

# THE JOINT ADVOCACY INITIATIVE MAGAZINE

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Joint Advocacy Initiative  
The East Jerusalem YMCA  
YWCA of Palestine  
[www.jai-pal.org](http://www.jai-pal.org)

A photograph of a church tower with a red dome and a cross on top, situated behind a grey wall. A tall, modern building is visible in the background to the right. The scene is set against a clear blue sky.

# Christianity and Palestine

The Palestinian Christians are deeply rooted in Palestinian local. The vast majority are native Arab Palestinians and originate from the first Christians.

Palestinian Christians used to make up 6.5% of the Palestinian population, with a population of more than 400,000, according to Dr. Bernard Sabella, the Middle East Council of Churches' West Bank office director. The catastrophe (Nakba) and forced immigration imposed on the Palestinians, however, deeply effected the presence of Palestinian Christians.

The vast majority of Palestinian Christians today live outside their home country, due to occupation and immigration. No more than 50,000 live in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, 120,000 live inside the Green Line – what is known as Israel – and the rest are in the Diaspora.

Though Palestinian Christians belong to 15 different churches, more than half belong to the Greek Orthodox Church.

Palestinian Christians were and are part of the Arab identity, interwoven into the land's olives, its history and struggles, and integral to the diversity of Palestinian Arab culture. They face the same struggles as all Palestinians. Additionally they must resist Israeli attempts to empty Palestine of its Christians. Their presence acts as a bridge to the West, overcoming Arab stereotypes and communicating the Palestinian struggle. As a result, Israel targets this segment of Palestinian society, hoping to see it vanish and with it Western Christian sympathy..

According to Dr. Bernard Sabella, the Palestinian Christian presence is unique in the following ways:

1. They share an agricultural and rural life style in common with Muslim farmers, living as one community in villages and towns.

- 2. The common Palestinian struggle since the Turkish colonization has united Christians and Muslims against external colonizing forces.
- 3. Western presence in Palestine had a positive effect on the Christian population, primarily in education, medical services and quality of life.
- 4. They have a closeness and a special connection to the holy sites in Bethlehem, Jerusalem and Nazareth.

In this issue, "Christianity and Palestine," we focus on Christianity's relationship with Palestine, how this relationship is handled abroad and what the question of Palestine means for the Palestinian Christians living under Israeli occupation.

We at the Joint Advocacy Initiative (JAI) believe in the importance of this relationship and we have released several special reports and statements on this matter. This issue serves to highlight the local Christians' role in serving society and the Palestinian cause, empowering community relationships, and struggling against the attempts to create internal sedition and divisions.

Therefore, the JAI encourages the voluntary and functioning bodies of the Christian organizations to empower and unify their efforts for the service of the Palestinian Christians' role in facing Christian Zionism and fundamentalism. Also, we encourage these bodies to enhance relations between the Palestinian Christian organizations and western Christian organizations, and support their participation in international forums and events which take up issues of human rights and the Palestinian cause.

The Palestinian Christians' message is peace with justice, reconciliation, tolerance, and the preservation of Palestinian rights. They advocate for a religious identity within the national identity, towards a more secure, just and open world.

By Adnan Ateyah

## Joint Advocacy Initiative

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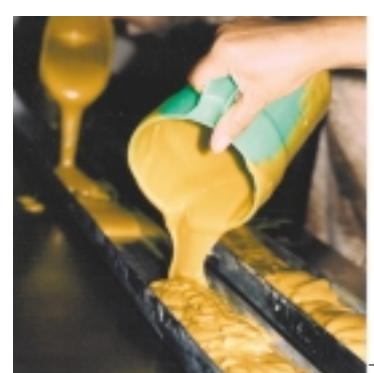
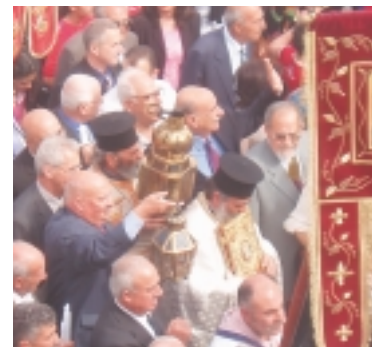
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# Greetings from the Joint Advocacy Initiative

## Who we are?

Our desk operates as a joint initiative of The East Jerusalem YMCA and YWCA of Palestine. We, the staff, consist of full time workers and volunteers from both organizations dedicated to advocating for the Palestinian

cause amongst YMCA/YWCA movements as well as our partners around the world.

One of the most effective ways in which we advocate is through our campaigns. Both the Olive Tree Campaign and the Good Earth Campaign support Palestinian farmers living under

the horrendous conditions of occupation, whilst allowing us to advocate for Palestinian freedom. Details on these campaigns, as well as information on how to get involved, are contained within this first edition of our magazine.

## What is our message and what are our goals?

At a time when the political leaders of the world speak of progress towards peace in Israel-Palestine, the day to day hardships of Palestinian life continue to grow more and more severe. It is this growing void between the international image of the “peace process” and the realities of occupation which this magazine hopes to address. It is our hope that, through this publication, we can allow you to develop a better understanding of some of the realities of Palestinian life under continued occupation and ghettoization. We wish to convey the suffering and widespread injustice faced by thousands of Palestinians on a daily basis. It is our hope that

you will join with us in pursuing peace with justice for the whole of Israel/Palestine by helping us demand our full civil and human rights and a complete end to all forms of occupation in Israel/Palestine.

We envisage a future in which all the people of the Holy Land will have freedom of movement and expression, freedom to live

without violence and persecution and the ability to determine their own religious identity as one people enriched by their differences.

We hope you enjoy our new publication. Feel free to contact us if you would like to join our advocacy efforts for justice for the Palestinians under occupation.



Youth planting olive trees as part of our Olive Tree Campaign.

# The Bethlehem Ghetto

Everyone in the western world knows the name 'Bethlehem'. Unfortunately, to many people the name means nothing more than that of an historic city where Jesus was born over two thousand years ago. Today I live in that historic city of Bethlehem, but before I was here the mention of the city's name would bring images of a nativity scene with Christmas lights and three wise men standing under a star. Today, however, Bethlehem is a city which is home to over 60,000 thousand Palestinians and is also the centre of Christianity in the Holy Land, with the largest population of Christians in the Middle East. The most dramatic stages of the city's history are by no means over, yet the sad thing about the city is that it remains almost mythical in the minds of most people.

To me modern Bethlehem is less mythical than it is surreal. The only way to really communicate why this is the case is to describe the process of leaving the city. When you approach the boundary of Bethlehem the Apartheid Wall is visible for several hundred meters, well before you reach the military checkpoint. You must pass through this checkpoint to reach Jerusalem and the confiscated Palestinian land on the other side. As you approach the 'barrier' (which is the name the Israelis have given to their 26-foot high Apartheid Wall) you notice a small Church building some fifteen meters before the Wall. It has a sniper watch tower which looms over it, guarding the gate which at the moment is a five-meter wide gap in the Wall. As you move through the gate you see graffiti spray painted on the Wall which

reads 'American money – Israeli occupation' in reference to the American governments funding of the Apartheid wall. 'If only Americans knew...' I often think to myself as I am aware that this huge Christian super power has funded the ghettoization of the birth of Christianity.

When you pass through the gate the Israeli military checkpoint comes into view some two hundred yards ahead. These army posts are advertised to the world as 'necessary to stop terrorists entering Israel', when in fact the checkpoint's purpose is to stop all the residents of Bethlehem entering Arab East Jerusalem – illegally annexed by Israel in 1967. Where once the road would have been busy with constant traffic to and from the city, now there is less than a thin



The Wall near Bethlehem's northern entrance



## Who Could Believe it ?

By Stephen Collings

trickle of people fortunate enough to have gained a permit to pass through. Many have families on the other side and a substantial portion of the population of Bethlehem used to work in Jerusalem – today however, no permit means no access. Who would have imagined that a military occupation would be able to cut Bethlehem from Jerusalem without the knowledge of the majority of the world’s Christian population, and with the consent of the world’s Christian superpower. As I said, life here is surreal.

Once you become a regular traveler of this journey you can see with

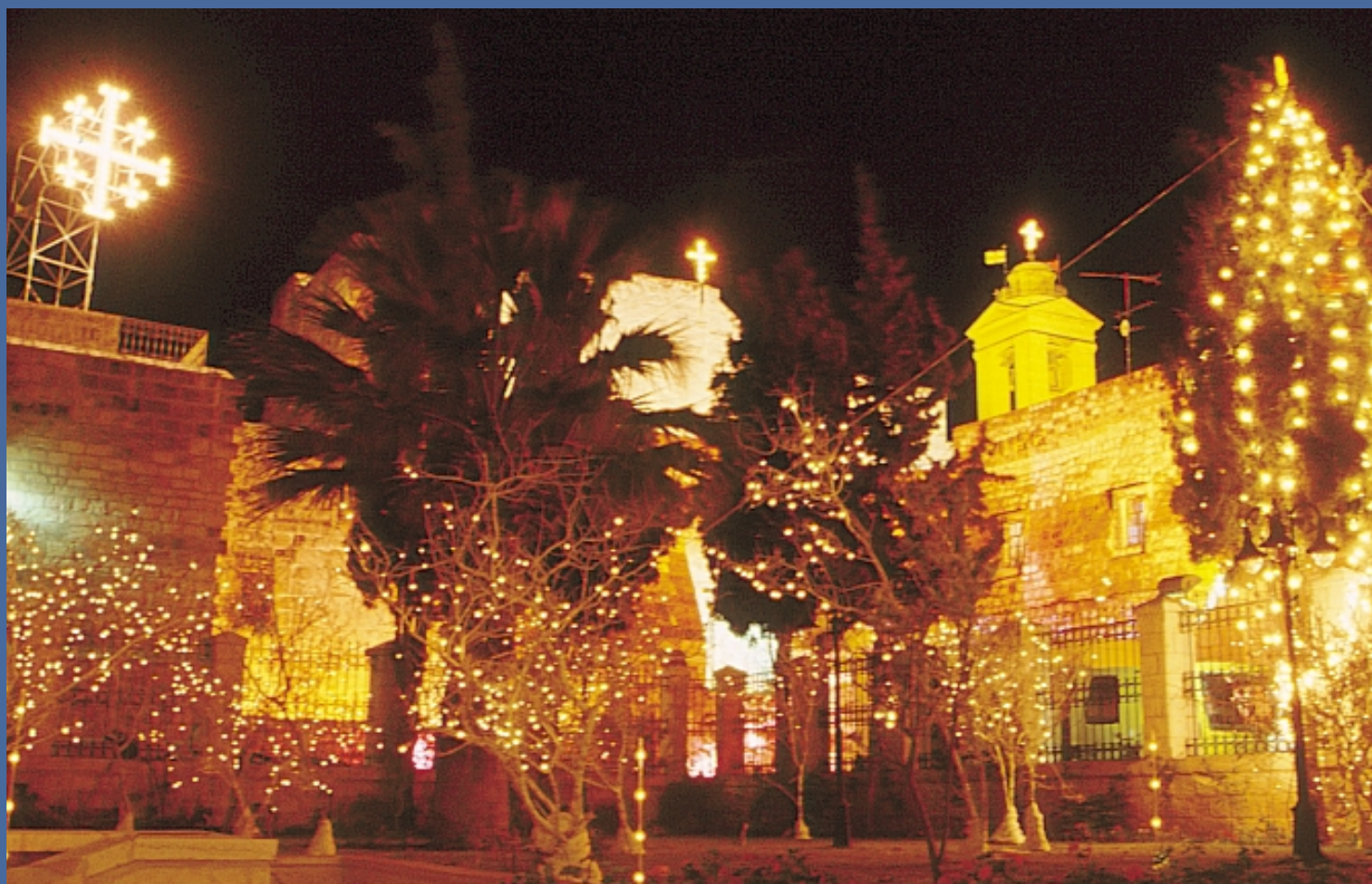
your own eyes that terrorism is not the issue here. If it were, then there would be a long line of people waiting to be checked and being allowed through once it became clear that they were not armed and merely going to work in Jerusalem or to pray at one of the holy sites. This is not the case, however. So why is it so difficult to move in and out of Bethlehem? There are several sinister reasons for this and security is well down the list.

The first obvious motive is the economic strangulation of the city. It is almost too obvious to state the impact that restricting the movement of the majority has on

any economy. Without the ability to move back and forth, haulage vehicles, business men, laborers, tourists and shoppers simply cannot contribute to the economy of either city. Over the last five years this has had a massive impact upon the economy of both cities, despite the ability for some to sneak through in certain places. When the ‘gate’ in the wall is complete, there will be no opportunity for anyone without an Israeli permit to even sneak through.

The effects of the strangulation strategy are perhaps most visibly seen in the destruction of the tourism sector. Bethlehem is

# Don't forget to add a 10 me your nativity scene this Ch



primarily a tourist city. Before the second Intifada over 30 million USD was invested in new hotels and tourist facilities in preparation for the millennium and the swath of pilgrims that were expected to appear from all over the world in the years following 2000. The tourists never really came. Instead, from 2001 onwards the city was subjected to a series of military curfews, invasions, and bombardments and many of Bethlehem's new hotels were occupied by Israeli military snipers because of their height and views over the city during the siege of the Church of the Nativity. Once the troops withdrew, the people

of prosperity for the city. This new day never came. Because of this, unemployment in the city is rife and the economy is on its knees. Many of the newly built restaurants and hotels never re-opened after the withdrawal of the siege troops. Since then, tourism figures have only managed to rise to 10% of the pre-2000 figures.

At first thought it is obvious why the Israelis would want to place the city under economic siege – after all, attacking an enemy's economy is a time honored strategy in warfare. However, the Intifada did not resemble an ordinary war fought by two relatively equal sides.

the entire population is Muslim. Only last week when I questioned a soldier about why he had turned an old man back at the barrier, he said, "Look at him," referring to his Arab head scarf, "would you trust him?"

The major vulnerability in all of this propaganda is the Christian population, many of whom have connections with the West and the 'common ground' of Christianity from which to campaign on behalf of all Palestinians.

The most distressing thing about all this is that it appears to be working. The construction of the Bethlehem

# eter high concrete wall to Christmas!

of Bethlehem were left with a series of luxury hotels in ruins, a massive amount of debt and no prospect of the tourists returning because of the view of the city as 'too dangerous', as presented to the world by the Israelis.

Even before the major investments were made, Bethlehem's economy was always based upon tourism. Today, in 2005, the streets of the city are lined with gift shops sporting faded 'Millennium 2000' stock which was ordered in preparation for the celebrations five years ago which were supposed to mark the beginning of a new age

The nature of the fighting was manifested in sporadic groups of lightly armed militants facing down tanks, F-16 fighter jets, Apache helicopters and heavy artillery. There were therefore no arms factories to destroy, no enemy supply lines to cut and none of the conventional reasons that an enemy has to employ an economic siege.

The strategy of destroying the tourism sector, restricting trade and movement, and the latest blow which is the construction of the wall, all share the saome motivation of encouraging an exodus amongst the Christian population. This is because Israeli anti-Palestinian propaganda revolves around the image of the 'brutal Muslim terrorist' which prays on the Islam-phobia of the West. This can be seen as highly effective, as American propaganda has also spent recent years disgracefully depicting all Muslims as terrorists. Palestinians are therefore all portrayed as murderous thugs, an image which is supported by pointing out that

ghetto (as many are now calling it since the construction of the Wall), and the various other assaults on the economy are leading to a rapid decline in the Christian population of Bethlehem and all of Palestine. With the Christians gone, and with anti-Muslim racism at an all time high in the West, the Israelis will have disarmed the Palestinians of one of their major sources of sympathy and therefore will have much great maneuverability in their 'Greater Jerusalem project' which is ethnically cleansing all the areas around Bethlehem.

The checkpoint and Wall gate are not the only components in the ghettoization of the city. Bethlehem is encroached upon by no less than seven Israeli colonies, several kilometers of Wall, an electric fence, two Israeli-only by-pass roads and a large military base. We at the Joint Advocacy Initiative ask all fellow Christians to take a stand and join with us in solidarity against the destruction of the world's holy city.



# Living Stones of Palestine!

By Ibrahim Hannounch

Being a minority means gathered in a certain area with a closed community living on its own; with its own schools, medical centers, companies, etc. If you go around in Palestine and Israel, you will realize that this is not the case for us! Palestinian Christians are a scattered population which is integrated into the society, and although we are very small in percentage, we do not consider ourselves a minority or aliens in our homeland.

Palestinian Christians are the brothers and sisters of the Muslim Palestinians, as well as Muslims everywhere across humanity, in our neighborhoods, in our homeland, in the struggle for freedom and justice and across all fields of the

secular social life. Obviously, this excludes believing in their faith, or inter-marrying with them, since this would require similar theological belief on fundamental faith issues.

Being 'joined together' as Christians and Muslims in Palestine generally implies that there are no different community divides, such as one liberal and one conservative community, based on religion. Whether a person is liberal or conservative mainly depends on such factors as area, mentality, family traditions, or a misinterpretation of one's own religion and faith.

However, Christians are generally more openly liberal, not just on the Palestinian level, but as a belief system and society. Rather than their marginalization in the society, this has resulted in them being leaders of big organizations, universities, and political parties. Also, it has allowed them to occupy high positions in educational institutions, the arts, and governmental positions.

Palestinian Christians generally have strong relations and networking

connections with churches and church-related organizations in the West. Therefore, targeting Christians directly causes more trouble for the Israelis than targeting Muslims. It means they must face the western countries and the Christian powers. Christians are treated as badly as Muslims at checkpoints, border crossings, in the prisons, in cases of land confiscation and in other areas. The Israelis, however, have to think hard before targeting an area with a major Christian population. Therefore, Christians are a big obstacle for Israel. Because of this, a huge amount of pressure is being put on the Christians to force them out of their homeland, in order to make things easier for the Israelis, who can then present their occupation as war against Islamic terror!

There are cases where a Christian is treated better at a checkpoint than a Muslim, but it is of no consequence, since Palestinians are only too highly aware that the Israelis are doing such to try to lead us into hating, and therefore fighting each other.

Palestinian Christians use their relations and networking contacts with churches, church-related organizations, and Christian groups



Priests awaiting the Holy Fire from Jerusalem in front of the Church of the Nativity. Each Easter the Holy Fire is brought from Jerusalem.



Scouts in Bethlehem march in a parade celebrating Easter with drums and bagpipes. In Palestine, Easter is the most celebrated holiday, with activities lasting all week.

across the world, because of their similar suffering and lack of rights as Muslims, to advocate for Palestine. They raise international awareness on the Palestinian issue, tell the story of their lives under occupation and Israeli aggression, call for the implementation of Palestinian rights, and try to persuade these partners and churches to get involved in international lobbying and actions on higher official levels.

in Palestine and Israel.

Palestinian Christians are involved in most forms of civil resistance and advocacy except for the violent ones. We understand why some Palestinians would commit a suicide bombing when they have deep feelings of revenge caused by utter desperation with no hope of a decent life or future, or when they take arms against the Israelis with the aim of making them loose their

their practice against Palestinians as a war against Islamic terror. This finds a great deal of support, especially with the current US government!

There is definitely some harassment and conflict which take place from time to time on a religious basis, due to sectarian racist mentalities. This falls into the Israeli trap of illusion which has been created since the recent religious cultural war lead by the US government and its allies, which sees one side as Christian and the other as fundamentalist Islamic. In reality, both of these extremisms mutually feed the other!

***The question is: Are Palestinian Christians treated differently than Muslims by the Israelis? The answer is yes, but not any better or worse for it!***

They are not only fighting against Israeli occupation, but Palestinian Christians must also fight against Zionists and 'Christians' who have adopted Zionism, known as Christian Zionists. Palestinian Christians deny that these groups can call themselves 'Christian', and raise awareness locally and internationally for the idea that they represent a distortion of Christianity. This is a common message and continuing campaign undertaken by the various churches

grip on this unjustly occupied land. We do not of course excuse these actions – but we do understand them.

Many Palestinian Christians, however, are leaving Palestine at a very rapid pace due to the pressures of Israeli aggression and the increasing difficulties and insecurity in Palestine. Others leave with the idea that this land is an Islamic land for Muslims only! And this definitely serves the Israeli goals in presenting

And there are calls by some Islamists for an Islamic state of Palestine. However, this is not an excuse for leaving your home land. God wants us in this land, and would have had us born in another place otherwise! And if the majority wants an Islamic state, then let it be so. Palestinian Christians live peacefully, even within the governmental and highly ranked positions, under different Islamic periods, empires, and kingdoms.

Palestinian Christians are the everlasting Living Stones of the Holy Land!

# International Voices



## Between the Bible and Human Rights: A debate among Norwegian Christians on the Palestinian\Israeli conflict

By Silje Hirsch

Silje Hirsch is currently in Bethlehem with the Ecumenical Accompanier Program in Palestine and Israel, a program of the World Council of Churches. She completed her Master's thesis in Sociology, titled, "Between the Bible and Human Rights: An analysis of the reporting on Israel-Palestine in two Norwegian Christian newspapers".

*The first thing you meet when you enter the town of Bethlehem is a nine meter high wall on both sides of the road. On one side the words "Welcome to the ghetto" are written. These words say a lot about the situation here these days. It is nearly completely encircled now by the Wall on two sides and a bypass-road on the other, which makes the lives of the people here more and more difficult. People talk about feeling suffocated. The words "Welcome to the ghetto" are not too strong to use about the town where Jesus was born.*

In my home country, Norway, the debate about how Christians are supposed to relate to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is still going strong – as it has since the early days of the Israeli state. In the first decades after the establishment of the State of Israel, the majority of Norwegians strongly supported it. Israel was reckoned to be the democratic ideal among many of the politicians. In the Christian communities many saw the establishment as proof that God intervenes in the world and that the people of Israel were still the chosen people of God. This attitude has remained strong in many of the Christian communities. Many Christians describe themselves as friends of Israel, theologically interpreting Israel as the chosen people. In these communities, strong solidarity with Jews is also very common.

In the 1970's and early 1980's, however, a different interpretation of the conflict emerged in smaller parts of the Christian communities of Norway. This interpretation was inspired by personal meetings with Palestinian

Christians and their perspective of the conflict. It was an eye-opener for many that their fellow Christian brothers and sisters belonged to the other part of the conflict, and that these Christians were facing a difficult situation because of the occupation after 1967. Another inspiration came from the Palestinian liberation theology, which emphasized a Christian responsibility to take care of the oppressed. Support for the Palestinian cause began to grow.

At this time, support for the Palestinian cause was only present in the leftist parts of the Christian communities and they represented a small minority of the Christians. In the late 1980's, however, the Norwegian YMCA and YWCA started focusing on the Palestinian cause in order to the advocate for their sister organizations in Palestine – a partnership which continues today. Their stand was an important step in spreading awareness of the situation.

The debate has been strong, and for decades the pro-Palestinian Christians have had difficulties being heard in brother Christian communities. Slowly, though, awareness of the Palestinian Christians and their struggle has grown among church leaders. It has also become a more accepted attitude among many people in the Church of Norway (the State church). In this same period of time, the general opinion in Norway on the conflict has changed a lot. It has become much more critical of the way the Israeli government is treating the Palestinians. Among the Christian Zionists, however, support for Israel has become even more aggressive. The Christian Zionist

newspaper, "Dagen", has hardly changed its interpretation of the conflict during the last 40 years. Every new incident is interpreted within the same old story where Israel is a weak victim surrounded by enemies on all sides. Any action that provides security for the state – security according to them – is a good action. Because they view Israel as the chosen people, with a divine right to the land, they also believe God interferes directly in the conflict on the Israeli side. Despite their loud voice and many angry letters to the editor, though, they no longer represent a large constituency.

Between these two opposites there are, among Christians, different kinds of "friends of Israel," who believe that Israel stands out among the peoples of the earth. Some could even be labeled "critical friends of Israel". These Christians want to be friends of Israel, but believe that friends are supposed to criticize each other when they are doing something unacceptable. A typical example of this attitude is the moderate Christian newspaper, "Vaart Land", which has gradually changed from a strong pro-Israeli point of view to a more critical attitude – at the same time claiming a friendship with Israel. They don't believe that God interferes directly in the conflict, but that his presence is a sign of hope for both parties.

The majority of the Christians in Norway, however, might not have any opinion on the conflict at all, or they prefer to stay neutral and balanced. However, the moderate church institutions have gradually changed their focus in favor of the

Palestinians. This goes for several leaders of the Church of Norway, the newspaper Vaart Land and Norwegian Church Aid, an ecumenical Christian aid organization and one of the five main aid NGOs in Norway. They have not become extremely radical or gone to the barricades, but their changes have been and will be important in order to legitimize critique of the Israeli government among mainstream Christians. These institutions may in many ways change this stance from being labeled as “politically radical,”

providing a more moderate image. The Christian Zionists, however, will probably not change much in the near future. Despite their small numbers, they affect the debate because many Christians are afraid of raising the issue in a Christian setting, for fear of being labeled anti-Semitic by their fellow Christians. This mix between theology and politics in the debate blurs the issue and overshadows the discussions about the real facts on the ground in the conflict.

Back to Bethlehem: The people in the town where our religion has its origin are nearly strangled. Christians are emigrating from the area in high numbers, because of the difficult life under occupation. This is an alarming situation that should call the Christian communities in Norway and all over the world to raise their voice – but many keep quiet.

But the attitudes are changing – at least in Norway – and maybe that is a sign of hope.



## The Church in Palestine

By Carolyn Schneider

**Carolyn is Assistant Professor of Theology at Texas Lutheran University. She is currently with the Ecumenical Accompanier Program in Palestine and Israel, a program of the World Council of Churches.**

When I teach my university course called “Introduction to Theology,” I always include a unit on the church. I have found that the images of “church” that come to the minds of my students most readily are images either of their own particular congregations or of ecclesiastical organizational structures. I try to paint another picture in their minds. In the Bible, Paul refers to the church as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4) and talks about that one body with its varied members “in” this or that place (1 Corinthians 1:2, 2 Corinthians 1:1, Galatians 1:2, etc.). So, we are all bound together wherever we live as the church, and furthermore, this body of Christ is God’s expression of love for the world, not only for Christians (John 3: 16). Therefore, pain, injustice, and also joyful well-being anywhere among any people are matters in which the church is engaged when it is being true to its identity.

Out of the painful situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories comes the voice of the church in that place. The voice of Palestinian Christians is at home in the Arabic language but struggles to communicate in the various languages of the rest of

the body of Christ so that its message can be understood and acted upon. I am currently spending three months in the West Bank as a participant in the World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel ([www.eappi.org](http://www.eappi.org)) and thus have had the opportunity to listen to the stories of several Palestinian Christians (whose names I have changed for the sake of privacy in what follows). Julia speaks of being driven out of her village as a refugee in 1948. Mariam speaks of losing her father to a missile in the course of their family’s flight in 1967. Yvonne speaks of family property taken over as a barracks by the Israeli army in 2002 and left as a wreck. Nisreen speaks of feeling fearful, vulnerable and insignificant when demolition bombs are dropping nearby. Fuad speaks of the loss of business as the mobility of people and goods is ground to a halt by the wall and the checkpoints. Daoud speaks of despair in the face of political games played with maps and geography at the expense of the lives of his people.

While these voices belong to Palestinian Christians, the stories they tell are common to all Palestinians, whether Christian or not. One striking characteristic of the church in Palestine is its commitment to a nonviolent response to these experiences. They

understand nonviolence as Jesus’ way of being in the world, and it is his body that they are.

As Bishop Munib Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land often insists, the conflict in Israel and Palestine is not a religious conflict between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. It is a political conflict which must be resolved politically. But people do live out of their faith in the middle of this conflict. For Christians that involves making an appeal to their siblings in Christ to come see what is happening, to speak truthfully to others about it, and to act as one can in one’s own country to press for a just peace.

Disclaimer: I work for Peaceful Ends through Peaceful Means (PEPM) as an Ecumenical Accompanier serving on the World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). The views contained herein are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of PEPM or the WCC. If you would like to publish the information contained herein or disseminate it further, please first contact the EAPPI Communications Officer and Managing Editor ([eappi-co@jrol.com](mailto:eappi-co@jrol.com)) for permission. Thank you.

# Investing in Peace: Chu

By Nathan Wright

The Wall, pictured here near Abu Dis, has been the target of much criticism from churches in the U.S.

Nathan Wright is a volunteer with the Joint Advocacy Initiative. He is a volunteer with Global Ministries, the overseas body for the United Church of Christ and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

In July, 2004, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) initiated a process of phased, selective divestment from companies supporting the Israeli occupation. In doing so, they triggered a flurry of activity from mainline Protestant churches scrambling to deal with an issue that not only forces tough theological decisions, but ensures considerable ecumenical, political and theological consequences.

Jewish organizations and supporters of Israel have fired back. Thirteen U.S. congresspersons sent a letter claiming that the resolution, “reflect[s] a fundamental misunderstanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” and that it undermines peace by “emboldening those who seek to de-legitimize the State of Israel.”<sup>1</sup> The church’s Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick responded to this letter strongly, suggesting that the resolution is a result of Congress’ failure “to be an ally or a balanced arbiter in the negotiations for peace in the region.”<sup>2</sup>

All of this activity has brought new energy into Christian dialogue on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The World Council of Churches officially encouraged its members to consider economic methods directed at the occupation in February of 2005, and the Anglican Church, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church

and United Church of Christ are all considering divestment.<sup>3</sup>

Church and Jewish groups were clearly caught unprepared, the Presbyterian decision arriving in the middle of several failed campus divestment campaigns. Though the debate sometimes focuses more on Christian-Jewish dialogue than on divestment and the reasoning behind it, Israel’s illegal occupation can no longer be ignored.

“The elephant is in the room. It has always been in the room,” Rev. Jay Rock, the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s interfaith relations coordinator says. “Now it has grown so big that we have to talk about it.”<sup>4</sup>

## The Elephant

While mainline Protestants do not have the same apocalyptic devotion to the State of Israel that drives Christian Zionists’ unwavering support for Israeli policy, their focus on social justice and human rights has made them natural allies with the Jewish community as well as advocates for Palestinian rights. For years their calls for Palestinian self-determination have been accompanied by statements affirming Israel’s right to exist, but so far this has not created significant discussion or change regarding the occupation. Church communities have been reluctant to pursue the issue.

The Presbyterian decision, however, and the debate it has created within Christian circles, indicates a frustration that has been growing for some time. Israel’s consistent refusal to accept international law and what can only be described as contempt for international attempts to intervene on behalf of human rights has led many to wonder what another statement from the church would achieve.

In his response to the congresspersons’ letter, Kirkpatrick says he is “terribly distressed in the failure of the United States Congress to seek a peaceful resolution to this conflict.” But what lies beneath Kirkpatrick’s distress is a greater exasperation at U.S. attempts to guard Israel from any criticism and block international efforts towards peace.

The U.S. has used its veto power in the U.N. Security Council at least 29 times to prevent the passing of resolutions supporting Palestinian self-determination and sanctions against Israel. Requests by the U.N. for independent monitors and peacekeeping forces have been consistently ignored or dismissed.<sup>5</sup> Israel is also the largest recipient of cumulative U.S. assistance since World War II, when Israel was created, with current assistance at roughly \$3 billion.<sup>6</sup> Though U.S. policy states

<sup>1</sup> *Church Responds to Congressional Criticism on Divestment* <<http://www.pcusa.org/washington/divestment.htm>>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> In the summer of 2005, the United Church of Christ approved a resolution to begin a selective divestment.

<sup>4</sup> *GAC authorizes pastoral letter on Assembly’s divestment action* <<http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/2004/04429.htm>>

<sup>5</sup> *Deliberate Deceptions: Facing the Facts About the U.S.-Israeli Relationship*, Fmr. Sen. Paul Findley

<sup>6</sup> *Israel: U.S. Foreign Assistance*, Congressional Research Service

# Churches and Divestment

Photo: Nathan Wright

that the funds are not allowed to be used in the occupied territories, the money is not tracked and there have been several cases in which Israel has been suspected of using the money for illegal activities.

Because of the U.S.'s economic and political protection, and because Israel insists that the U.S. maintains a primary role in any diplomatic initiatives for peace, the U.S. is responsible for its failure to bring pressure on Israel, to reduce settlement expansion, or to prevent Israel's military dominance from unilaterally preempting final resolutions.

In 1992, the powerful pro-Israel lobby AIPAC stated, "It is doubtful the U.N. has any useful role in solving the Arab-Israeli dispute,"<sup>7</sup> and to this day Israel continues to leverage its support from the U.S. against widespread international anger at Israel's occupation. By undermining international bodies such as the U.N. and the International Court of Justice, Israel and the U.S. have frustrated peace-minded people all over the world. It is this frustration that Kirkpatrick is referring to when he directs his response to the congresspersons.

The interest in divestment can also be attributed to developed relations in the region. By reaching out to Palestinian Christians, churches in the U.S. have been able to improve their understanding of life under

occupation. Many who were present at the Presbyterian's 2004 General Assembly have indicated that Mitri Raheb, a Palestinian Christian from Bethlehem, was particularly convincing in his support for the resolution.

Participation in programs such as EAPPI, a World Council of Churches initiative that places internationals with Israeli and Palestinian peacemakers, has also strengthened these ties. Their reports and news of their activism has helped lobby the World Council of Churches and, by extension, the many member churches in the U.S.

These local contacts have been crucial in informing American church bodies of the realities on the ground in the occupied territories and breaking fundamental misperceptions of the conflict. This increased awareness of the conflict, combined with the U.S.'s continued failure to address fundamental issues, has supported the move to divest and helped the Presbyterian Church (USA) resist pressure to abandon tangible efforts to end the occupation.

In all of the controversy that has been stirred up, it's worth remembering that the Presbyterian resolution was passed in a 431-62 vote. That's an 87% majority in favor of a phased, selective divestment from corporations profiting from the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. This majority, as well as the quick embrace of a debate on divestment from other

churches, is a clear indication that the "elephant in the room" has been sleeping on our couch for some time.

## The Effect

Now that divestment is being put on the table, advocates for an end to the occupation need to make clear to church communities what can be gained from divestment.

The phased, selective divestment that the Presbyterian Church (USA) has chosen holds several benefits. Though shareholder activism is unlikely to significantly impact a corporation's behavior, the selectivity of the divestment helps to highlight the worst practices of the occupation.

This process of identifying problem companies will focus attention on many of the policies of the occupation that are often ignored. A divestment from Caterpillar, for instance, can educate the public about home demolitions. Divestment from settlement products will help people understand the massive proliferation of settlements and the territorial ruptures they create in a contiguous West Bank. By developing strict divestment criteria, the church will require closer scrutiny of the occupation itself. In divesting, church communities stake a claim – a personal responsibility – in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that statements have so far failed to create. The nature of divestment as a tangible practice forces communities to discuss the conflict, internally and

<sup>7</sup> *Myths and Facts*, Bard and Himelfarb, 113, cited in *Deliberate Deceptions*, Fmr. Sen. Paul Findley



Photo: Henry Ramner, Sweden

International groups connected to the church, such as EAPPI pictured here, have helped educate the churches in the West about the Palestinian struggle.

externally, in the sort of direct terms that have been avoided in the past. It will take work, however, to keep the debate focused on equitable solutions and moral obligations, and away from polarizing rhetoric.

Many opponents are attacking any divestment move as a blanket rejection of Israel. This misrepresentation seeks to move the debate away from the Israeli occupation and onto the Christian-Jewish relationship. But proponents of divestment can prevent this distortion by emphasizing the selective targeting of divestment campaigns and consistently reinforcing the realities of occupation.

The effects of this dialogue centered on the conflict can be far-reaching. The response from the Presbyterian decision is evidence of this, and as more churches get behind divestment, a crucial reframing of the conflict can occur.

In the U.S., the dominating perspective of the conflict inverts the balance of power between Israelis and Palestinians. This misunderstanding is not so common throughout much of the world. For several reasons that are beyond the scope of this article, the

U.S. public views Israel as the greater victim of violence, despite the fact that Palestinians are killed in numbers three times greater than Israelis.

Israel's military control of the occupied territories is rarely explained or understood by the U.S. public. Except in cases of extreme abuse, such as the home demolitions in Rafah in 2004, the American public is not informed of the daily intrusions, abuses and humiliation that the occupation imposes on the Palestinian people. In addition, the effects of ongoing Israeli military operations, including assassinations, on the civilian population in the occupied territories is almost entirely ignored in the U.S.

As a result, Americans view Israel as a nation under siege instead of a nation undertaking the siege of another people. Those concerned that the rights of Palestinians are being abused are then criticized for a perceived emphasis on Israeli actions, even though Israel is, in fact, the primary perpetrator of violence.

When a church decides to divest, they legitimize these concerns for Palestinian human rights. This legitimization, combined with the process of education that must

accompany divestment, is the first step towards recognizing the reality of the Israeli occupation and transforming America's biased perspective of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

### The Critics

Pro-Israel groups are working to characterize a divestment decision as biased, uninformed and even anti-Semitic, but recent studies by *If Americans Knew* have revealed considerable pro-Israel bias in mainstream media coverage of the conflict. During the second Intifada, major television networks emphasized Israeli deaths at a rate of 300% to 400%.<sup>8</sup>

The U.S.'s well-documented support of Israel in the face of major international opposition makes it clear where the bias lies. Though this criticism is likely to be very effective for pro-Israel groups, there is so much available information to the contrary that there is little left to do but point people in the right direction. More reasonable critics of divestment, however, have brought up concerns that should be addressed.

Peace Now, a left-wing Israeli organization, has come out against divestment, and much of the press coverage has used this organization to insinuate that divestment is a radical move. What is not often said about Peace Now, however, is that they are a Zionist organization who seeks an end to the occupation primarily to retain the Jewish nature of Israel. They are unwilling to admit Israeli responsibility for the displacement of Palestinians in 1948 and 1967, unwilling to compromise on Jerusalem, and interested in retaining major settlement blocks in the West Bank. As a result, they refuse to work with Palestinians as equals and seek peace not on moral grounds, but for ethnic and political goals that are, at a minimum, segregationist and at odds with Christian ethics.

The head of Peace Now, Yariv

<sup>8</sup> *Off the Charts: Accuracy in Reporting of Israel/Palestine*, If Americans Knew is a research institute focusing on media coverage of Palestine-Israel <<http://ifamericansknew.org/media/net-report.html>>

Oppenheimer, says that the “immediate response” from Israelis to divestment is “anger and mistrust.”<sup>9</sup> He also claims that divestment “will not convince Israelis that the occupation is a bad thing.”

The churches’ interest in divestment, however, goes beyond the “immediate response.” It is not only about ending the occupation, but also about larger moral problems.

The Israeli occupation is responsible for considerable land confiscation, regular attacks on Palestinian civilians, the isolation of East Jerusalem and many other cities from the West Bank, the maintenance of checkpoints that regularly contribute to Israel’s growing list of human rights abuses, and the prevention of a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

A decision to divest is not only a long-term commitment to developing the proper conditions for peace, but it is also the result of a moral obligation to socially responsible investment of funds – an obligation that arises directly from the illegal occupation. In working towards a peace with justice in the region, “anger and mistrust” are regrettable but acceptable when they are part of the process of fulfilling this commitment and moral obligation.

Though many people are questioning how effective divestment can be, the director of the Anti-Defamation League, Abraham Foxman, believes that “there could be a domino effect that other churches might ultimately follow. It’s a serious threat that we take seriously.”<sup>10</sup> It is unclear, at this point, how far the recent activity surrounding divestment will spread, but it is clear that churches need to explore new ways of working towards peace, and divestment has proven successful in the past.

Other critics have tried to insinuate that a divestment from Israel, and not a corresponding divestment from other major human rights abusers in the region, is unfair. While these critics

consistently de-emphasize Israel’s own crimes, they are correct in asserting that other countries in the region also abuse human rights.

In making this argument, however, they lose sight of Israel’s relationship with the United States, preferring to selectively identify Israel as one more nation in the region; this despite the fact that most of their time is spent making the argument that Israel deserves special consideration among nations.

Israel is indeed the target of a special focus in the region, for many reasons. For the purposes of a discussion on divestment, however, the primary reason that the occupation must be singled out is because of its continued reliance on U.S. financial and political support. The U.S., and by extension its citizens and churches, has a particular responsibility for Israel’s actions, as it is not only a casual supporter, but the primary defender of the occupation.

Another concern has been raised over the timing of divestment. On the part of well-meaning Christians, this concern is primarily the result of a misguided sense of hope. It also serves Israeli interests by deflecting attention from the ongoing hardship of the occupation and postponing the debate while Israel finalizes its control of the West Bank. Christians are certainly called to a sense of hope in all that they do, but in this conflict hope has too often translated into an eagerness to see light around every corner.

There are many interesting things happening now, with the impending Israeli redeployment in Gaza, the election of Abbas and the shifting politics in the occupied territories. These actions should inspire hope, but they must be understood alongside parallel developments, such as the completion of the Wall, the expansion and consolidation of settlements surrounding Jerusalem, and the abandonment of the Road Map. These events make it clear that the conflict is not headed towards peace, but simply

a perpetuation of Israeli military ideology: security through violence, peace through domination.

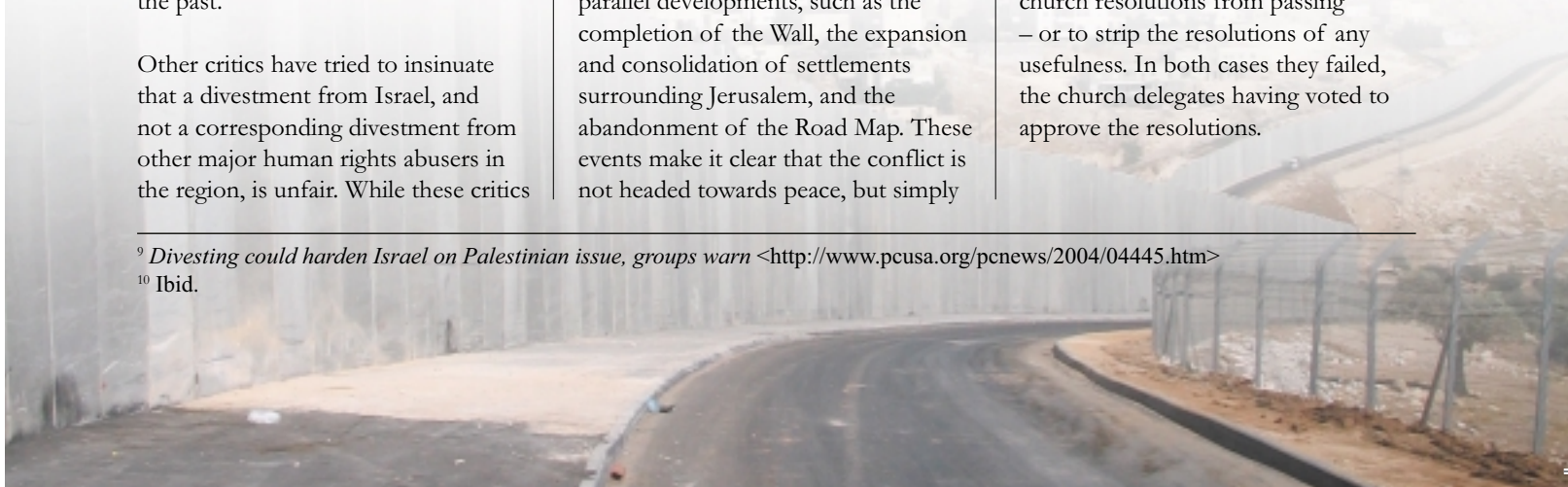
Instead of feeling cautious, churches should consider divestment to be an act that takes advantage of the moment, a positive contribution to the conflict that supports a Palestinian leadership struggling for reform, and that emphasizes a need to end the occupation before a peace with justice can be attained.

Though mainline Protestant churches in the U.S. have had a long history of advocating for Palestinian rights, it is clear that these efforts have failed to apply enough pressure on Israel. With the Wall winding its way through the West Bank, a unilateral solution is finalizing the abandonment of a Palestinian state, the imprisonment of Palestinians into tiny cantons; the abandonment of Palestinian refugees and of a Jerusalem for everyone, of reconciliation and regional integration. Christian churches concerned with social justice in the region must admit their failure and act now to find new means of working towards a lasting peace.

*Update, August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2005:* Since the writing of this article, the Anglicans and the United Church of Christ have both voted to take steps towards divestment targeted at the occupation. In addition, several church bodies have focused criticism on the Wall. Jewish groups in the U.S. stepped up their efforts to block these moves, showing up at both the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) church-wide meetings this summer. Through a combination of outside demonstrations and leafleting, direct lobbying, and involvement in the internal debates they sought to prevent church resolutions from passing – or to strip the resolutions of any usefulness. In both cases they failed, the church delegates having voted to approve the resolutions.

<sup>9</sup> *Divesting could harden Israel on Palestinian issue, groups warn* <<http://www.pcusa.org/pnews/2004/04445.htm>>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



# Palestinian Christians betw

By Rifat Odeh Kassis



Christian priest sits outside the entrance to the Church of the Nativity. The Palestinian Christian population is a disappearing presence in the Holy Land, in danger of becoming extinct.

Photo: Nathan Wright

## Introduction:

It is no longer possible to take for granted the Christian presence in the Holy Land. In fact, now more than ever before, the actual existence of indigenous Christians is at stake. The threat comes not from the Muslim community, as some would lead us to believe, but from the Israeli military occupation and double standards used by the West.

It is no secret that Palestinians live within a tribal culture. This reality implies that personal security and protection depend exclusively on the tribe in all sectors of society. Very frequently, even the most “democratic” political parties are based on this very concept. A cursory glance at the names of leaders of specific parties reveals that many members and leaders have the same family names. People sometimes join a particular party not because they are convinced by its ideology but because it fits into the system of tribal support and protection. The same is true of religious affiliation. A consequence of this reality is that one may become an easy target if the tribe or political party or religion to which he/she belongs is considered weak. It is indeed unfortunate that in certain cases, especially now as the Palestinian Authority lacks real authority and as many people are questioning the role

of law, the only protection available is that of the tribe or political party.

## The emigration of Palestinian Christians:

Many Palestinian Christian families have emigrated. Unfortunately there are no concrete and reliable figures available. Regardless of the reasons, this reality has weakened the Christian community as a whole and has made them extremely vulnerable. Very often, those who are strong and enjoy the support and protection of a powerful tribe or political party are unable to understand the vulnerability of those who lack this type of support or to recognize the consequences of their actions. Within Palestinian culture, people tend to side with those who are strong even if it brings harm to those who are weak. In this regard, Christians have two options, either they become themselves active in the political and social life to become more involved in changing this reality and building a democratic state, or they become isolated and marginalized and support those elements within society they consider strong.

## The Islamic Fundamentalism:

Another concern for Christians is the emergence of Islamic fundamentalist movements, although the concern has no correlation to the security of Christians. In general, the members of these movements are not even

aware of the existence of Palestinian Christians. They are as ignorant as many Western Christians in this regard! Most of the members of these movements are ordinary people who know nothing of bigotry or prejudice. Unfortunately, however, they are frequently led astray by the harmful teaching of a few dubious leaders or activists. It is important to mention that these teachings are often directed against democratic or liberal ideas in general, including Christian ideas and their ways of life, though not against Christians as such.

As Christians we must neither fear nor ignore fundamentalists. Rather, our energies must be directed to the creation of a new society where democratic rights are respected and harmful traditions are challenged. Muslim fundamentalism, as a religious revival, must be able to accommodate non-Muslims fully if it is to become a revolutionary revival as opposed to a reactionary one. This occurred once at the end of the 19th century and there are signs of the same thing happening within the Hizbollah Party in Lebanon. It is still too soon to make a judgment until, of course, these movements end up becoming primary ruling powers. In order to understand the fundamentalism of Islam we need to study and understand the

# Between Dreams and Reality

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fundamentalism of Jews represented by the extremists' settlers and many of their political and religious parties and the fundamentalism of Christians represented by the Christian Zionists, because I really believe that Muslim fundamentalism is a reaction and response to these movements. It is also founded on a sense of humiliation and helplessness.

The long and short of it is this: Arab Muslims have a big challenge because they must be able to look upon their Arab Christian neighbors as compatriots; and Christians must reciprocate a reflection of the principles and values of Christ and Mohammed.

### **The Christian Fundamentalism:**

There are many external factors that influence the relations between Christians and Muslims. Local Christians have little or nothing to do with these factors but they have created much damage. The actions of Christian fundamentalists in USA and Europe who use the name of Christ to justify their wars on the Arab World and on Islam itself are major factors that create cleavages between Christians and Muslims. Local church leaders have long been aware of the importance of enhancing relations with Muslim clergy and this is an important thing. Dialogue that takes place among leaders is obviously significant, but dialogue at the grassroots level of society is equally vital. Any dialogue that is initiated, however, must take place within an atmosphere of tolerance – a concept not often found these days in the world, including our society. The fear of difference, of the “other”, is rooted deeply in the Palestinian psyche. It is precisely this fact that must be challenged if fruitful dialogue and principles of tolerance are to be integrated into society. The spirit of tolerance in our land, under

this extreme political and cultural situation, is being eroded. Dialogue and normalizing programs between Christians and Muslims prove to be inadequate because these programs operate outside the context of the ordinary person and center on high-ranking officials who shake hands in front of cameras but never touch the reality of the people.

The War on Iraq and before that on Afghanistan, blind Western support for Israel, and factors emanating from such positions and policies combine to jeopardize the Christians' presence in the Middle East and threaten their very existence. On the other side, the recent position of churches everywhere in the world taking sides against the war on Iraq was a very good step to help the local Christians get their message through. One still hopes that the churches in the west will take more progressive positions in relation to the Palestinians and their cause for a just peace. But all these good steps are not going to suffice; these relations should be manifested in joint work and activities. We should encourage and motivate our youth to be together, we should open our schools, institutions, and clubs to accommodate both. Above all we should quickly abandon the double-face, two-discourse attitude that has no value except as a public relations exercise. In their essence, such attitudes are simply the exertion of isolationism and racism.

### **The Israeli military occupation:**

Muslims and Christians alike live under the same Israeli military occupation. They both suffer from the daily harassment, the killing, confiscation of lands, destruction of infrastructure and properties, and above all the demolishing of their hopes and aspirations. Since its creation in 1948, Israel has put severe pressure on the Palestinians designed to frustrate their dreams and prompt

them to quit their land. The influx of refugees at that time changed the demographic fabric in the country and in the neighboring countries as well. The Jews grew rapidly in numbers, while the Palestinians contracted and became a minority, whose rights are violated and abused. And as in any military occupation, the occupiers adopted the classical “divide and rule” policy to conquer and maintain their stranglehold on power. While Israel's role in dividing Muslims and Christians cannot be minimized, we must be careful not to place all the blame on the occupation. We need to open our eyes to important facts and happenings in our area starting from the Gulf War right through to the phenomenon of Bin Laden. The Israeli occupation of Palestine has proven to be one of the most significant contributing factors to problems in general for Christians, not least of all the problem of emigration. Christians have been subjected to harsh measures because they are often more capable of advocating in the West on behalf of Palestinians.

### **The Role of the Palestinian Christians:**

The volatility of the political situation is played out in a variety of arenas within the region. The powers involved, whether they are external or internal, have contributed in various ways to war in the region and untold suffering for countless people. Britain, France, Germany, and Italy are some examples. However, the creation of Israel is the most significant factor in regional instability and violence. Arab Christians are in the forefront of the defense of their countries and societies. At the beginning of the last century, Christians were pioneers in introducing new ideas and, in fact, had a role in leading the Arab World. This, however, is no longer the case. Christians have lost their historical role in the Arab National Movement

and have lost the ideological war on this front. Nationalism and Socialism – created out of Christian initiatives – have been lost. In other words, our fundamental projects have been lost. Christianity’s role as a bridge between West and East has proven to be an empty dream – one that was visualized in detail, but never carried forward to its logical conclusion. It seems that Christians have in fact even lost their capacity to play this role. Whether or not this role should be a Christian one is open to question. Why? Simply because Christians have been stranded in rhetoric discourses and dreams but never actually sought out the wherewithal to actualize them. The reason for this is that there has never been a solid ground from which to work. Christians remained torn apart in our divided enclaves of church divisions led and/or funded mainly by the West. Theological formulations remained stagnated in meditative ways rather than in transformative ones. Thus, Christians never really rooted themselves in the cultural ethos of the region, to understand and claim their identity. The bridge role between the East and West was far too superficial and devoid of substance to give the Christian an identity. Instead, it seemed as if Christians were more concerned about and involved in the external environment rather than in the internal social and cultural formations.

Perhaps this is why ordinary people are confused. To whom do Christians belong? Do they belong to the Vatican, Germany, England, Greece, Russia, the US, or Palestine? Christians have relinquished their responsibility for this mission and instead allowed other structures to take over this precious space. This is nothing short of an abdication of responsibility, which Christians have carried out with efficiency and integrity in the past and gained recognition for. This is the loss of a role and function through which Christians made a contribution to social advancement and, thus, attained a place and recognition.

Lest it be misunderstood that Christians are alone in misunderstanding their identity, it is crucial to point out that many Muslims as well, through their experience of colonialism, imperialism, and neo-

imperialism, have equated Christianity with the tyrant or the occupier. This is certainly unfortunate, but a fact that must be addressed if anything is to change.

Christians in Palestine lack leaders and have suffered long years as a consequence of this reality. Whether as a result of emigration or of lack of interest, Christians have ceased to develop new leadership. The dilemma is best described by Christians themselves thus: “Either we have good church leaders who lack a base within the local community, or we have strong Christian leaders totally unconnected with the church”. This fact has been instrumental in creating an embarrassingly weak church that has little or no decision-making capacity. What adds to the misery is the Quota system, which was followed in the first and the only Legislative Council election. By contrast, Egypt’s Copts, for instance, have refused this system and emphasized the notion of a co-equal citizenship. The quota based election system brought a good number of Christians into the council. These members can barely claim to be the legitimate representatives of the Christians. It is shocking to know that most of them have almost never held any meetings with what are supposed to be their constituencies. This system only reveals the bankruptcy of the claim that Christians are truly Palestinian. Indeed, Christians have floundered in the political wilderness because they look like people who are anything but integral to the community. Rather, they have chosen to be a group with a minority complex. Christians should have chosen to be represented either by political parties or by individuals. Palestinian Christians must never internalize the attitude of a religious minority and leave political life to others; on the contrary we should be active and involved in the political and social life of our community.

**The role of the Church:**

In this regard, the role of the church has often been criticized for its weakness. While it is true that the church is weak, we need to realize that the church is simply a microcosm of the people as a whole. A major

factor in its weakness is the lack of value placed on the role of Christians in public life. Authentic faith leads one to participate in the political life of society. It is worth mentioning that Christian participation in the Arab societies of the region is a reflection of the general lack of political participation in the Arab World at large.

The weakness of the church is reflected in some of its mistakes over the years. For example, while there is an abundance of respected church literature available in English or German, there is next to nothing in Arabic. This literature could be a clear message in itself not only for Christians, but for Muslims as well. The church has failed in its mission to strengthen the sense of unity and confidence within its communities and to help its communities understand more deeply their faith and witness in society. It has also failed in finding ways to encourage its people to remain in the region and make a positive contribution to the creation of a new and better future for all Palestinians.

Photo: Anna Ebbesen



Palestinian Christians have given up their unique identity and allowed external identities to dominate this space.

The church has often been afraid to provide any special services to Christians for fear of being labeled biased against Muslims. The presupposition is that we are guilty until proven innocent. Rather than addressing this issue directly through initiatives that build mutual respect and understanding between Christians and Muslims, the church has remained aloof and has engaged in dialogue only at hierarchical levels, excluding the common people. This neglect has left

grassroots endeavors to a few church-related organizations – a tremendous loss for the church and its mission here.

The potential for the church to act as a real bridge between people of different faiths has been greatly diminished. Even when the meeting between a number of church leaders and the spiritual leader of Hamas, Ahmad Yasin, happens, Christians suspiciously ask if it is merely a public relations ploy. Ordinary church community members were not even aware that this historic meeting took place. Nor was there any follow-up to the meeting - another in a series of missed opportunities for the church.

Until very recently, the church failed to play a major role in Palestinian political life or even in standing up for issues of justice and peace. Its message to the international community was not communicated well locally, especially when the message was one of reconciliation and peace. The church has become more “professional” and less people-oriented. Now, and in the midst of talking about negotiations and the Road Map or whatsoever, there is a golden opportunity for the church to play a vital role in this struggle. The church needs to be there not to defend the Christians’ interests but to participate in defending the national cause and national home.

#### **Conclusions:**

Based on all this, there are some expectations in relation to the Palestinian Christian presence and role in this area. Some of these expectations are realistic but some are not. Palestinian Christians need to increase their analysis capacity in order to learn from their history and the history of the region, and to draw up their vision and direction for life.

#### **The expectations of the Palestinian Christians:**

##### **1. from Palestinian Muslims:**

- a) Palestinian Christians want to be recognized as blood brothers and sisters and not as a protected minority or ‘ahl el thimma’. We should have the same rights and obligations as any other citizen. Religious affiliation should not make a difference.
- b) Palestinian Christians need to be

recognized as important contributors to past and present Arabic history.

- c) Palestinian Christians must be helped to overcome their fears and anxieties. This could be done through creating an open joint forum to tackle various and important topics which affect their lives.

- d) Palestinian Christians must be trusted as an integral part of society.

##### **2. from their sisters and brothers in the West:**

- a. Change the colonial-missionary-evangelistic mindset toward Palestinian Christians.

- b. Help strengthen the churches structures and help them fulfill their mission.

- c. Offer moral and financial support and encouragement to Christians with the aim of helping them remain in their home country and become authentic witnesses within society.

- d. Stop making erroneous accusations that Muslims persecute Palestinian Christians.

- e. Participate in the struggle to end the Israeli occupation.

- f. Visit Palestinian Christians to learn about their problems and to help them find solutions.

- g. Work alongside Palestinian Christians in their attempt to rectify the misinterpretations of the Bible, especially on the part of so-called Zionist Christians.

- h. Initiate and strengthen various levels of partnership with Palestinian Christians.

- I. Try to understand the reality and the strength that Palestinian Christians are Arabs and they have been living in an Islamic culture for about 1,500 years.

##### **3. from the Church:**

- a. Support in being united as Christians in front of the Israeli occupation.

- b. Greater involvement in Palestinian political and social life.

- c. Greater efforts to improve relationships between the different congregations and to work more on Christian unity.

- d. Greater efforts to strengthen the alliance with Muslims in order to support the national leadership.

- e. A commitment to stop selling or renting Christian properties that could be used as a tool to strengthen the Israeli occupation.

##### **4. from themselves:**

- a. Be more involved in the political and social life.

- b. Get involved and participate in the church life.

- c. Create a strong network between the Churches and the Church-related organizations in the Palestinian context; this will progressively influence the Christian message to the World and help the Palestinians achieve their national goals.



Muslims praying during a demonstration at the northern Bethlehem checkpoint. Male Muslims under the age of 40 are frequently prohibited from reaching the Al Aqsa Mosque on Fridays. Though Christians are also subject to most Israeli closures, soldiers will occasionally allow Christians through on Fridays, contributing to the “divide and rule” strategy employed by Israel.

***“Salvation for a race, nation, or class must come from within. Freedom is never granted; it is won. Justice is never given; it is exacted. Freedom and justice must be struggled for by the oppressed ... and the struggle must be continuous.”***

Quote from Mr. A. Phillip Randolph (1889-1979), African American, Civil Rights leader, and one who inspired Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr

# Beneficiaries

## in Jericho

By Hanne Tommelstad

Since 2001, The YWCA of Jericho has been able to provide a food production programme as an employment project for women. At that time the situation was very difficult as the Israeli response to the Intifada resulted in considerably less job opportunities and the complete 'closure' of the city. In addition to creating job opportunities, the programme also aims at providing food from local crops, giving an alternative to Israeli and imported goods. This is important as one of the key factors of the occupation is that the Palestinian people are treated as a captive market. In reality, this Israeli trade monopoly means that while many farmers are unable to sell (and even produce) goods, the markets are flooded with produce from illegal settlements. Our program works against this.

Since the launching of the Good Earth Campaign, the products needed for the campaign have given the food production programme a secure and stable income. The items in the campaign package which are prepared at YWCA in Jericho are olive oil soap and three kinds of herbs: spearmint, thyme and sage.

As the number of people that are now more aware of the dangers from heavy chemical usage increases, some farmers have started to develop alternatives for healthy, organic farming. The herbs prepared for the Good Earth Campaign are cultivated with this ecological perspective

in mind, without the use of noxious chemicals. As this is a new way of farming, since many areas of Palestinian agriculture have used chemicals for some time, the courageous farmers benefit from those who show trust in and promote their products.

Of course, the customers also benefit from pure and healthy products. The herbs are a natural and healthy alternative to different types of medicine, and they also give a delicious taste to many types of food and drink. The olive oil soap is also good for the customers. This kind of soap is widely known for its gentleness on the skin and can be used by everybody.

The YWCA is pleased that it can maintain this attitude of "farmers first, customers last", and the women at the food production programme can benefit from the sales through the Good Earth Campaign. Many of them do not have other opportunities to have a regular income. Some of them are the only ones in their family able to find work, and some have large families to maintain.

There are many examples of women in the project who are empowered and feel proud because of their work in the food production programme. One of the employees is working at YWCA in the morning and in a shop in the evening. She needs to work more now as her salary is not like it was before. She is sad about the situation, wondering when it will change, when the

tourists will come again, so that she can go back to her former work in a hotel. She had a well paid job in those days. Her salary is not so high now, but it gives security for her and her mother, whom she also supports.

Another employee lives in the refugee camp Aqbet Jaber, just outside the town of Jericho. She worked in another city for a few years, after having studied electronics at the vocational training centre of YMCA. But when the travel restrictions were imposed, she had to quit her job. After being unemployed for some time, she was lucky as she had the chance to work in the food production programme. Her father is retired and she has three brothers who are unemployed. She says it is a good feeling to support the family. Working outside is also a help for her character as she is grateful to get away from home for some hours a day because the family is stressed due to the difficult situation in which they live.

When visiting the food production programme in Jericho, you can easily see the joyful environment, even if you do not understand Arabic. The women laugh a lot, as humour is important in their frustrated situation. If you ask how they can keep laughing, you will get the same answer as anywhere in Palestine: We have to keep hope! If we do not have hope, we do not have a future. We think we have a future. We have work and so we are lucky. Therefore we have hope.



# The Good Earth Campaign

*Make a difference*

The Palestinians' connection to their land is under threat, and so are the lives of those who depend on the land for living. Agricultural work has now in many areas become almost impossible as a result of the restrictive measures imposed by the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Hence, the Joint Advocacy Initiative of the YWCA of Palestine and the East Jerusalem YMCA has embarked on the Good Earth Campaign. The objective is to advocate on behalf of, and provide support for, economically disadvantaged Palestinians whose livelihoods are dependant upon the land.

Through buying the products of the Good Earth Campaign, you make a peaceful action against the illegal occupation of the Palestinian land. You also support the Palestinian people in their struggle for their livelihood and in achieving peace with justice.

For count generations, Palestinians have been inextricably linked to their land. Their connection to the land is not only agricultural, but also has emotional and spiritual significance within Palestinian culture. The hills, valleys, and plains of Palestine are filled with a variety of flora and fauna that attest to this fact.



## Products of the Good Earth Campaign are produced by natural ingredients from Palestine. The campaign bag costs \$20 and consists of:

- 250 ml Extra-Virgin Olive Oil: An oil of the first pressing, the purest available. The olive and its oil underpin the development of human civilization.
- Hand made olive oil soap: A natural cleanser and moisturizer. It is long-lasting and suitable for all skins types.
- Olive wood products: Hand carved

olive wood item that has been the main source of income for Palestinians in Bethlehem. The Campaign bag consists of a hand carved Nativity Set.

- Dried Herbs: The Campaign bag contains three different herbs, namely thyme, sage, and spearmint wit a small recipe on how to use them.



Producing soap at the YWCA in Jericho.

Photo: Hanne Tommelstad

## The Good Earth Campaign seeks to make a difference through:

- Creating marketing and sales opportunities for Palestinian producers.
- Promoting and preserving the rich heritage of Palestine through affirming the vital link between Palestinians and their land.
- Providing an opportunity for organizations and individuals

throughout the world to act in solidarity with the Palestinians in their struggle for peace with justice through purchasing the campaign bag.

- Promoting economic independence and self-confidence for marginalized and disadvantaged producers.

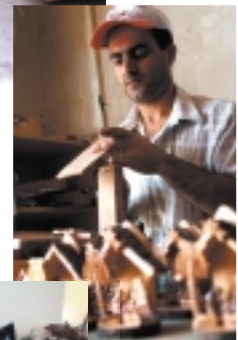


Preparing the herbs for packaging.

Photo: Hanne Tommelstad

# Make a difference through buying the campaign bag for \$20!

(Shipping not included)



To place an order or get more information, contact

**Joint Advocacy Initiative**  
**The East Jerusalem YMCA / YWCA of Palestine**  
P.O. Box 19023, East Jerusalem  
Phone: +972-2-277271  
Fax: +972-2-2774540  
Email: [ymcashop@ej-ymca.org](mailto:ymcashop@ej-ymca.org)  
<http://www.ej-ymca.org> <http://www.ywca-palestine.org>

Or fill this form and mail it\*

***Make a difference!***

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

No. of campaign bags: \_\_\_\_\_ (\$20 per bag excluding shipping)

Date / Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

\*Upon receiving your order, we will send you an invoice with the payment details. The land products will be shipped to you as soon as we receive your payment.

Thank you for making a difference, and for your support to the Palestinian people in their struggle for their livelihood and in achieving peace with justice.

Yes, I want to receive more information about the campaigns.



## Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center

### The Sabeel Center

In March 1990, an international conference was held which placed Palestinian Liberation Theology in relationship to other liberation theologies from around the world, leading to the founding of Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center with a Jerusalem based office with a Nazareth branch.

### Sabeel focuses on three ministries:

- **Ecumenism:** transcending denominationalism and finding our true identity in Christ.
- **Interfaith:** building a community that is multi-religious and able to work together - religious differences being respected, understood and accepted.
- **Justice & Peace:** working for justice, peace and reconciliation with mercy using the power of non-violence.

### Purpose Statement

Sabeel, an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians, inspired by the teaching of Jesus Christ, seeks to deepen the faith of Palestinian Christians, promote unity among them, and lead them to act for justice and love. Sabeel strives to develop spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation, and reconciliation for various national and faith communities. The word 'Sabeel' is Arabic for 'the way' and also a 'spring' of life-giving water. Sabeel also works to promote an accurate international awareness of the identity and presence of Palestinian Christians. It encourages individuals and groups around the world to work for a just and lasting peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action.

### Programs and Networks that help in fulfilling Sabeel's visions/goals:

Some programs are aimed at local participation, others at international participation. All programs seek to:

- Deepen the faith of Palestinian Christians.
- Lead people to act for justice and love for all humankind.
- Work for the unity and renewal of the church.
- Develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities.

### Programs include:

- Women: Sabeel aims to broaden

women's horizons and provide a deeper understanding of the Bible to make it more relevant in their lives. Ecumenical meetings, workshops, pilgrimage trips, and discussions throughout Palestine and Israel lead to the empowerment of women. (contact: [local@sabeel.org](mailto:local@sabeel.org))

- **Clergy:** works within the thirteen denominations in Jerusalem, facilitating solidarity and mutual understanding amongst the clergy; ecumenical clergy conferences, annual retreats, monthly meetings to discuss common concerns and how to better serve congregations. (contact: [clergy@sabeel.org](mailto:clergy@sabeel.org))
- **Youth:** encourages local youth through development of leadership skills while exploring the meaning of the Palestinian Christian identity. Issues of justice and peace, human rights and other contemporary topics are discussed during seminars, pilgrimage trips, and camps. (contact: [youth@sabeel.org](mailto:youth@sabeel.org))
- **Community Building:** events that nurture open-minded and responsible action that will lead to strengthening community ties in the process of building a better society.
- **International:** Increases awareness of the Palestinian existence, political situation, and culture. Encourages individuals and groups from around the world to work for a just, comprehensive, and enduring peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action.

### Programs for Visitors: Contact:

#### visit@sabeel.org

- Ahlan-wa-Sahlan: (Arabic for "welcome") selection of programs ranging from a one hour lecture to a full day of events concluding with a Palestinian meal and cultural event.
- Witness for Justice and Peace Tours: trips into the heart of the West Bank and Gaza promote a more accurate international awareness of the realities of occupation and its effects, hear from local Palestinian and Israeli organizations working for justice and peace.
- Contemporary Way of the Cross: theologically based visits to the contemporary "stations of the cross"; demolished home, checkpoint, refugee camp and wall. New publication: "Contemporary Way of the Cross: A Liturgical Journey along the Palestinian Via Dolorosa" is available.
- Conferences (Local and International): inform, educate, and motivate through conference participation to share both the

good news - that Christ is at the center of justice and peace - and the bad - that occupation and its consequences still exist in Palestine.

- **Cornerstone:** Sabeel's quarterly publication in English highlights Sabeel's ministry, contains theological reflections on contemporary events, and snapshots of local and international activities.

Resources: Sabeel publishes statements and articles on current events, including Morally Responsible Investment, Suicide Bombers, the Wall, and the Gaza Disengagement. Sabeel also carries a variety of books for sale. These and other items that can be found on our website along with recommended reading, videos, and a list of websites for updates and information. Website: [www.sabeel.org](http://www.sabeel.org) is regularly updated with articles, events, new publications, statements, and archival materials. (Note: website is currently under reconstruction and will soon be multi-lingual.)

### International Friends of Sabeel (IFOS):

IFOS was organized by members of the international community who wanted to support the work of Sabeel through education, advocacy, conferences, solidarity visits and financial contribution. There is now a network of friends around the world who work in partnership with Sabeel to help bring about a just and durable peace for Palestine and Israel. (Contact: [world@sabeel.org](mailto:world@sabeel.org))

### For more information on any of the above contact:

**Sabeel**  
P.O.Box 49084 - 91491 Jerusalem  
Palestine via Israel  
Tel: +972 2 532 7136  
Fax: +972 2 532 7137  
Email: [sabeel@sabeel.org](mailto:sabeel@sabeel.org)



Clergy Program



Youth Program

ifos

# Olive Tree Campaign - Keep Hope Alive

In the year 2002, the Joint Advocacy Initiative of the East Jerusalem YMCA and the YWCA of Palestine has embarked on the Olive Tree Campaign under the theme "Keep Hope Alive".

The aim behind this campaign is to stand against the illegal Israeli actions towards our agricultural lands and fields in a peaceful way. The campaign is seeking to plant 50,000 olive trees in the very places where they have been previously uprooted, or in places where the land is being threatened by confiscation.

Olive trees are purchased through generous sponsorships from partner YMCAs and YWCAs around the world, organizations, churches, and interested individuals. Each tree costs \$20, which covers the price of the young olive tree, fencing around the field if required, an irrigation system, a certificate of acknowledgment mailed to the sponsor, and a special plaque with names of sponsors inscribed. This plaque will be placed in the field.

We look forward to your support to KEEP HOPE ALIVE within Palestinian communities and we hope that your participation in this campaign will be the first step in an ongoing partnership and solidarity with the Palestinian people and their struggle for peace with justice in their homeland.

By sponsoring an olive tree in Palestine, you show solidarity with the Palestinian people and help us KEEP HOPE ALIVE for a peaceful future in Palestine. You also encourage Palestinians to reaffirm their commitment to work constructively towards peace with justice. Olive trees can be sponsored and planted on your behalf, in the memory or honor of a loved one, or as a gift.

The Olive Tree Campaign is preparing for its' fourth consecutive season now. Generally, olive tree planting is from December until March while sponsorships are received throughout the year. For the past three seasons, we have been able to plant 12,645 trees in various occupation-affected fields. Nablus, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Hebron, and Jerusalem are among the areas located for planting olive trees. Fields are selected upon their location, whether trees have been previously uprooted, and a written commitment from the farmer to look after the trees.

Moreover, the Olive Tree Campaign is involved in organizing a number of events such as:

- Two international planting days where we invite members from the local and international community to join us in the actual planting of the sponsored olive trees at a selected field as a way to celebrate the end of a year's planting season.
- An Olive Picking program where we invite interested individuals and olive picking enthusiasts for a ten-day program that involves picking olives in selected fields and arranged visits and presentations. The program is usually held in November.
- An Olive Festival that usually connects with the olive picking program. Cultural products and olive related items are offered for sale during this festival. Cultural presentations are also featured.



## The Olive Tree Campaign Keep Hope Alive Sponsorship Form

Please type clearly

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

No. of Trees: \_\_\_\_\_

Total donation: \_\_\_\_\_

Bank Transfer Information  
Bank Name: Mercantile Discount Bank  
Branch No. 638 Salah Eddine Street,  
East Jerusalem  
Account Name: The East Jerusalem YMCA  
Olive Tree Campaign  
Account No: 911-01-403555  
Swift Code: BARDILITE

Checks Payable to:  
The East Jerusalem YMCA  
Olive Tree Campaign  
P. O. Box 19023 East Jerusalem  
Israel

