

**SABEEL INTERNATIONAL YOUNG ADULT CONFERENCE –
ISRAEL/PALESTINE**

JULY 2012

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I visited Palestine and Israel as a participant in the 7th Sabeel International Young Adults' Conference, "Challenging Oppression on a Donkey: Christ, Resistance and Creative Discipleship". This conference, involving participants from 14 countries across the world, aimed at highlighting the reality of the situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories and facilitating both theological reflection and subsequent activism on the part of participants.



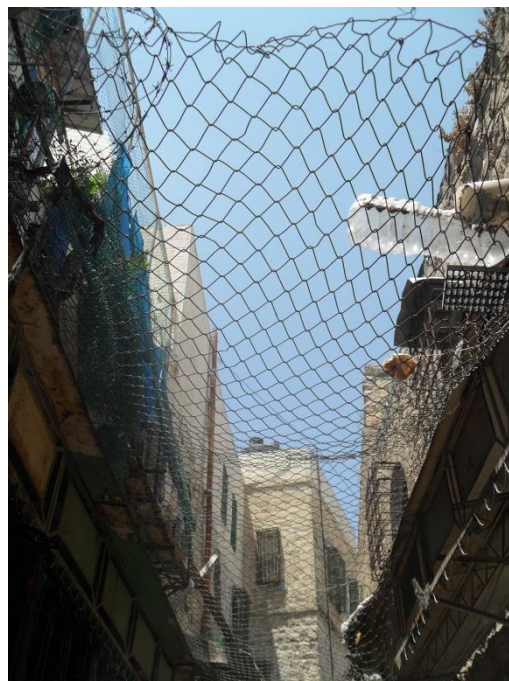
The vast majority of the 12 days of the conference were spent within the Occupied Territories, with a limited amount of time within the State of Israel itself. We travelled widely, visiting towns and cities such as Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Hebron, Jericho, Taybeh, and Ramallah, as well as rural communities in the rural West Bank.



We had the opportunity to hear from a number of agencies working in the region, including Sabeel themselves, Rabbis for Human Rights, EAPPI, Christian Peacemaker Teams, the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, Defense of Children International, and UNOCHA. These experiences enabled us to gain a better understanding of the historical, religious, political and humanitarian situation in the Holy Land. We also had a number of opportunities to engage in very challenging worship,

including using Sabeel's Contemporary Way of the Cross, which uses the liturgical form of the Stations of the Cross to highlight the plight of contemporary and historical Palestinians, and to link this with the Scriptures; and a 'visual lectio divina', reflecting on graffiti on the Separation Wall in Bethlehem as a kind of sacred text. Of course, we visited a number of the traditional pilgrimage sights too, and were faced with the task of reconciling all that we were seeing and hearing with the stories of our faith- or rather, with allowing the stories of our faith to be challenged and shaped by the stories of the people of Palestine.

We also undertook some volunteer work in refugee camps, including being involved in the rebuilding of Beit Arabiya in Anata, under the auspices of ICAHD. Doing this practical work was great, as it is easy to





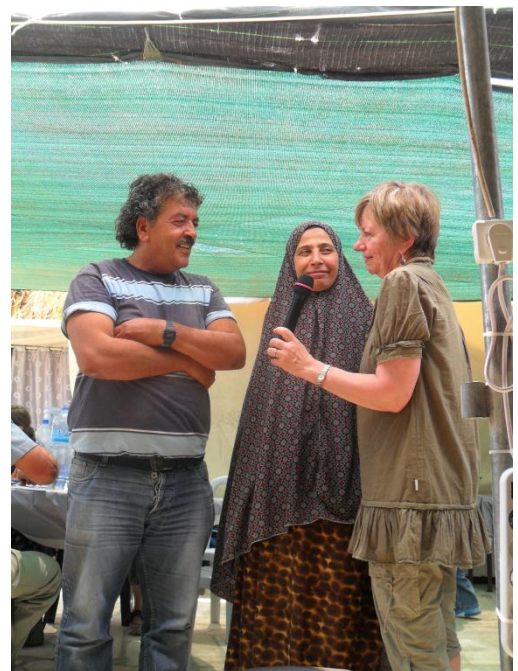
feel despondent and overwhelmed at the sheer scale of the suffering and injustice in the land. Although we did not do much, it helped even to take these tiny practical steps.

The definite highlights, though, were our encounters with the remarkable inhabitants of the Occupied Palestinian Territories. From elderly refugee women who told us stories of the Nakba of 1948, still dreaming of going home, to Daoud Nasser of the Tent of Nations, to the inhabitants of the tiny village of Susiya living under a demolition order, we heard, time and again, stories of great suffering, oppression and pain coupled with amazing resilience, hope and commitment to peace.

There are so many moments, and so many people, and so many stories which I will never forget- stories which I feel compelled to tell again and again because they must be heard and not enough people are listening. Personally, perhaps there were three particularly arresting moments.

The first of these was our visit to the small village of Susiya in the South Hebron Hills, where we heard the heartbreaking story of its people, displaced from their land because it was designated an important archaeological site in 1986. At this time, the villagers moved to their nearby agricultural land, where they live mostly in tents. Since these were erected without a permit (nearly impossible to acquire for a Palestinian living in Area C), there is constant threat of demolition by the Israeli Government. Not only this, but the Israeli Army has demolished Susiya's cisterns, making it very difficult and expensive to acquire water. Further, there are a number of Jewish settlements surrounding the small village, and its inhabitants are often subject to violent attacks from settlers. The people of Susiya urged us to stand with them and to share their story. I won't forget quickly the sense of solidarity coupled with helplessness, hopelessness coupled with great hope as we stood and sang, in the words of a South African song of resistance: "Courage, Susiya, you do not walk alone- we will walk with you, and sing your spirit home".

The second moment forever imprinted in memory comes from Al-Arroub refugee camp, south of Bethlehem. Here, we broke into small groups to do some volunteer work and to eat lunch with families, enjoying the humbling generosity and hospitality extended by Palestinians to complete strangers. Following lunch, we gathered with a number of people from inside the camp in the Women's Centre, and heard a talk from Defense of Children International about the treatment of child prisoners. What was most powerful, though, was hearing directly the stories of some such children. It is extremely common for very young people, aged 11 or 12, to be arrested and severely mistreated- indeed, we were told that the majority of young Palestinian men have been arrested at some point in their lives. We heard from two young men who had been arrested for making a film depicting the reality of life in the camp, focusing on the recruitment of children and vulnerable people to work as collaborators with the soldiers. We heard many shocking things about how they had been treated, and whilst this was extremely upsetting it was an important moment in really bringing home the reality of injustice.



The third moment, and the most moving for many in the group, was in Hebron. Our time in Hebron, though only lasting a few hours, was extremely intense, and in many ways the most difficult to deal with. The military



presence was extremely heavy, we were watched from rooftops and followed by gun-wielding soldiers, we walked down Shuhada street, called Apartheid Street by locals and had our attention drawn to the segregation between Israeli and Arab, we saw the wire netting hanging above the Souk to protect Palestinian traders as best as could be from the rubbish, stones, urine and even acid thrown down on them by settlers living above. The tension was palpable in Hebron, and the tourists few. We were once again to eat lunch with families, and all of us looked forward to meeting people who live in this difficult situation and hearing about their lives. To do this, we had to go through a checkpoint, which happened perhaps more smoothly than we had expected, the soldier even joking with us whilst searching our bags. Once the last member of our group had come through, though, there was a sudden change of atmosphere and we were ordered to return to the other side immediately. We were all quite unnerved, and our Palestinian guide, along with our friend from Rabbis for Human Rights, questioned the

soldier as to the reasoning behind this sudden change- but to no avail. Quickly the situation escalated and the checkpoint was closed down, leaving us faced with a growing line of Palestinians waiting to cross. Whilst our Jewish friend and some recently-arrived EAs tried to calm the situation, we stood, held hands, and prayed in almost silent resistance. We then, in the interests of those waiting, returned to the other side of the checkpoint. On the other side, we stood, slightly shaken by the experience, and talked with the EAs about checkpoints and the different ways in which they can operate day-by-day. We were followed by representatives of the families with whom we had been to eat, who, in their own powerful act of resistance, brought pots of rice and lentils, yogurt and salad, plates and bowls and spoons and fed us as we sat in the street. Food was shared with passers-by and even taken to the soldiers in the check-point, in a beautiful moment which witnessed to the incredible power of peaceful resistance and of radical hospitality.

These are just a few snapshots of twelve incredible days of challenge, learning, sorrow, and joy. Just a few weeks on, I do not yet feel that I have completely comprehended what I saw and heard and experienced. Indeed, I am not sure that I ever will completely understand it. But it is clear to me that this is not and absolutely cannot be the end of my journey with Palestine/Israel. I hope to visit again, perhaps for a longer time as a volunteer, or perhaps taking others from Scotland to see and hear too. I intend to seek out opportunities to tell some of these stories- as I already have at a workshop at the Church of Scotland National Youth Assembly last weekend, and to read more about the situation and about Palestinian Liberation Theology. I will encourage young people from the Kirk to attend this conference in future years, and people of all ages to visit the Land, to listen and to question what they hear in the Western media. Above all I will pray for a just peace in Palestine/Israel, and for the individuals by whose stories I have been so profoundly moved.

