arabs have consistently obtained the highest pass-rates on state matriculation exams, a requirement for university entry. This year will see the 18th class to graduate.

Nearly all graduates will go on to college, but most will not be able to attend universities in Israel because there is a 12 percent quota for acceptance of Arab students. (All Palestinians are considered Arab, even though citizens of Israel.) Although Palestinians represent 20 percent of the population, they comprise only eight percent of the students attending Israeli universities. In addition to quotas, admission and housing preferences are given to students who have served in the Israeli Defense Force, and Palestinian young people do not serve in the Israeli military. Many graduates will go to Jordan or Hungary – a few to the United States. Since Palestinian students from Israel are allowed to enter the West Bank, some will go to one of the five Palestinian universities located there. (It is against Israeli law for Jewish people to enter the West Bank, so there is very little chance that Israeli and Palestinian students will get to know each other.)



While the government of Israel provides K-12 education for all citizens, schools are segregated; Jewish children attend Jewish schools, and Palestinian children go to Palestinian schools, which

are subsidized at a lower per capita level. According to a 2012 report there is a shortage of over 6,000 classrooms and 4,000 teachers in Palestinian communities, including East Jerusalem.

Palestinian children who live in Upper Nazareth (a modern, growing and predominantly Jewish development built on a hill overlooking “old Nazareth”) must go by bus or foot to the schools in Lower Nazareth (which has a 25 percent majority Arab population). In Upper Nazareth Palestinian children are admitted to pre-schools only.

Some Israeli Jews are sympathetic with the plight of the Palestinian people and oppose unjust government policies, but discrimination is common and exists in many forms in Israel. It compounds the loss of opportunities for employment and income potential, and many parents are confronted with a difficult choice because of the lack of economic incentive for their children to stay. Knowing that a son with a degree in mechanical engineering or accounting may need to work as an auto mechanic or retail clerk, or that a daughter who aspired to be a doctor will need to choose another healthcare career, leads some parents to encourage their children to emigrate. Other members of the family often follow them.

A recent increase in discriminatory practices in Israel and West Bank communities controlled by Israel does not bode well for peace. Segregation, not dissimilar to that seen in the Southern states of the United States prior to the civil rights movement, promotes mistrust, fear, intolerance, and dehumanization of “the other,” leading to a fortress mentality of *us* against *them*. Through their educational and health care institutions and the Department for Peace, Reconciliation and Interfaith Dialogue, the Diocese of Jerusalem strives to sustain and strengthen the Christian presence. Teaching respect and concern for *all* people, these institutions provide a voice of moderation and a bridge between their Jewish and Muslim neighbors.

Barriers for Visitors to Israel

Recently, our British friend Pat received an urgent call to visit a daughter who was very ill in a hospital in Nazareth, Israel. Although not of Arab descent, Pat married a Palestinian Anglican priest and lived for many years in Ramallah, in the West Bank. During her time there, restrictions on travel between the West Bank and Israel made it impossible for Pat and her daughter to be together unless they met outside the country. Ten years ago, Pat moved back to her home in England. Now she needed to reach Nazareth as quickly as possible. Recounting her experience, she says:

“I am not allowed to travel to Israel as a British tourist. Hence, I had to fly to Jordan, cross the border into Palestine, which involved a lot of hassle through different checkpoints, then travel to Ramallah. There I had to visit various Government offices to obtain a new Palestinian passport (mine had expired), a new Palestinian identity card, and go to an Israeli office to ask for a permit to enter Israel. I told the Israeli officer (who was American) my circumstances, explaining that as a British citizen, I should be able to fly direct to Tel-Aviv. ‘No,’ he said, ‘You are a Palestinian!’ ”

Our friend finally obtained a one-week permit with stipulations that she could visit her daughter during daylight hours but must return to Ramallah by 7:00 pm each night—in other words, she was not to sleep in Nazareth. Fortunately, she was not stopped at the Ramallah checkpoint or Allenby crossing on her return to England through Jordan. But, she wrote, “All this meant that I not only had to spend six extra days travelling (3 each way) but at twice the expense. I might add that I am elderly and with my British passport can travel anywhere in the world except Israel.”

Travel to or through Israel has also become next to impossible for US citizens of Palestinian descent or with close Palestinian connections. Those whom Israeli authorities suspect of being of Arab, Middle Eastern, or Muslim origin or those who have been involved in missionary work or activism may be denied entry into Israel or the West Bank. According to the website of the American Consulate in Jerusalem:

The Government of Israel does not currently permit U.S. citizens with Palestinian nationality (or even, in some cases, the claim to it) to enter Israel via Ben Gurion International Airport. Many travelers have been sent back to the U.S. upon arrival. Others have been allowed to enter Israel but told they cannot depart Israel via Ben Gurion without special permission, which is rarely granted. Some families have been separated as a result, and other travelers have forfeited expensive airline tickets.

These restrictions are especially grievous for Americans born in the Holy Land. Take, for example, a retired Seattle banker, a Palestinian Christian born in Jerusalem but who has been an American citizen for over 30 years. He chose not to join our November pilgrimage because he expected to be turned back at Ben Gurion airport. Another Seattle Palestinian ex-pat born in Jerusalem (also a banker) is unable to visit her sister who lives in the Old City of Jerusalem. Her sister will not come to the US for fear that she will not be allowed to return or that her home will be confiscated under the current law pertaining to “absentee property”.

Even though prior confirmation sometimes may be granted by the Israeli Embassy for entry via the Allenby border crossing from Jordan to areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority, *this stamp does not permit such travelers to enter Jerusalem or Israel... appeals are rarely approved.*

American members of Christian tours who are not of Palestinian descent are usually allowed to enter Israel through Ben Gurion Airport and can travel freely in Israel and the West Bank. Couples or individuals traveling alone, however, often face difficulties not worth risking the cost of a ticket. The Consular website states that the *U.S. government seeks equal treatment and freedom to travel for all U.S. citizens regardless of national origin or ethnicity, but that all persons applying for entry to Israel and the West Bank are subject to security and police record checks by the Government of Israel and may be denied entry or exit without explanation.*

While our tour group was preparing to leave Jerusalem, we met a retired doctor from Boston who was waiting for a permit to visit Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza, where she had been invited to consult on plans for their new cancer treatment center. Her husband (not a doctor) had received a 24 hour permit to enter Gaza and had just returned, but his CPAP machine (for sleep apnea) had been confiscated by Israeli guards at Erez crossing. The doctor had given up hope of receiving a permit and expected that the costly effort to pursue her charity mission would be in vain.

The founding of the State of Israel as a home for the Jewish people was the culmination of the hopes of displaced and persecuted Jews who sought to escape discrimination and tyranny and the horrors of the Holocaust. But in the 60 years since, Zionist nationalism and the growing influence of the religious right have been turning Israel from a place of safety and freedom for the Jews to a state that is no longer a place of safety or freedom for everyone. In the move toward segregation and separation, there have been until recently no distinctions between Christian and Muslim populations, whether these are Palestinian citizens of Israel or non-citizens living under military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza.*

It is clear that not everyone is welcome, and not everyone enjoys equal rights in a state purported to be democratic. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu underscored the point on March 4 when he said that if Palestinians really want peace with Israel, they will recognize

Israel as a Jewish state—“the right of the Jewish people to a state of their own.” Implicit in this statement is the idea that those who are not Jewish do not belong in a Jewish state. More recently, Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman has proposed the transfer of 1.5 million Arab-Israeli citizens to a new, but undefined, Palestinian state by shifting the borders. No longer citizens of Israel, Palestinians would be either moved to the West Bank or to a group of small northern towns and villages near the Green Line and placed under the control of the Palestinian Authority in exchange for annexation by Israel of large Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Under international law, the legality of such a proposal would be unthinkable but is being explored.

Inequalities between Israelis and Palestinians are not the result of land appropriation and physical barriers alone. A growing number of laws and pending laws are making life so difficult that it is ever more likely that Palestinians will be unable to stay in their homeland. In addition to legal measures that deprive Palestinians of civil rights and due process, there is an alarming up-swing in aggressive acts toward Christians and their institutions.

**Since 2012, Israel has been encouraging military service by Christian citizens and begun a voluntary enlistment drive. This has been offered as a way for young Palestinian Christians to prove their loyalty to Israel and qualify for certain benefits previously not available. This is a divisive issue. While some Christians support military service, the vast majority of Christians oppose any measure which pits Christians against fellow Palestinians and perceive this action as an extension of ongoing Israeli efforts to create a wedge between Christians and Muslims. About 2000 Christians reach conscription age each year. About 150 are reported to be serving in the IDF. (Jonathan Cook, May, 2014)*

Christians Face Threats to Religious Freedom

When we visited the Christian Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City during the first week in Advent, 2013, we were anticipating that preparations for Christmas would be in full swing. A tall tree was being uplifted near the New Gate entrance, but for the first time in my many visits, there was an almost ghostly quiet in the streets. The usual bustle of school children, nuns, and clergy in flowing cassocks was absent. Shopkeepers told us that there were few customers these days, and many shops have closed. The lines of worshippers at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher were relatively short; only a few knelt at the anointing stone, and the queue to enter the Edicule, marking the site of the Resurrection, was cordoned behind Israeli police barricades.

The Christian population of Jerusalem has fallen dramatically. In 1945 an estimated 32,000 Palestinian Christians lived in Jerusalem alone. Now there are only about 10,000, according to Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek, Canon Emeritus of St. George's Anglican Cathedral.

Palestinian East Jerusalem, where the historic Old City is situated, is being encircled by continuing settlement expansion. This ring of settlements, secured by the 25' concrete "Wall", separates the residents of East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank, including two other major Christian towns, Ramallah and Bethlehem. Of the nearly 600,000 Jewish settlers now living in the West Bank, 200,000 of them presently live in East Jerusalem. Some settlers live in rooftop enclaves located above the Old City homes and markets; one settlement overlooks the limestone steps leading to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.



Bethlehem also is nearly surrounded by settlements, the Wall and some 32 additional barriers— settler by-pass roads, checkpoints, roadblocks of razor wire and rubble, and security buffers that separate Palestinians from their farms, olive groves and grazing lands, as well as from each other. In the Bethlehem governate, 22 Israeli settlements have been built. The Christian population of Bethlehem stood at more than half in 1990 but is now down to about 18 percent of this city of 22,000.

In the last decade, concerns about restricted access to Christian holy sites have been growing. For resident Palestinians, visits to traditional Christian pilgrimage sites are controlled by an Israeli permit system that unduly restricts freedom of worship and is applied arbitrarily. Three years ago, a US State Department report highlighted the problems of Palestinian Christians in reaching key religious sites, a complaint reportedly echoed by an internal EU document, but the suppression of religious freedom in Israel and the occupied West Bank has received little media attention in the US.

In addition to problems with access, aggressive acts against worshippers attempting to reach the Church of the Holy Sepulcher have increased. Following the Holy Saturday* celebration in April, 2013, thirteen Patriarchs and heads of churches issued the following statement:

“We, the heads of Churches in Jerusalem watched with sorrowful hearts the horrific scenes of the brutal treatment of our clergy people and pilgrims in the Old City of Jerusalem...it is not acceptable that under the pretext of security and order that our clergy and people are indiscriminately and brutally beaten and prevented from entering their churches, monasteries and convents.”

On May 31, 2013, Reverend Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, USA (PCUSA) wrote to the Reverend Dr. Suzan Johnson Cook, United States Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, to express his concern about violations of the religious rights and the physical abuse of Orthodox and other Christian worshippers in Jerusalem. Not only do West Bank residents have limited access, but even Jerusalem Palestinians are finding it harder to gain entry even on their holiest days, he said. He especially deplored the beating by Israeli police of 85 year old cleric Fr. Arsanios, head of the Coptic Church in Ramallah.

In his letter to Suzan Cook, Rev. Parsons also expressed “growing concern over what appears to be the use of military permits to control/restrict the movement of visitors, including our fellow church-workers, many of whom have come to work with partners not only in Israel, but also in the West Bank. We have reported evidence that they have been required to sign affidavits that they will not enter Area A [set aside in the Oslo accords for administrative and security control of the Palestinian Authority] or any area under the Israeli occupation, or Area C [60 percent of the West Bank now under both Israeli administrative and military control] without a special military permit issued by the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories.”

**Holy Saturday is one of the most important religious celebrations for Palestinian Christians. The ceremony takes place on the eve of the Orthodox Easter, when a flame, or Holy Fire, from the tomb is kindled and passed by candles and torches to thousands of worshippers in and on the roof of the Holy Sepulcher. The flame is also used to light lamps that are transferred to other Christian communities. It is a time of great joy.*

He went on to say that some are not fully informed as to how to get the military permit that will allow entry into the West Bank and, as a result, are not able to do so. "These measures create a significant obstacle to members of the Christian community to "fulfill their missions of humanitarian aid, compassion and support for our Palestinian partners," he said.

Providing context for Parson's letter, ruling elder Robert Trawick, professor of philosophy and religious studies at St. Thomas Aquinas College in New York and a member of PCUSA's Middle East Peacemaking Issues Committee, observed that these actions "are part of a pattern of increasingly aggressive actions by Israeli security forces dating back a decade or more." He also pointed out that a US State Department International Religious Freedom report that found preferential treatment was given to Jews celebrating Passover and to international visitors making pilgrimages, while the authorities enacted restrictions that impeded the activities of local Christians celebrating Easter.

Commenting on the situation, Ms. Hind Khoury, former international ambassador for the Palestinian Authority and board member of Bethlehem Bible College, said "People are not coming to Jerusalem anymore from the West Bank. Who wants confrontations and tear gas?"

Fast forward to 2014—Holy Week and Easter. *The Guardian* reported that "Palestinian Christians from the West Bank and Gaza are required to seek permission to travel to the Old City, a lottery in which it is never clear how many permits a family will receive, if any. Last week, Christian leaders complained that – as in recent years – they had faced either obstruction from the Israeli authorities or that a lack of travel permits had prevented many from celebrating Easter in Jerusalem. "

Fouad Twal, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem and head of the Catholic Church in Israel, Cyprus, Jordan and the Palestinian territories, stated during a visit of Palestinian Christian leaders to Ireland that the number of Palestinians attending Palm Sunday processions this year was "very low." He blamed Israeli actions for the sparse turnout. "About 50,000 Catholic and Orthodox Christians live in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and many need a permit to travel to Jerusalem in the days before Easter... Maybe there were less permits, maybe they came late, or they gave one to the father but not to the mother," he said.

On Wednesday of Holy Week, Father Firas Aridah, priest of St Joseph's parish in Ramallah on the West Bank at the Latin patriarchate, said, "The Israeli authorities have said they are giving more permits this year to come from the West Bank, but the point is that Christians should be able to come here without permits. ... in Bethlehem most say they still haven't received their permits, and among those who have, it is only a couple of members of the family. It may be those who don't have them now will get them one or two months later, as happened last year."

It is not uncommon for clergy to be denied permits to travel to Jerusalem. Loss of access to religious sites (both Christian and Muslim) is the result of draconian policies of the Government of Israel that dispossess and discriminate against Palestinians, whether in the West Bank and Gaza or inside the State of Israel. These policies have been legalized by the accelerated enactment of laws that separate Palestinians from their lands and livelihoods and deny basic human rights. Since Benjamin Netanyahu became Israeli Prime Minister in 2009, the government has ramped up its program of land confiscation, home demolitions and settlement expansion, revocation of Palestinian residency permits, housing discrimination, and threats of closure for unpaid business taxes. Not untypical, an East Jerusalem bookseller we visited in December said he was taxed on the basis of the number of books he was *expected* to sell, not the number he actually sold. A shopkeeper in the Christian Quarter told us that he had so little business he could scarcely afford to stay open.

When the separation barriers and buffers for the settlements are completed, the Wall will be more than twice the length of the 1949 armistice “Green Line”, the official boundary separating Israel from the West Bank. According to B’Tselem, the Israeli information center for human rights in the Occupied Territory, 85 percent of the barrier will be inside the West Bank instead of conforming to the Green Line, isolating over 9 percent of the West Bank and East Jerusalem from other parts of the West Bank. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that about 150 Palestinian communities have part of their lands isolated by the barrier and must obtain “visitors” permits or receive prior permission to access these areas. Palestinians cannot enter or pass through Israel without special permission.

Of special concern is the isolation of some 11,000 Palestinians in 33 communities or households in the so-called “Seam Zone” area between the Wall and the Green Line between the State of Israel and the West Bank. The majority of these homeowners require “permanent resident” permits from Israel to continue living in their houses. Israeli settlers living in the Seam Zone are exempt from this regulation. Few health or educational services are available to Palestinians in this area, and they must pass through checkpoints to reach their agricultural lands, workplaces or essential services. By tradition, Palestinian land owners have gone out from the villages (where they had their homes) to work in their fields, fruit and olive groves, and grazing lands.

Since 1948, confiscation of Palestinian land has been authorized by Israel’s complex and much expanded Absentee Property Law. The law was originally designed to permit confiscation of property from Arab refugees who had fled or were evicted from their homes during and after the war leading up to the creation of the State of Israel. By the end of the Six Day War, when the West Bank was occupied by Israel, the law applied to anyone who did not reside or was not physically present in the annexed area on the relevant date (June 28, 1967) and therefore considered to be an *absentee* owner.

More recently, the law has been applied to Palestinians residents of East Jerusalem, who have been continually present, but by virtue of annexation or redrawn municipal boundaries are now considered absent from Jerusalem. As explained in the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* (June, 2013), “this is about Palestinians who live in the West Bank – and sometimes, meters from their property in Jerusalem, who had their homes confiscated because they’re now ‘absentees’ i.e. no longer Jerusalem residents. ...we’re talking about people who still live in the vicinity, under Israeli rule, but now find themselves on the wrong side of the line for maintaining their property...”

In the last decade, the combination of Wall and other separation barriers, restrictive laws and zoning regulations have conspired to make it very difficult for Palestinians to maintain ownership control of their property inside municipal Jerusalem, the Seam Zone or any other parcels of land chosen by Israel for settlement construction, closed military zones, industrial parks, green space or other purposes. Once declared *absent* there is little the landowner can do except appeal to the Israeli courts—a costly and often unsuccessful process taking years.

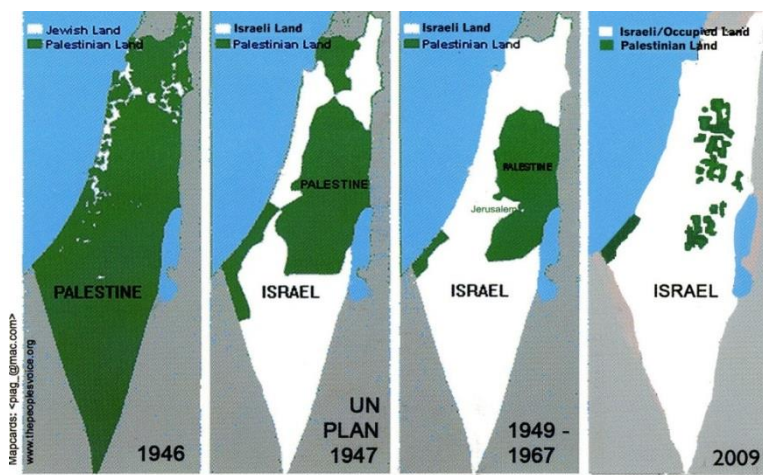


Har Homa settlement in Beit Sahour, between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, where construction of 144 new settler homes was approved in March, 2014.

Following Secretary of State John Kerry’s failed efforts to broker a compromise, Churches for Middle East Peace (April, 2014) reported that, according to Israeli watchdog group *Peace Now*, the negotiations were a boon to the settlement enterprise and that, “during the 9 months of Secretary Kerry’s efforts in the region, the Israeli Government promoted plans and tenders for at least 13,851 housing units in the West Bank and East Jerusalem - an average of 50 units per day and 1,540 units per month.” Most notable, the average yearly number of tenders was four times higher compared to previous years.

Christians Struggle to Stay on the Land

A visitor to the West Bank needs only a day or two to observe the damaging effects of the 48 years of Israeli military occupation on the Palestinian people. Nowhere have these been more dramatic than in the towns and rural communities near Bethlehem, home to a large Christian population. In the last ten years, especially since the Oslo accords attempted to set in motion a peaceful process to establish the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, an accelerating combination of laws and “facts on the ground” have disrupted the lives of thousands of Palestinian families and are the most probable cause of the Christian exodus, especially the emigration of the younger generation. Eight visits over a period of 20 years, show clearly visible and exponential effects of the occupation on both sides of the Wall.



According to the Israeli Committee Against Housing Demolitions, nearly 25,000 Palestinian properties in the West Bank have been seized or demolished since 1967. Once declared to be “state land” by the government of Israel, the burden of proof of ownership falls on the Palestinian owner. New Palestinian construction on land

claimed by Israel is deemed “illegal” and is subject to demolition orders, usually on the grounds that building permits have not been obtained. More than 90 percent of Palestinian building applications, even to remodel or repair existing structures, are rejected.

Bypass roads which connect the settlements with each other and with commercial centers are generally off-limits to Palestinians, who must use unimproved secondary roads to reach their jobs, agricultural lands, essential services and other Palestinian communities. Bethlehem is now nearly surrounded by three large settlement blocs that are connected through by-pass roads and served by an urban infrastructure of services. In the West Bank, more than 80 percent of the available water is allocated for settlement use, and Palestinians, who are not allowed to dig new wells, must buy their water from Israel. There are 203 Palestinian villages that are not connected to the power grid, but some have developed solar systems.

The following examples illustrate the current realities for the families of Daoud Nassar and Johnny Anastas, a Catholic monastery, and a convent, as they attempt to preserve their ownership rights and remain on their land in the occupied territory near Bethlehem.

Daoud and Jihan Nassar are Palestinian Christians whose 100 acre family farm near Bethlehem was purchased by his grandfather in 1916. Despite the fact that the family has documents verifying ownership and payment of taxes dating to the Ottomans, British and the early Israeli government (and family members have lived and worked on the land continuously since the land was purchased) the farm has been designated as “state land”. Since 1991, Daoud and his brother have filed appeals through the Israeli military, civil and Supreme Courts to prove ownership.

The hilltop farm, which produces olives, almonds, figs, grapes and other fruit, is located in fertile hill country 5 ½ miles southwest of Bethlehem in the West Bank. The Wall and a ring of five settlements that form a perimeter have nearly isolated the land from the rest of the West Bank. The Nassar farm is not connected to the power grid or to public water, and the main access road has been blocked by military authorities. The family has installed solar panels for power and cisterns for the collection of rain water, but because permits are required for any improvements, these structures have been under demolition orders. Since no new structures can be built above ground, a chapel has been built underground. Settlers from the nearby settlement have uprooted thousands of trees, damaged the cisterns and attempted to build roads across the farm. The surrounding area is under the total military control of Israel.

In 2001, hoping to find a peaceful and proactive means to keep his farm, Daoud, a business graduate of Bethlehem University, began to develop the *Tent of Nations*, as an educational and environmental project bringing people from around the world “to build bridges of



understanding, reconciliation, and peace.” Tents are provided for the visitors, and last year 5,000 international visitors, including many Israelis, joined together to plant trees, harvest olives, teach at the Women’s Education Center, lead activities in youth summer camps, and work together to pursue peace through non-violent activities. The credo of the Tent of Nations is “to bring people together who refuse to be enemies.”

On Monday, May 19, 2014, while Daoud Nassar was speaking in Seattle area churches (including Bellevue First Presbyterian and St. Mark’s Cathedral) the *Tent of Nations* came under an unannounced attack by the Israeli military. Bulldozers destroyed at least 1,500 mature apricot and apple trees on the farm. In addition, the growing terraces were reduced to rubble to prevent any future planting. Under Israeli law, no demolition is supposed to occur until the appeals court has delivered a verdict. The Nassars were still awaiting a decision from the

military courts regarding their latest appeals when the demolition took place. More about the *Tent of Nations* can be found on www.fotonna.org.

Johnny and Claire Anastas share a three story brick home just outside Bethlehem city with Claire's mother, their 4 children, and Johnny's brother and his family, all Palestinian Christians. The Anastas house, which used to front on the main street to Bethlehem, is now isolated on three sides by the separation Wall. Because of its proximity to Rachel's Tomb (off-limits to all but religious Jews) the Anastas home is under military surveillance and control, and there are no neighbors.

Before the construction of the wall began 12 years ago, the Anastas families had a thriving



business selling carved olive wood religious artifacts, with shops for home accessories and car repairs locate on the premises. These shops are now closed for lack of business; the souvenir shop has few customers, but Claire manages an online store and welcomes orders from overseas.

Photo from Friends of Bethlehem.org

Bob Simon featured the Anastas family in a segment on "Christians in the Holy Land" on *CBS 60 Minutes* in April, 2012 (<http://www.cbsnews.com/team/bob-simon/>). This program was seen by an estimated 70,000,000 Americans and is an exceptional example of news coverage of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict from the Palestinian point of view, but it unleashed a torrent of criticism from some Christian and Jewish groups that blasted the report as unfairly portraying Israel as an oppressor of Christians. CBS stood by their award-winning journalist. (Now 72, Simon won the Overseas Press Club's President's Award on April 24, 2014.)

Not only family-owned lands, but Christian institutions also are threatened. The Cremisan monastery, situated on a hill about 2,800 feet above sea level, was built in 1885 on ruins of a 7th century Byzantine monastery. In late spring, 2013, it was invaded by Israeli soldiers. The Salesian sisters of the adjacent convent have been in a seven-year legal battle to fight the annexation of their property by Israel. Now the government plans to extend the separation barrier through convent property. This will place the monastery (well known for its Cremisan winery, whose profits go to the school) and 75 percent of the convent's land on the Israeli side

of the Wall. The convent and primary school will stay on the Palestinian side, and 400 children will have to pass through a checkpoint to attend school. The barrier will also annex the farmland of 58 Palestinian families who would be given limited access via an “agricultural gate,” open for limited times of the day. The courts have consistently ruled against the nuns, but on January 29, the High Court ruled that construction in the Cremisan Valley should be postponed pending further study.

Along with legislation that legitimizes land confiscation, two recent laws have created new restrictions for Palestinians, whether they live in the West Bank or Israel. A law passed in 2011 prevents Arab citizens of Israel from acquiring permanent residence or citizenship status for spouses from the occupied territories. Because Palestinian citizens have often married someone from the occupied territories or from other Arabic speaking countries, this law impacts the family life of over 25,000 Arab families who are forced to live apart or who choose to live together “illegally.”

Since 1948, no new Palestinian communities have been established in the State of Israel. By law, Israeli communities can deny applications for homes if the “admission committee” feels that the applicant does not “fit” socially into the community. This law, approved by the Knesset in March 2011, makes it legal to bar Arab citizens from existing communities in the Galilee, home to many Christians. As a result, Palestinian communities are isolated; as they grow in density, they become economically less viable. Human rights organizations have opposed the law in the belief that it discriminates against Arabs by denying their civil rights.

Most recently, Christian churches and institutions have been confronted with property crimes and vandalism by extremist settlers and hardline Israeli Zionists. Robert Ross, writing for the Israel-Palestinian Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church, USA in September, 2013, reported that “Israeli settlers have been vandalizing Palestinian churches, monasteries, cemeteries and other Christian institutions in alarming numbers over the past three years.” These attacks, directed at secular and Muslim properties as well, are part of a “price-tag” movement started by settlers in 2011 to exact a price by intimidating Palestinians into leaving whenever there is a perceived setback to the expansion of the Jewish state. Acts of violence include fire-bombing of a Palestinian monastery near Jerusalem in August, 2013, setting fire to the door of the famous Latrun Monastery in 2012, and defacing a number of church or monastery walls with spray-painted graffiti mocking Jesus or calling for “Death to the Gentiles.” The Israeli government officially condemns these attacks but has prosecuted very few of the attackers. This year, for the first time, the US state Department included “price tag” attacks in their annual country reports on terrorism and noted that the attacks were largely unprosecuted.

In the days leading up to the visit of Pope Francis on May 23, 2013, Latin Patriarch Fouad Twal was quoted in the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* as he described the “wave of extremist terror that stirs up deep concern among any sane individual,” adding that the “ Israeli government should be concerned at the damage the attacks are doing to Israel’s image around the world. “

On May 24, the *Seattle Times* reported that in recent weeks, Jewish vandals had scrawled “King David for the Jews” and “Jesus is garbage’ on a Romanian Orthodox Church in Jerusalem. The Notre Dame Center, a large Catholic conference center located on the border between East and West Jerusalem, where the Pope stayed during his recent visit to Jerusalem, was defaced with graffiti reading “Death to Christians.” The Notre Dame Center was home to our group while we attended the International Sabeel Conference in November, 2013.

Since 2009, there has been an alarming growth of religious nationalism in Israel. More and more, peaceful resistance demonstrations by Palestinians, sometimes joined by Jewish protesters to express their solidarity, have been attacked by extremists or met with rubber bullets, tear gas and stun guns from military units. Recently, there is growing concern about the increasing proportion of settlers and others that represent the extreme political right in the Knesset, a coalition that kindles religious fanaticism and racism and fuels the drive for a state for only one religion, rather than two independent states or one truly democratic state.

With regard to attacks on Arabs, patriarch Twal also called into the question the move by the government to pass a law making Israel the nation-state of the Jewish people. ““A pressing question rises over how we educate our children, what do they learn about those who are different from them in terms of religion and ethnic and national identity?’ he asked.” (*Ha'aretz*, May 23, 2014)

No truly democratic state can be based on one ethnicity or religion alone. How could a Jewish state exist without discrimination or separation on grounds of ethnicity or religion? Would a Jewish state promote justice and peace? Should we, as Christians and Americans, give our moral and economic support for an exclusive “promised land” or a pluralistic “land of promise”?

Whose Promised Land?

This question has been simmering ever since my husband Fred and I had our first glimpse of the Holy Land, during a short course on the “Palestine of Jesus” at St. George’s College, Jerusalem in 1994. Every subsequent visit tells us that the answer lies in both “promise” and “land.” Supported by the witness of others, observations based on nearly seven months with “boots on the ground” over period of 20 years have led to the following thoughts and conclusions.

Over the millennia, laws have been devised to settle disputes and the abuse of power by kings and dictatorships. History has shown the human tendency to link theology and law to justify the use of force to gain power and control. In the 62 years since Israel was established as a state, laws have been created to strengthen the interests or ideologies of the majority, while violating the rights of the minority. Even when a covenantal relationship with God requires justice and compassion—that God’s children come together over these principles—human laws have often trumped religious precepts.

In November, 2013, our *Come and See* group attended the Ninth International Sabeel Conference, “The Bible and the Palestine Israel Conflict” to hear what the Bible tells us about our relationship with God and to examine how the Bible can be misused. Thirty international religious leaders and biblical scholars from many traditions (including Judaism) came to a clear consensus that *both* the Old and New Testament call for justice and liberation for *all* people of the land, regardless of ethnic, racial or religious convictions. God cares for each of his children. This means that all are “chosen,” and the Bible cannot rightfully be used to exclude or dispossess “the other” from the land. “Israel” was intended to be a community of faith, not a piece of real estate or nation state reserved for exclusive use based on ethnicity or religion. Christians are part of this community of faith.

The Apostle Paul did not see any future for either Jews or Gentiles apart from Christ. Paul’s words do not differentiate between tribes, families, cultures, or race. As he says in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also the Greek.” Christ teaches that “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:38)

Recognizing that a solution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict will depend to a large extent on reconciling competing narratives and theologies of the land, it is not easy to sweep away the chaff and find kernels of wheat in swirling crosscurrents of interconnecting and competing global interests.

Geopolitical interests and economics are strong factors in the occupation, and as more and more Palestinian land is being incorporated within the State of Israel, the growing right-wing Zionist movement is attempting to use the Bible to justify an exclusive claim to the land. “Separate” or “vanquish” seem to be the only options on the table. At the present time, only about 12 percent of historic Palestine remains under nominal Palestinian control.

Gideon Levy, an Israeli columnist who once served in the Israeli Defense Force, wrote in *Ha’aretz* on July 4, 2014, “Rejectionism is embedded in Israel’s most primal beliefs. There at the deepest level lies the concept that this land is destined for the Jews alone—that they are “God’s treasured people –and God chose us... This means that in this land, Jews are allowed to do what is forbidden to others.” Levy goes on to point out that the only encounter between the two people is between the occupiers (who have overwhelming force of arms) and the occupied (who in despair turn to violence). In the past two decades the two people have separated from each other. There is no way that young Israelis and Palestinians will meet each other on equal footing... The average young Israeli will never meet his Palestinian peer, other than during his army service. Nor will the average young Palestinian ever meet an Israeli his own age, other than the soldier who invades his home in the middle of the night or in the person of the settler who usurps his lands....”

It is in the interests of the Israeli people, themselves, to recognize the dangers inherent in the continued occupation of Palestine and present policies of their government. In a news release for Summer, 2014, the rabbinical council of Jewish Voice for Peace says, “As Jews, we abhor the abuse of human rights that are the standard practice of our fellow Jews in the Israeli Government and Israeli military. This is not the path of justice.” ...This Jewish season asks us to engage in a collective moral accounting, to reckon seriously with the ways our own failings have historically led to our communal downfall...”

While other nations weigh the merits of “one state” or “two states,” Israel’s juggernaut of control and confiscation of Palestinian land marches toward the inevitable conclusion that, unless there is a major shift in the trajectory, the land remaining in the West Bank will soon become part of a Jewish state, and any non-Jews who wish to continue to live in the Jewish state will be asked to pledge allegiance to it or leave.

Is this a recipe for peace? Is there really anything we can do about it? It is easy to dismiss this question with a shrug—the conflict over there has been going on for four thousand years. But don’t we, as Christians, have a moral responsibility to try? Christ’s call to us seems clear: Christians must stand up for justice and confront injustice, racism, violence and everything that dehumanizes or dispossesses “the other.”

So what can we do to support our partners in Christ?

Read the *Kairos Palestine* and the *Call to Action, a US Response to the Kairos Palestine Document* (kairosusa.org). On December 11, 2009, Palestinian Christians sent out a plea to the churches of the world and to people of good will everywhere. It was a cry from the heart, issued from the City of Bethlehem and titled *Kairos Palestine—A moment of truth: A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering*. The theological context of this declaration is God’s desire for life with love and dignity for all people.

Kairos Palestine was signed by leaders of 12 Christian denominations in the Holy Land and called the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land “a sin against God and humanity.” In that the occupation deprives Palestinians of dignity and basic human rights, it “distorts the image of God in the Israeli who has become the occupier, just as it distorts this image in the Palestinians living under occupation.” *Kairos Palestine* does not argue with Israel’s right to exist, but it calls for an end to Israeli occupation of Palestinian land.

Become informed. Seek sources of information that reflect Palestinian concerns as well as those of Israelis. Until very recently, the popular media in the United States has generally failed to connect details of the violent conflict with underlying root causes brought on by nearly 50 years of military occupation. Even the right of peaceful protest (e.g. over loss of wells, farmlands and harvests) is now being silenced by military action. Attend conferences that bring together respected authorities and listen to many voices.

Sign up for information or action alerts from the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem (jdiocese.org); American Friends of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem (afedj.org); Churches for Middle East Peace (cmep.org); Episcopal Peace Fellowship-Palestine Information Network (epfnational.org/palestine-israel-network); Friends of Sabeel - North America (fosna.org); Sabeel – Jerusalem (sabeel.org); Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding (emeu.net); American Task Force on Palestine (americantaskforce.org); Washington Report on Middle East Affairs (wrmea.org); Council for the National Interest (councilforthenationalinterest.org); Jewish Voice for Peace (jewishvoiceforpeace.org); Mondoweiss (mondoweiss.net); Foundation for Middle East Peace (fmep.org); Saint Mark’s Middle East Focus saintmarks.org/justiceministries); IFAMERICANSKNEW.org.

Form a parish study group using the Episcopal curricula *Steadfast Hope, the Palestinian Quest for Just Peace* or *Zionism Unsettled, a Congregational Study Guide*. Members of the Bishop’s Committee for Israel/Palestine would be happy to help you get started. Contact Randy Urmston, chair, at Rwu@hllaw.com to learn more.

Develop a companion relationship with one of the parishes, educational or healthcare ministries of the Diocese of Jerusalem. Members of the Episcopal Bishop’s Committee for

Israel/Palestine are available to help connect you. Contact with churches and friends help reassure our Palestinian companions that they have not been forgotten.

Speak up. Share what you know with others. Do not be afraid to talk about the issues. It is not “anti-Semitic” to take a stand against the actions of the Government of Israel when her policies and actions fly in the face of basic Judeo-Christian beliefs and ethical values. Engage in interfaith dialogue; seek common ground with Jewish people who desire a just peace.

Contact your representatives in Congress. Tell them to stop giving unconditional military and financial support to Israel and to address the underlying causes of the conflict. Let them know that you object to using your tax dollars in ways that support military solutions and create more human despair and an endless spiral of violence. Ask them to attach conditions that will encourage Israel to end the occupation.

Visit the Diocese of Jerusalem. Be sure your pilgrimage is conducted by a Christian tour leader. Take a course St. George’s College in Jerusalem, located on the grounds of the Anglican Cathedral (sgcjerusalem.org). The college provides year round pilgrimages that combine lectures, reflection, spirituality and travel and is located in East Jerusalem, only a few minutes walking distance from the Old City.

Participate in the BDS movement (Boycott, Divest, Sanction). Despite intense lobbying by the Israeli lobby, charging that the BDS movement is “anti-Israel” or “anti-Semitic,” several mainstream Christian churches are beginning to view economic pressure as the most effective non-violent means to resist injustice and to encourage serious peacemaking efforts on the part of the Government of Israel. In June, 2014, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA voted in favor of divesting [pension funds] from three US companies that profit from Israel’s occupation of the West Bank (Caterpillar, Hewlett Packard and Motorola.) In May, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church called for an explicit boycott of all Israeli companies “operating in the occupied Palestinian territories.” To learn more about BDS, go to bdsmovement.org.

Pray unceasingly. “For his is our peace; the one who made both groups into one and who destroyed the middle wall of partition, the hostility, when he nullified in his flesh the law of commandments in decrees. He did this to create in himself one new man, out of two, thus making peace and to reconcile them both into one body to God through the cross, by which the hostility has been killed.” (from Ephesians 2:14-16 as quoted on Bishop Greg Rickel’s blog during his visit to the Holy Land in January, 2014 - bishopricket.com)



Pray not for Arab or Jew,
for Palestinian or Israeli,
but pray rather
for ourselves,
that we might not
divide them in our
prayers but keep
them both together
in our hearts.

*Based on a prayer by
a Palestinian Christian*

Promised Land or Land of Promise? is available on-line at www.ecww.org/peace