



THE METHODIST PEACE FELLOWSHIP
with the
FELLOWSHIP OF RECONCILIATION
<http://www.mpf.org.uk>

PEACE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

No. 34

January 2010

Peace in America

By Lissa Hilliard,

American United Methodist Individual Volunteers in Mission in the West Bank

The issue of peace in America is contentious on many levels. There is large disagreement as to what peace means and for whom. Often we think of peace as just harmony, tranquility or a time to relax and enjoy. Saddled with two unpopular wars Americans tend to think of peace as a future time when there will be no war and no strife. It really doesn't sound that difficult or complex - there are bumper stickers that say, "Can't we all just get along!" Yet as we see in the headlines every day, it is not quite so simple - peace eludes even the most consummate of diplomats. If we look around our world and our society we see not just the lack of world peace but the lack of peace on many levels. The most pressing peace issue for me personally, and I think for the world in general, is the lack of peace in the Holy Land. This conflict is at the heart of so much of the hatred and terrorism in the world today.

VOLUNTEERING IN PALESTINE

For the past six years my husband and I have served as United Methodist Individual Volunteers in Mission in the West Bank. For the most part I travel by myself as my husband's job only occasionally enables us to travel together. Over the years I have been in Palestine during times of great tension, during war, during incursions and during periods of relative calm. It has become a standing joke that when I am about to go back something momentous will happen. My friends and family here in the States all think I am incredibly brave for going to the West Bank. They have all heard how dangerous it is, yet I feel very safe while I am there. What they don't understand is where the danger is coming from. In 25 trips to Israel/Palestine I have never had any Palestinian be anything but most kind, helpful and hospitable to me. On the contrary, too often I have witnessed firsthand the horrors of the occupation, the injustice and the violence visited upon the Palestinian people by the Israeli government and military. I have been harassed by militant Israeli settlers, awakened in the middle of the night by Israeli bombs, shelled by Israeli tanks and almost executed by Israel Defense Forces soldiers at a checkpoint. I have a good understanding of what it is like to live under occupation but with one very important distinction - I can walk away - I can leave when I want. Every time I leave my friends in the West Bank I feel a whisper of guilt that I was lucky enough to be born in a country where I am free.

Just this past August I made my twenty fifth trip to Israel and the West Bank. My mission there is twofold: to try to help those remaining Christians stay in their homeland and to also educate Americans here at home as to the reality of the situation in the occupied West Bank. It is my hope that once people know the truth they will be inspired to work for peace with justice for all the people of the Holy Land. Often my work takes the form of speaking, writing, giving programs at churches and organizations and taking groups to Israel/Palestine. In the West Bank we work with numerous churches, clinics and schools. Education is very important to Palestinian parents so we started a scholarship program at our church to help Christian families with tuition cost. We also work with Christian artisans to help provide an outlet here in the US for the beautiful crafts they produce.

One mission in particular has been working with the Catholic priest in the small village of Taybeh. Taybeh is the very last totally Christian village left in the West Bank. When Father Raed was first appointed to Taybeh he was greatly alarmed by the number of families that had emigrated due to unemployment, travel restrictions, curfews, and the lack of opportunities. He came up with the idea of the peace lamps. The production of the lamps employs more than 20 people from the village and uses olive oil produced by village farmers. Most important is the idea of lighting the lamp and praying for peace. Father Raed's goal was to put a peace lamp in every church in the world to get the whole world to pray for peace in the Holy Land. He said that if the whole world prayed for peace God would have no choice but to answer our prayer! I loved the idea and so began working with Fr. Raed several years ago to promote the peace lamps here in North America. Only by working together can we hope to accomplish our goals.

THE OBAMA ERA

Times have changed here in the US. With the election of Barack Obama there is a new sense of hope. After eight years of cowboy diplomacy under the Bush administration, I am once more unashamed to say I am an American. For the first time in many years there is a real effort to get meaningful peace talks underway between Israel and Palestine. For far too long America has been an unquestioned supporter of Israeli policy. Our tax dollars have allowed a very brutal apartheid occupation to continue in the West Bank and Gaza – something few Americans truly realize. Like a breath of fresh air, President Obama's demand for an Israeli settlement freeze in the West Bank is a welcome beginning. Few outside the US realize how truly courageous this is. The all powerful Israeli lobby, American Israel Public Affairs Committee has for years put immense pressure on American politicians to conform to their right-wing demands. Often times these demands run counter to American national interest and in the long run are self-defeating for Israel. All honest dialogue concerning Israel/ Palestine and the Middle East in general has been effectively stifled. Most politicians having little knowledge of the true facts and fearing re-election threats conform to the AIPAC dictates. Yet out on the horizon new more moderate Jewish lobbies are taking shape.

THE PRESSURE GROUPS AND PEACE

J-Street¹ presents itself as “the political arm of the pro-Israel pro-peace movement.” While advancing policies that promote the national interest of the US they are still primarily concerned with the long-term interest and security of Israel. They realize that the survival and security of Israel depends on a negotiated and diplomatic end to the conflict with the Palestinians. J-Street supports the two-state solution based on the 1967 borders with minor exchanges to enable Israel to keep some of its settlement blocs. They endorse an end to the occupation of the West Bank, the Golan Heights and the strangulation of Gaza and the right for both peoples to live in peace and security. Because of their moderate position they are often accused of being self-hating Jews, although they cannot be labelled anti-Semitic. Their pleas for peace and diplomacy are for the most part balanced and fair and thus have great appeal. J-Street has opened a powerful new avenue for Jews and people of other faiths and backgrounds who do not support the extreme right-wing policies of the Israeli government.

Jewish Voice for Peace, Tikkun and Not in My Name are other smaller, more progressive Jewish advocacy groups. These organizations tend to focus more on Palestinian support, peace and justice and human rights issues. Through their efforts many are coming to realize that Israel is not the helpless victimized democracy that is often portrayed in the media.

On other fronts the boycott, divestment and sanctions idea - BDS - is gaining strength. If diplomacy will not work perhaps economic pressure will. Years ago this grassroots idea helped bring down the apartheid regime in South Africa. Advocates of BDS are hoping it can work to bring peace to the Holy Land. Here and there in the international news we are suddenly hearing of more countries and large corporations who have

¹ J Street, being an American lobby organisation aimed at Washington, derived its name from the alphabetically named street plan of Washington: the J Street is missing from the grid (the street naming jumps from I Street to K Street). Also, by association, J refers to Jewish as in multiple English abbreviations. Further, "K Street," a street in the heart of downtown Washington, D.C. with powerhouse lobbying firms located on it, has become synonymous for Washington's formidable lobbying establishment. The absence of a J Street in Washington is for historical/orthographic reasons. Thus, the choice of the name reflects the desire of J Street's founders and donors to bring a voice to Washington D.C. that, much like the missing "J Street" of the downtown grid, has been absent so far. It may also suggest being slightly different from the usual lobbying concerns. (*Wikipedia*)

decided to join the movement. Many churches, organizations and individuals here in the US are also considering BDS. While critics have called the movement anti-Semitic, I see it as a moral decision. Where we chose to invest and what we chose to buy have implications and repercussions. When we choose to buy items made in illegal settlements we are condoning the idea of land theft, home demolitions, racism and inequality. Until the Israeli government voluntarily chooses to change its policies toward the Palestinians, abide by international law and end its illegal occupation of Palestinian lands I believe BDS is a viable option. There are many web sites promoting BDS.² including www.bdsmovement.net and www.stophthewall.org.

AN INTER-FAITH APPROACH

On a more human level we are beginning to see more interfaith dialog between differing faiths. Just a few weeks ago we held the second annual peace conference at Lake Junaluska Methodist Assembly here in North Carolina. This conference was the result of a grassroots movement begun by the Junaluska community with wonderful support from the United Methodist Board of Church and Society. The focus this year was interfaith dialog among the three Abrahmic (or Abrahamic) faiths to explore what each faith contributes to the search for world peace. We wanted to explore not only our differences but to understand our commonalities. To represent Christianity we chose as keynote speaker my friend, Melkite Archbishop of the Galilee, Elias Chacour.

I first met Abuna Chacour at Lake Junaluska in the year 2000. At the time I was deeply impressed by his message of reconciliation and forgiveness. Since that first meeting I have met him again many times - mostly in his native Galilee. He is a man who has faced terrible discrimination, disappointment and prejudice within his own country. He has had every reason to be full of bitterness and resentment, yet he is a man of quiet confidence - a man truly unafraid to get his hands dirty in his quest for a just peace. To me he represents the best in Christian attributes. Among his many awards is the World Methodist Peace Award given in 1994.

To represent Islam we chose Dr. Sayyid Syeed. Dr. Syeed is the National Director for the Office of Interfaith and Community Alliances for the Islamic Society of North America. He is a powerful speaker and helped many to understand Islam not as a religion of extremist but as a religion of peace.

Rabbi Mordechai Leibling of the Shalom Center in New York was the Jewish representative. He was stepping in for Rabbi Arthur Waskow, who had been seriously injured in a car accident a few weeks before the conference. Rabbi Leibling serves on the boards of the Faith and Politics Institute and Rabbis for Human Rights – North America. A kind and scholarly man, Rabbi Leibling, was very outspoken in his criticism of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. He admitted having been sent numerous death threats because of his position on this issue.

Too often we see each of these faiths as one inclusive body yet within each faith there are large variations in interpretations and ideas. We tend to forget that each religion has radical elements that lean toward extremism. None are innocent and there is much work to be done to recognize the common threads of peace, love and compassion which underlie the three Abrahmic religions. Each of our speakers, along with workshops featuring practical ways to further the cause of peace and understanding, left the over 400 people attending the conference uplifted and hopeful.

HOPE

The cause of peace in America is experiencing a renewal. The climate of fear and isolation are slowly dissolving and change is in the air. People are talking – exchanging ideas. Will we learn from the past? Can we once again become a force for peace? As we say in the Middle East, “Inshallah” – God willing!

L. M. Hilliard November 2009.

Lissa is willing to supply more information if needed, lissacald@charter.net.

² E.g www.bdsmovement.net and www.stophthewall.org. Use Google to find others.

Prayer

Lord, Israel/Palestine is the land where Jesus walked, preached forgiveness, healed many people and gave his life to reconcile us to you and one another. We feel some of his pain as he wept over Jerusalem saying, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace-- but now it is hidden from your eyes"³. Give all those concerned and involved a clear vision of the way of peace for themselves and the country and all its peoples. **Amen**

Note from the Secretary, Rev. Maurice Wright, (01743 873 633) mhw@surfree.co.uk, 3, Cornwall Dr. Shrewsbury, SY3 0EP).

We are grateful to Lissa for providing this edition. We have wanted to know something about Peace among the American Methodists and Kenneth Greet's World Methodist Council contacts has made this possible.

The MPF membership leaflet and back copies of P21C can be found on our web site for those able to access it. It is www.mpf.org.uk.

The November Executive received suggestions for some restructuring of the MPF jobs and offices. As I retire after 14 years in July it is an opportunity to look at these which like Topsy have grown due to Alan being unable to continue with this newsletter. This naturally feel on to me. Also I have seen through computerisation. This is supposed to make the job easier but it also makes a lot more things possible! I have summarised the suggestions below.

- The secretary will deal with minutes, meetings and arrangements for the Conference etc.
- The editor of P21C will commission and receive scripts in consultation with the Executive, edit and prepare them for the printer and then ask FOR/database keeper to forward labels to the printer so that they can be sent out.
- The database keeper, if not FOR, will need to be familiar with databases, probably Access. This is a job which might be done from home without attendance at Executives. The database has to be kept up to date and when required the latest version or postal labels supplied. This is different from the membership of MPF which is kept by FOR because we are first of all members of FOR.

Anyone who feels they could do any of these jobs should contact me as soon as possible. We are pursuing any leads, suggestions or offers.

The Treasurer is grateful for the donations received in response to Alan's appeal. We operate on a very fine margin.

Maurice

Donation may be sent to John Young, Shalfleet, Dunston Heath, Stafford, ST18 9AN

I enclose £..... as a contribution towards the costs of "Peace in the 21st Century". [Cheques payable to the Methodist Peace Fellowship, please. If you would like a receipt, please tick here.....]

Name.....

Address.....

..... Email/Tel.

No need to use this form if you wish to retain P21C for future reference. However please include the details above.

³ Luke 19:41-2. The following verses send a shiver down the spine though perhaps referring to a time nearer that of Jesus