

GENERAL SYNOD**PRIVATE MEMBER'S MOTION: PALESTINE AND ISRAEL****Background Paper from Dr John Dinnen**

‘That this Synod affirm its support for:

- (a) The vital work of the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), encouraging parishioners to volunteer for the programme and asking churches and synods to make use of the experience of returning participants;
- (b) Mission and other aid agencies working amongst Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and elsewhere in the region;
- (c) Israelis and Palestinians in all organisations working for justice and peace in the area, such as the Parents Circle – Families Forum; and
- (d) Palestinian Christians and organisations that work to ensure their continuing presence in the Holy Land.

Introduction

1. For more than sixty years the lives of Palestinians and Israelis have been blighted by fear and conflict. Israelis fear attack by suicide bombers and threats to the existence of a Jewish state. Meanwhile citizens of the West Bank and Gaza endure the devastating social and economic effects of occupation or blockade, with Jewish settlements (illegal under international law), hundreds of barriers to movement and the separation wall built largely on Palestinian land.
2. The Holy Land, Israel and Palestine, is the birthplace of all three Abrahamic faiths. In his Easter sermon Archbishop Rowan drew attention to the deep sense of despair felt by many at the lack of progress in finding a peaceful solution to the conflict in the Holy Land. He urged Christians to support those organisations that encourage cross-community reconciliation. Earlier in the year, Archbishop Rowan made a personal pilgrimage to Israel and Palestine. He spoke to the Christian Palestinians in Zababdeh, in the occupied West Bank, of how we longed and prayed for there to be a future in Palestine for all its citizens in justice and equality. Many Israelis who seek peace say that it is in the long term interest of both Israelis and Palestinians for there to be justice and full human rights for all in the Holy Land.
3. There is a temptation to shy away from the problems of the Holy Land as too difficult or too controversial. However, there are many local Israeli and Palestinian groups working tirelessly for peace. I feel that we must not pass by on the other side, but seek to support organisations both here and in the region that work for peace. It is not for us to prescribe a particular solution, whether two state or one state, but to help those who strive for a viable solution with peace and justice for both Palestinians and Israelis.

Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme

4. The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) is a World Council of Churches (WCC) initiative which was established in 2002 in response to a request made by the Heads of Churches in Jerusalem ‘for the protection of our people’. Palestinian, Israeli and international NGOs were also calling on the United Nations to send a human rights monitoring force at that time, which was denied. The WCC gathered churches all over the world and, inspired by their successful Ecumenical Monitoring Programme in South Africa, sent the first Ecumenical Accompaniers (EAs) to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories in 2002. Ecumenical Accompaniers are carefully vetted and trained before they go to Israel-Palestine. Since then nearly 1000 EAs have been sent from more than 20 nations. There have been many Anglican Ecumenical Accompaniers, including Bishop Richard Llewellyn, former Bishop of Lambeth, and at least 5 priests. The volunteers spend about 3 months in Israel and the West Bank including East Jerusalem. In Hebron they escort Palestinian girls to Cordoba School which lies between two Israeli settlements in the heart of this Palestinian town and the girls often suffer threats and attacks by extremist settlers on their way to and from school. Across the West Bank they monitor checkpoints at the separation barrier, where people queue for up to four hours every morning in order to get to work, school or hospital. The International Red Cross and UN humanitarian and human rights agencies rely on the statistical data and eyewitness accounts collected by the EAs at check points or house demolitions. Local people, say they feel safer, and that the world is watching, when they see EAs at work. Israeli peace activists, such as Rabbis for Human Rights call EAs to join them in providing a protective presence to Palestinian farmers trying to harvest their olives but experiencing attacks from settlers. EAs also worship with the members of the local community from a wide range of denominations.
5. On returning from the Holy Land the EAs speak to churches and other local groups and have been invited to speak to EU Middle East policy groups and the UN Human Rights Council.
6. EAPPI is already supported by many of the other major Christian Denominations and organisations (Scottish Episcopal Church, Church of Scotland, Methodists, URC, Quakers, Baptists, Christian Aid, USPG-Anglicans in World Mission, CMS, Pax Christi UK, CAFOD).

Mission and other Aid Agencies among Palestinians

7. **Christian Aid, USPG, and Amos Trust** all work with peace and development groups in the Holy Land. They support bodies such as agricultural cooperatives in the West Bank, education in Gaza and civil rights organisations in Israel. The Christian Aid publication *Breaking Down the Barriers: working for peace in the Holy Land* provides excellent background material, suggestions for bible study and for actions that a church or a Christian group can take.

Israelis and Palestinians working for Peace

8. There are many Israeli and Palestinian groups working for peace and reconciliation. I will mention two particular groups which have spoken at fringe meetings of the General Synod: Parents Circle-Families Forum, and the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions. **Parents Circle - Families Forum** (PCFF) is a joint Palestinian Israeli organization of over 600 families, all of whom have lost a close family member as a result of the prolonged conflict. Joint activities have shown that the reconciliation between individuals and nations is possible and it is this insight that they are trying to pass on to both sides of the conflict. The PC-FF involves bereaved families from Israel and Palestine. Listening to these families is a powerful stimulus for us to pray for and work for peace.
9. The **Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions** (ICAHD) is a human rights and peace organisation established in 1997 to help end Israel's Occupation over the Palestinians. ICAHD takes as its main focus the Israeli policy of demolishing Palestinian homes in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and within Israel proper. Since 1967 Israel has demolished more than 26,000 Palestinian structures in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem in violation of international law. ICAHD has rebuilt 185 Palestinian homes as a form of non-violent resistance to the Occupation and to demonstrate that there are partners for peace. ICAHD provides a programme of alternative critical study tours of the region. It has Economic and Social Consultative Status at the UN and regularly submits written and oral reports to the Human Rights Council.

Palestinian Christians

10. As a result of living under occupation policies, including severe restraints on developing their economy, physical barriers and lack of travel permits that restrict their freedom of movement between Jerusalem and various towns in the West Bank and Gaza, the number of Palestinian Christians has fallen drastically in recent years. Each year the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme witnesses thousands of Christians being denied their right to worship in Jerusalem by the Israeli authorities. There are several ways that we can support the remaining Christian community in the area. As well as supporting them in our prayers, we can go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land that include opportunities to meet with Palestinian Christians, to worship with them and to hear their stories. By supporting Palestinian tour companies and hotels we can help reverse the economic effects of the occupation. Also the possibility of twinning with a church or village in Palestine is worth considering. In our recent General Synod meetings we have been encouraged to support the charity **Friends of the Holy Land**.

Study, Prayer and Action in our dioceses

11. In Hereford Diocese, the Council for World Partnership and Development has set up a Holy Land Group which has arranged a series of open meetings to study issues to do with the life in the Holy Land today. We have heard from Jewish, Christian Palestinian and Muslim Palestinian speakers from organisations such as Checkpoint Watch, Amos Trust, Council

for Christians and Jews, Islamic Relief, Neve Shalom and Independent Jewish Voices. We have also shared meals with those of the three Abrahamic faiths. A surgeon from Hereford told us how she goes to East Jerusalem each year to teach the medical students and how she has struggled to be allowed to enter Gaza to reach the clinical medical students stranded there.

12. Church members can lobby or write to their MPs or MEPs, appealing for the UK and the EU to take a more active role in relation to the Middle East peace process, where international law is upheld and security provided enabling both people groups to enjoy a just and sustainable peace.

Conclusion

13. Please support the resolution so that we may stand alongside the Israelis and Palestinians who seek a just peace. Consider whether you can go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and meet individuals and organisations working for peace. Also engage in interfaith dialogue in your own community.

14. **List of suggested contacts/organisations**

Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel

Parents Circle-Families Forum

B'Tselem

Amos Trust

UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

Greenbelt

Christian Aid

CAFOD

Pax Christi UK

Iona Community

Jews for Justice for Palestinians (UK)

Women's Coalition for Peace (Israel)

Biblelands

Middle East Ecumenical network (UK)

Palestine- Israel Ecumenical Forum

Sabeel

Rabbis for Human Rights

Friends of the Holy Land

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