

CORNERSTONE

A PUBLICATION BY SABEEL ECUMENICAL LIBERATION THEOLOGY CENTER



Living in Community

They reminded me that Christianity isn't meant to simply be believed; it's meant to be lived, shared, eaten, spoken, and enacted in the presence of other people. They reminded me that, try as I may, I can't be a Christian on my own. I need a community. I need the church.

Rachel Held Evans

Community is a key part of Christian life, it appears throughout the Bible with Jesus illustrating community throughout the parables.

This is especially vital in the Land of the Holy One where the Christian community is divided especially those communities in the West Bank, where communities are divided by illegal Israeli settlements and in Gaza with its tiny number of Christians - a tiny community who work hard to make a big impact.

At a time when the number of international Christians is beginning to outweigh the number of native Palestinian Christians, solidarity and understanding is more important than ever.

In this edition of Cornerstone we will explore the various Christian communities both in Israel and Palestine. Exploring these communities through the eyes of various people from the international, Israeli, and Palestinian communities.

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SALT AND LIGHT TO THE WORLD

The Christian community as light and seasoning for the world.
Matthew 5 : 13 - 16 (NRSV)

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled underfoot."

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Jesus' teaching on salt and light follows hard on the heels of the Beatitudes, which close by extolling the blessedness of those who are persecuted. Together, the Beatitudes and the Parables of Salt and Light form a kind of profile for the spirit-filled disciple.

Some have been persecuted for silent protest. But many more have been vilified for declaring the Good News by both their deeds and their words. Jesus doesn't restrict our witness to words only or deeds only. Together they comprise the blessing of uncompromising witness.

In verses 13-16 Jesus tells two simple parables and draws conclusions from them. Using parables was a characteristic teaching method for Jesus. He chose two simple concepts - salt and light - and expounded from them principles for living.

Salty Christians

"Salty Christians" almost sounds like a serving of fish and chips. Salty Christians, Jesus tells us emphatically, are much to be preferred over the salt free variety.

A proper amount of salt is essential

to sustain life, so ancient peoples traded whatever was required to obtain it. In Palestine, most salt came from salt caves in the area around the Dead Sea. Both ancient and modern peoples have used salt as both (1) a food preservative and (2) to bring out the flavour of foods. It was also used to make covenants and mixed with sacrifices.

“A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community.

Salt as a preservative

So what does it mean to be the salt of the earth? If we use the preservative analogy, we would say that Christians by their very presence help preserve the world and hold back the forces of evil against it.

Who led the way towards the abolition of slavery in the United States? Christians. Who led the way toward a non-violent protest against racial discrimination? Christians.

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that regardless of the trouble caused to us by another we can *“no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me.”* This is an important point, if the Christian community are to be agents for a just peace in the land of the Holy One. We cannot, however difficult it is, allow hatred to drive our actions to our fellow human beings.

Salt as a seasoning

There is much more evidence in the Bible of salt being used as a seasoning, and in the Parable of Salt and Light, Jesus seems to refer more to salt’s taste than its effects.

Salt was used with sacrifices and in the making of covenants. We read of its ability to add flavour to food, and in Colossians 4:6, Paul writes *“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you*

may know how to answer everyone.”

Here, as in Jesus’ parable of Christians being the salt of the earth, salt has to do with witness and conversation. In Colossians 4:6 it is used with the Greek word ἀρτύω (artuō), meaning to season.

“Let your conversation always be full of grace”

We believe the primary meaning of *“You are the salt of the earth”* has to do with a willingness to live our lives with the “tang” of our faith intact. We’re under so much pressure to give up our differences and blend in with society. Believers are to be “tangy” rather than bland and insipid in the way we act, live, and speak.



The salt gathered from around the Dead Sea was often impure. Water could leach out the usable salt, leaving contaminated salts intact, so that it looked like salt but tasted bad. This seems to be the basis of Jesus' warning about salt losing its saltiness. The essential Christ-inspired difference in our lives can be leached out through turning a blind eye to injustice.

The light of the world

Jesus' second parable about uncompromising witness has to do with light. In Jesus' day, homes were commonly lit by small clay lamps which could be held in the palm of the hand. The most primitive consisted of a saucer to hold the olive oil, in which was immersed on end of a wick that lay in an indentation in the rim. Later clay lamps were sometimes covered, with a hole in the top in which to pour the oil, and a hole in one side for the wick.

In explaining the concept of making one's witness clear, Jesus introduces a third parable *"A city built on a hill cannot be hid."* Cities were usually situated on hilltops for protection against attacks. It is much more difficult to storm a walled city running uphill, and defenders have always known that victory can be claimed by capturing and holding the high ground. Jesus' point, however, is not a city's defence, but its visibility because of its elevated position.

In the same way, he continues, a lampstand would elevate a lamp for the greatest illumination within a room. Now Jesus contrasts elevating a lamp on a lampstand to covering a lamp with a basket. People don't light a lamp to hide its light under a basket, Jesus says. Rather people light a lamp in order to shed light to everyone around.

Words versus deeds

Sometimes people place a false choice between words and deeds. *"I testify to my faith in God by the way I live,"* some say defiantly.

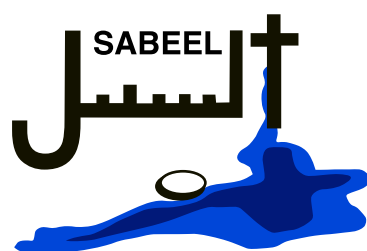
We agree that we must live lives that bring credit upon Jesus or our words won't be taken seriously. They will be laughed at or thrown back in our face and become a cause of greater disbelief on the part of those who watch us.

But deeds without words only tell half the story. Part of seasoning our conversation with salt is telling the good news to those around us. Why is Jesus called *"The Word"*? Because he was the expression of God the Father and spoke the words his Father gave him to speak.

Our witness must consist of both deeds and words which enable us to live out a life of justice and peace even here in Palestine and Israel where both are challenged on a daily basis.



This bible study was written by staff and volunteers at Sabeel Jerusalem.



WHY THIS TOPIC AND WHY NOW?

Sabeel views this issue of Cornerstone as extremely important, it addresses and acknowledges the changing landscape and composition of Christians in the Holy Land. Since the days of the early Church, the Christians of the land have been a mosaic of different ethnicities, theologies, and religious backgrounds. Throughout history we have had members, or even communities, of non-indigenous Christians move to the holy land for a variety of reasons: to live close to the holy sites, refugees from conflicts and genocide, missionaries who have decided to remain in the land, etc... Many of these communities have maintained their languages, traditions, and cultures whilst merging with the indigenous Palestinian Christian community and contributing to its beauty and diversity.

For many years, being a Christian

in the Holy Land meant to be a Palestinian Christian, and most likely an Arab speaking Christian as most of the Christians of the Holy Land come from an Arab background. The Christians from non-Arab backgrounds such as Assyrian, Armenian, Ethiopian, Greek, etc. identified themselves, and were accepted as, Palestinian Christians.

In the recent past a new reality has emerged and been mainly neglected when we look at the Christians of the Holy Land. Today some estimate that at least 30% of the Christians living in the land of the Holy One are not indigenous. The new Christians of the Holy Land are also very diverse, and their challenges and interests differ from the challenges of the indigenous Christian community. The aim of this issue is to introduce some of these communities to the reader.

As a result, the following questions arise: is there any relationship between the indigenous communities and these communities? If so what kind of relationship is it? If not why not, and how do we develop these relationships with like-minded communities?

In Palestinian Liberation theology one must accept the inclusive theology of God for all people, work for justice and defend the rights of the oppressed using only non-violent means.

Witness Visits

Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre invites you to join us to experience the reality of life in today's Holy Land.

Witness Visits

Find out what the realities are on the ground in Palestine and Israel, worship with Palestinian Christians, and meet Christians, Jews, and Muslims who partner with Sabeel in non-violent resistance against the violation of international and humanitarian law.

Solidarity Visits

Find out what the realities are on the ground in Palestine and Israel, worship with Palestinian Christians, meet Christians, Jews, and Muslims who partner with Sabeel in non-violent resistance against the violation of international and humanitarian law, and act in solidarity with Palestinian people under oppression.

Fall Solidarity Visit 2020

October 13th - October 21st

Spring Witness Visit 2021

March 16th - March 24th

Fall Solidarity Visit 2021

October 5th - October 13th

Spring Witness Visit 2022

May 13th - May 20th

Fall Solidarity Visit 2022

October 25th - November 2nd

Find our more at www.sabeel.org



CHRISTIANS IN THE HOLY LAND

Rev. David M. Neuhaus

The Holy Land constitutes the cradle of the Christian faith. Here Jesus Christ was born, lived, died and rose from the dead, fulfilling the promises of God to the patriarchs, priests, kings, sages and prophets in the Old Testament who lived in this land. Here too, the first church of believers was established and from Jerusalem the apostles set off to preach the Good News to the ends of the earth. Since the first century, the land has been home to Christians, who have played a central role in the history of this land. Who are the Christians in the Holy Land today? What are the challenges they face? What is their future?

Who are the Christians in the Holy Land today?

Christians in the Holy Land are very diverse in origin, denomination and socio-political context.

Firstly, Christians belong to various socio-cultural groupings:

- Christian Palestinians, the indigenous Arabic speaking Christian inhabitants of the land;
- Christians of diverse origins who live within Jewish Israeli, Hebrew speaking society;
- Christians labour migrants and asylum seekers;
- long term resident expatriates, most of whom serve in Church structures and institutions.

Secondly, these Christians belong to a diversity of denominations: Greek Orthodox and Catholics, Armenians, Latins (or Roman Catholics), Syrian Orthodox and Catholics, Copts, Ethiopians, Maronites, Anglicans, Lutherans and a plethora of Evangelical groups.

Thirdly, Christians find themselves living under different political circumstances in the light of the developments in Israel-Palestine since 1948.

In Israel, there are:

- circa 125,000 Christian citizens who are Palestinian Arab. The major denominations are Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Latin

and Maronite.

- circa 35,000 Christian citizens who live in the Jewish Israeli Hebrew speaking population, predominantly migrants from the ex-Soviet Union. The major denominations are Russian Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Latin and Protestant. To this number can be added between 6-10,000 Messianic Jews.
- circa 150,000 Christian migrant workers and asylum seekers (mostly from Asia (Philippines, India, Sri Lanka), Eastern Europe and Africa (predominantly Eritrea). The major denominations are Latin, Eritrean Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and Protestant.

In Palestine (including East Jerusalem) there are circa 50,000 Christians, almost all of them Palestinian Arab. The major denominations are Greek Orthodox and Latin.

These figures constitute a major decrease in the number of Christian Palestinians and a phenomenal increase in the number of non-Arab Christians.¹

Defining the challenges that face the Christian communities in the Holy Land today is one way to describe them.

What are the challenges they face?

The Christian Palestinians are challenged, first and foremost, by the myriad levels of fragmentation

that has been imposed on them, denominational, historical and socio-political. Christian Palestinians are divided into a variety of denominations whose origins are to be found in the theological debates of the first centuries and the structural fragmentation of the Church in Europe thereafter. For many, these divisions and the resulting rivalries are a source of scandal. Many insist that their primary identity is Christian rather than Byzantine, Latin or Protestant. Ecumenical dialogue is not only a formality but a day to day reality, in which Christian Arabs, constantly aware of their small numbers, often insist: *“united we survive, divided we disappear”*.

However, fragmentation is not only denominational but also geopolitical. After 1948, Christian Palestinian Arabs, like their Muslim co-nationals, found themselves in three different socio-political realities. Some became citizens in the newly created State of Israel. Some found themselves in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, annexed to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan or in the Gaza Strip, occupied by Egypt. Many others found themselves in a diaspora, living as refugees. In 1967, East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were occupied by Israel. Today, many Christians in the West Bank and all Christians in the Gaza Strip live in areas that are defined as “autonomous”, politically divided, structurally unwieldy and unable to effectively function due to continued Israeli control of these territories.

The ongoing struggle for independence in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 and for equality within the territories that became the State of Israel in 1948, provide a platform on which Christian Palestinians can not only surmount their denominational divisions but also unite with Muslims in a joint program of action. Undoubtedly, the hope of many Christians engaged in the struggle for independence and equality is for a secular, democratic society, which would guarantee their rights as citizens.

“United we survive, divided we disappear.”

One of the major issues facing Christian Palestinians in the Holy Land is the migration of Christians from their homeland. This trend, which began in the nineteenth century, is perhaps one of the most important threats to the Christian

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1. Christian Palestinians constituted about 10% of the population of Palestine before 1948. The dramatic change occurred in the aftermath of 1948 and is due to the enormous increase in the number of Jews, the exit of many Palestinian refugees including Christians, the continued migration of Christian Palestinians from the Holy Land, and the decrease in the number of children per family within the Christian Palestinian community.

Arab communities throughout the Middle East today. There is a serious brain drain in the Christian community as the young, the educated and the professionals do indeed migrate leaving behind a more and more impoverished community. Christians are also having smaller and smaller families as compared to Muslims and Jews. The result is that despite an overall slight increase in the number of Christians from year to year, there is a significant decrease in their proportion in the overall population.

For *Christians living within Jewish Israeli society* (citizens, migrant workers and asylum seekers), their presence in the Holy Land is connected to the establishment of the state of Israel. Christian members of Jewish families and Christians claiming Jewish ancestry have been migrating to Israel since 1948, granted many of the same privileges as their Jewish co-nationals. After the massive waves of immigration from the countries of the ex-Soviet Union (about one million people between 1990 and 2005), the non-Arab Christians number about one quarter of the Christian citizens of Israel. New Christian populations of migrant workers and asylum seekers have established makeshift churches in places where the Church had not been present, at the very heart of Jewish towns and cities. Today, south Tel Aviv has one of the largest Christian populations in the Holy Land, tens of thousands of Christians, belonging to a plethora of churches, Eastern, Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical, as well as a diversity of sects.

Under pressure to assimilate into the Jewish population, some of these Christians (especially those who are citizens) adopt Jewish customs and even convert to Judaism. The assimilation process is even more successful with the children of these immigrants who are educated in the secular, Jewish Israeli school system, with almost no exposure to the faith and traditions of their parents. The State promotes conversion to Judaism for those perceived as having Jewish heritage and this is particularly developed within the Israeli army, where young people are encouraged to enter the “mainstream” by becoming formally Jewish.

The new Christian populations constitute a dilemma for a state that defines itself as Jewish. Whereas, Christian Palestinians are clearly distinguished from the Jewish mainstream because they are Arabs, the new Christians live at the very heart of Jewish society. The non-Arab Christian Israeli citizens have no political demands on the State but seek rather total integration. For those Christians who are not citizens, the labour migrants and asylum seekers, the precarious living conditions, exploitation in the labour market, lack of social benefits and growing racism (particularly directed against the Africans) are enormous challenges.

What is their future?

Ongoing discrimination against and marginalization of Christians in Palestine and Israel weakens already fragile communities that have an essential role to play in the lands

that constitute Christianity's place of birth. However, Christians, perhaps more than all other residents of the Holy Land today, are primarily threatened by the ongoing state of war between Israel and Palestine. The occupation of Palestinian lands, discrimination against Arab citizens in Israel, violence in the region and socio-political unrest are all elements that threaten the future of Christians as well as everyone else.



The Christian institutional presence is significant despite the small number of Christians. This institutional presence was built up over centuries and caters to increasing numbers of non-Christians. Educational institutions, medical facilities and welfare organisations constitute important arenas where Christian discourse and values can be promoted in the larger society. Among the best schools in Israel and Palestine are the Christian schools. The Christian institutional presence introduces the important reality of a Church that serves all and especially the neediest.

Christians have the vocation to contemplate the future with hope, actively engaging the challenges of

the present. To do this:

- Christians must develop a sense of their deep rootedness in the Holy Land and their vocation to be a united, coherent witness to Christ, the love of God and the Gospel of pardon and reconciliation wherever they live.
- Christians must identify those Muslims and Jews who can be allies in the struggle for a society in both Palestine and Israel in which freedom, dignity and the respect for human rights are foundational.
- Christians must engage in civil society, promoting justice, peace, equality, forgiveness and reconciliation as well as demanding the fostering of a civil identity in which basic belonging is based upon citizenship rather than on religious, confessional or ethnic identity.

Rev. David M. Neuhaus SJ, is an Israeli Jesuit priest and former Patriarchal Vicar for the Hebrew-speaking Catholic congregations in the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem.



THE RUSSIAN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Translated and adapted from information from Bishop Romanus

The Russian Orthodox community in Israel is a divided community with a long history in the Land. Established in 1882 under the control of the brother of Tsar Sergei Alexandrovich it began with schools and churches established in the areas inhabited by orthodox communities such as Nazareth, Beit Jala, Ramah, Kafr Yassin, Ma'alul, Nazareth, and Jerusalem.

Over time, the church went through various changes due to political movements and changes within the structure of the various orthodox communities. This has led to the community being split into three rough categories:

- Those under the care of the Moscow Patriarchate
- Those under the care of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem
- Those under the care of the Archbishopric of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Diaspora.

There are currently around 50,000 Russian Orthodox Christians in Israel

and Palestine who are concentrated around certain areas, mainly in the north of the country. These Russian Christian communities are, for the most part, closely linked to the Jewish communities within which they live.

At present there are around 14 Russian Orthodox churches or home churches including The Church of the Holy Trinity of Moscow, Jerusalem, The Church of Tantur, Bethlehem, The Church of the Prophet Elijah, Mount Carmel, Haifa, The Church of St Jeris (Qallayah), Nazareth, and The Church of St Tabitha in the Monastery of the Archangel Michael in Jaffa-Tel Aviv.

Alongside these churches there was a recognition that areas would need to be created to allow the burial of Russian Orthodox Christians in areas which were (or are currently) mainly Jewish. To this end a variety of areas were created and consecrated to allow for these burials to take place. These areas include land at Be'er Sheva, Arad, Karmiel, Jerusalem, Haifa, Ashdod, and Ashkelon.



AS I DRIVE AROUND THE GALILEE, THE LANDSCAPE SPEAKS OF CHRIST

Rev. Kate McDonald

My position as pastor obliges me to solidarity with everyone who suffers and to embody every effort for human freedom and dignity.

Oscar Romero

As I drive around the Galilee, the landscape speaks of Christ. The shores of the sea where he called his first disciples, and after his resurrection fed them a breakfast of grilled fish. The waters on which he walked and the stormy waves which he calmed. The green grass of the hillside where he proclaimed the Beatitudes and the hilltop where he was transfigured. The ancient stones of communities where he offered healing, pronounced forgiveness, shared food, and told story after story of the Kingdom of God.

It's a part of the land, idyllic in its beauty, which has captured the

imagination and inspired the faith of countless Christians who throughout the millennia have travelled to walk in the footsteps of Jesus.

In the late 1800s a young medical missionary from Scotland, Dr David Watt Torrance, arrived in the Galilean seaside town of Tiberias eager to spread the good news of Jesus to all who lived there. However, he could not have imagined the conditions in which the people were living, and as he witnessed the poverty around him and treated illnesses caused by inadequate hygiene and poor sanitation, his heart was overwhelmed with compassion for his neighbours' suffering.

He began a medical practice in his home, but as word spread of his ability as a doctor, and as he gained the trust of both Jews and

Muslims in the region, he required larger premises. In January 1894 he opened the first hospital in Tiberias with the specific purpose of offering medical care to all regardless of race or religion.

The hospital later specialised in maternity and paediatric care, and when it closed in the 1950s, the buildings were converted into a pilgrim guest-house, and then were renovated again in 2004 to become what is now the Scots Hotel. Dr Torrance's desire to offering healing and hospitality to all whom he encountered have continued to guide the Church of Scotland's presence here in Tiberias and in the wider Galilee. Though the expression of these values has changed over the years as the context has changed, they are still at the heart of all we do.

The hotel itself seeks to heal the relationship between the peoples of the land by employing staff and managers from across the cultures and religions. And through its Mission Partners in Tiberias and Jerusalem, the Church of Scotland works alongside roughly forty organisations throughout Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza who also strive to bring healing to this region in a variety of ways: through bringing together people from different communities for shared dialogue; through sending doctors and medical supplies into the West Bank and Gaza and to marginalised communities within Israel; through restoring dignity to former prisoners; through education and empowerment; and through challenging discriminatory and oppressive laws and policies.

St Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians: *For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body ... If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.* (1 Corinthians 12.12-13, 26)

As I drive around the Galilee, the landscape speaks of Christ. Not the signs and stones pointing back through time to two thousand years ago, but Christ's Body living, present, active among us. The Palestinian members of Christ's Body witness and worship and keep the faith alive in this land of the Holy One and have done ever since he walked this soil. They follow his example: in schools, welcoming children of

all faiths; in hospitals and clinics, offering care to all who come through their doors; in the midst of conflict, responding with non-violence; in the face of opposition, preaching love of neighbour.

But they gather as less than 2% of the population. They worship in a language whose status has been demoted with the passing of the Nation State Law in 2018. They pray in the churches of Bir'am and Iqrit, rebuilt in villages that were destroyed when the State of Israel was established. They sing hymns with a longing for homes to which they cannot return.

Beyond the Galilee, in the West Bank and Gaza, walls and checkpoints and roads and settlements separate members of the Body of Christ from their holy sites and from their brothers and sisters in faith.

So much cause for honour. And yet so much suffering. So many reasons to rejoice. And yet so much need for healing.

A body is diminished if one part is missing, or if one part is in pain, or if one part is injured. Pain is tiring. It prevents the body from functioning to the fullness of its ability. A body longs for wholeness and health in order to do Christ's work in the world.

This land, idyllic in its beauty, captures the imagination and inspires the faith of countless Christians who travel today to walk in the footsteps of Christ. But those of us from the international church — those who

visit, those who live here, all of us guests in this place — we have a responsibility to open our eyes to bear witness to the conditions in which people are living because of injustice and occupation, to allow our hearts to be overwhelmed with compassion.

If we claim that part of our mission in this land as the Church of Scotland, as part of the international church, is to healing, we must be attentive to our fellow members of the Body of Christ who are in pain, to listen when they name their hurt. We must use our strength to draw the attention of the rest of the body to hear their cries. We must name with courage the cause of the suffering. And we must amplify the voices of healing, be guided by their wisdom, and join them in their efforts.

As I drive around the Galilee, the landscape speaks of Christ. In his name, I pray for his Body, for all people who suffer, and for healing throughout this land.

Peace, peace to the far and the near, says the Lord; and I will heal them. (Isaiah 57:19)

Rev. Kate McDonald serves the local congregation of St Andrew's Galilee, works as chaplain to the staff at the Scots Hotel, Tiberias and walks alongside the local Christian congregations and Church of Scotland partners in the northern areas of Israel and Palestine.



THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OF GAZA

Sami El-Yousef

There are close to two million Palestinians that call the crowded Gaza strip their home (roughly 15% of all Palestinians worldwide) living on an area that does not exceed 365 sq. km, making it one of the most densely places on earth. As far as the Christian presence, a formal household survey conducted by the YMCA-Gaza and published in May 2014 puts the figure at 1,313 (89% Greek Orthodox and 8.9% Catholic). Today, that figure is estimated to be around 1,000 people.

Churches and Christian Institutions of Gaza

The largest denomination of Christians in Gaza is the Greek

Orthodox represented by a Bishop who resides in the convent belonging to the 1,600-year-old Saint Porphyrius Church. As for the Catholic Church, it is represented by two priests from the order of the Incarnate Word and they live on the complex of the Holy Family Church in the Zeitoun neighbourhood. There is also an Anglican church on the complex of the Ahli Arab Hospital, though there is no local presence to speak of.



There is also a growing presence of the Baptist church. As for the religious congregations, the Rosary Sisters, the Daughters of Charity; and the Sisters of the Incarnate Word all have a presence there, serving the Christian institutions and churches in Gaza.

The Christian institutional presence is diverse and provides services that is proportionately much larger than the Christian population. There are in total five Christian schools in Gaza providing quality education to approximately 3,000 students in a co-educational setting. The five are: The Latin Patriarchate School, The Holy Family School, the Rosary Sisters School, the Greek Orthodox

School, and the Lighthouse School. There are about 180 Christian students served through these schools with the majority being Muslim. In the health sector, the Ahli Arab Hospital, the three clinics of the Near East Council of Churches in Shajaia, Darraj, and Rafah, as well as the Caritas clinic provide quality medical services to tens of thousands of Gazans on an annual basis, let alone their community outreach programs. More recently St. John's Ophthalmic Hospital opened a local branch in Gaza city. In addition, the Near East of Council operates four vocational training centres offering technical training to hundreds every year; as well as implements a variety of community development and employment projects. The Myrrh Bearers society offers a variety of programs to aid the community. The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) with its 500 strong members provide sports, cultural, educational and social activities in an atmosphere of respect and tolerance. Finally, the Daughters of Charity operate a home to care for the physically challenged and abandoned children, as well as senior citizens.



Boys playing football at Gaza YMCA

An important element of the life of the Christian institutions in Gaza is that they are continuously looking for ways to expand and be

of more service to the community. Expansions have taken place at practically every Christian institution in Gaza. These are not a sign of a dying community waiting for an exit visa to leave Gaza, but rather of a vibrant community that sees itself as an integral part of society in Gaza eager to make its contributions to the common good.

Christian Interventions

During wars and emergencies, a number of Christian charities come quickly to the rescue and provide financial and moral support to alleviate the suffering of the masses in Gaza including cash assistance, food packages, hygiene packages, and clean drinking water. Some Christian institutions open up their doors and hearts and convert their premises as temporary shelters to house the countless displaced people and as distribution centres. Immediately after the wars and emergencies, Christian charities immediately respond. For example, after the 2014 war, a number of homes and institutions went through a program of rehabilitation to fix the war damages. In response to the various reports on the level of trauma sustained by the whole Gaza population, and in particular the children, a massive psychosocial program of intervention was launched in dozens of schools, kindergartens and health facilities, reaching tens of thousands of people. Such support continued well after the war giving the Christian institutions an elevated status within the various communities in Gaza that were touched as a result of such

presence. Many within the Christian community reported after the war that the people of Gaza appreciated the Christian institutional presence as they were seen to be at the forefront of the delivery of emergency services during and after the war and are an integral component of the malaise of Gaza. Thus, better relations seem to have been fostered leading to a better acceptance and understanding between the two faiths.

“an integral part of society in Gaza eager to make contributions to the common good.”

In addition to emergency intervention, various churches and church institutions have provided a variety of programs to sustain the Christian presence through supporting the youth through university scholarships, job creation and capacity building programs. The pastoral programs offered by the Holy Family Church is unparalleled anywhere in our region. The two scout troupes (Orthodox and Catholic) are regrouping and participating in general activities along with other troupes.

Current Situation

The situation in Gaza witnessed a relative calm since the 2014 ceasefire was declared. However, in recent

months and with the humanitarian situation on the verge of total collapse, a series of protest events were organized on the border with Israel. This has continued and climaxed with another two-day major escalation in early May resulting again in major destruction and loss of innocent life. Additionally, the cuts in USAID funded projects as well as de-funding UNRWA by the U.S. government has exasperated an already fragile situation and caused additional suffering to hundreds of thousands. In light of the continuing humanitarian disaster, the near total collapse of water, sewage and electric networks, and the sky-rocketing unemployment figures, it is very likely that the situation will continue to worsen, unless there is a real effort to lift the blockade and allow people to live a dignified life. Only a political solution will bring peace and justice to the Palestinians and security to the Israelis.



Christian Presence and Witness

With this brief survey about the small yet vibrant Christian presence in Gaza, it is important to point out that the services provided by the Christian institutions in education,

health, and social services are provided to all segments of society with no discrimination with the Christian values at their core. These Christian institutions were never intended to serve the Christians alone, but rather the marginalized, weak and poor and those in need of such services regardless of their background. These institutions are trusted and respected by all including most Muslims who see the value of such Christian presence. Such institutions certainly have a huge role to play in interfaith dialogue which is lived day in and day out rather than be preached in academic circles. There is also a huge role that these institutions play in building local societies. In many ways the Church and its institutions end up doing the work of governments, and this cannot be more striking than their contributions in Gaza.

Sami-El Yousef is Chief Executive Officer at the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem having previously served with Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA) - Pontifical Mission for Palestine (PMP) as regional director since 2009.

***Al Ahli Hospital** is in the centre of Gaza City and treats over 45,000 patients each year. It is a haven of peace and hope in the middle of one of the world's most troubled areas.*

Restrictions on movement and imports mean that the Al Ahli Hospital is often without basic medicines and life is made even more stressful with limited supplies of electricity, food, water, fuel and .personnel

***Gaza YMCA**, Established in 1952 by a group of young people working in sports, social services and education to work with the Palestinian community in the Gaza Strip without discrimination related to religion, gender or nationality. The Gaza YMCA also provides youth programmes, sports activities, training seminars and courses, as well as running local events and festivals. It provides video conferencing and internet facilities between Gaza members and those at the YMCA in East Jerusalem.*



THREE IN ONE: THE IDENTITY OF AN ISRAELI MESSIANIC JEW - UNDERSTANDING THEIR THEOLOGY AND INDIFFERENCE TOWARDS THE ISRAELI/PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

Dr Salim J. Munayer

Our identities are often multifaceted and complex. Some pieces of our identity we choose. We place ourselves in groups to bring order, feel emotional connection, and find understanding. Other facets of our identity are visible and difficult to leave behind.

One especially intricate and often

misunderstood identity is that of an Israeli Messianic Jew. Inherent in the term, are three different complex and sometimes conflicting identities. One of the challenges the community faces is its struggle to define its own identity. While the identity cannot be clearly defined, it can be better understood by exploring the historical context and

theology of the community.

As we explore this identity, it may become clearer why Israeli Messianic Jews tend to be indifferent towards issues of justice in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. First, we must define the three main components of the identity.

Definition of Terms

Israeli can be understood as a civil or geographical designation. During the creation of the state of Israel, what was originally intended to be a state for the Jews, became a Jewish state. This created an undeniable correlation between being Israeli and being Jewish. The boundaries became blurred between these two identities and remain interchangeable to this day. The shadow of the Holocaust continues to shape the Israeli identity as there is always a perceived threat of extinction and an emphasis on survival. Through this, they have developed strong attitudes of self-reliance, independence, and national pride.

Messianic is a description of faith that can be equated to the term Christian, stemming from the word "Messiah". Christianity came from a movement birthed in a Jewish religious and social context. This is key to understanding Messianic Jews who feel a deep connection to the first century Jews who embraced Jesus as Messiah. Early Jewish followers of Jesus continued to observe Jewish traditions. However, this continual observance conflicted with the growing number of non-Jews in the church.

It was not until the 19th century that Messianic Jews began to break away from the Christian culture and create Jewish-friendly spaces. It is important to note that at the core of the faith of Messianic Jews are the same core beliefs of the evangelical Christian community. The difference lies in how a Messianic Jew lives

out their faith in comparison to a Christian.

The identity of Jew can be a religious, ethnic, or cultural term. However, since its formation, Jewishness could not be clearly defined - there is simply no single definition. It is agreed upon that it is often a subjective identity, constructed by the individual themselves, by gentiles, and by the state. In modern Israel today, a Jew is defined as one who is born of a Jewish mother. In terms of religion, the state of Israel only recognizes Rabbinical Orthodox Judaism and not Reformed or Conservative Jewish practice. During the 1st century, the Jewish religious life was a defining element of their identity. However, the religion of Judaism is no longer the decisive element in Jewish identity for many and encompasses more than a religion.

Brief History of the Israeli Messianic Jewish Identity

The Israeli Messianic Jewish identity can be traced back to the British Mandate. Prior to 1948, small congregations were formed where they referred to themselves as Hebrew Christians and emphasized the use of Hebrew terminology instead of classical Christian terminology. Many Messianic Jews continued to encourage a Torah-observant lifestyle. Before 1948, a significant number of Messianic Jews moved to England, which brought the already small community near to extinction. Those who remained, distanced themselves from foreign missionaries and shifted strongly towards identifying themselves with

the land and expressing allegiance to the state of Israel.

During the years following 1948, the community grew as immigration flowed and many Christian missionaries came to establish a presence in the newly found state of Israel. After 1967, the Messianic Jewish community interpreted the occupation of Jerusalem as a sign that would herald the second coming. They have a deep belief that God continues to act in and through history so historical events must be taken very seriously. This event stirred in them a deeper sense of patriotism and led to an idealised obligation to serve in the Israeli Army. Their military service became a focus of their pride and identity in the state of Israel. Zionism moved from simply being a political belief, to becoming a fundamental aspect of their theology.

The Messianic Jewish community continued to grow through the 1970s and worked hard to develop an identity that was separate from the earlier missionary and church culture. In the 1980s, there was an effort to create unity between congregations and an emphasis placed on evangelism by partnering with local churches. Around this time the decision was made by the community to no longer identify as a Hebrew Christian, but instead as a Messianic Jew. This transformation was largely influenced by the American Jewish community.

The 1990s were characterized by an influx of Russian Christians who immigrated from the former Soviet

Union and an increase in para-church organizations which focused on children and youth ministry. During the 2000s, the Israeli Messianic Jewish community grew exponentially. Different theological streams developed based upon different beliefs on Torah observance and charismatic expressions.

Identifying an Intricate Theology

The Israeli Messianic Jewish identity and theology is inextricably tied to the themes of God, the Land, and the Jewish People. It is in exploring these interwoven themes that we are better able to understand this community's beliefs and practices. They see God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Israel, the one and only God, and the God of their ancestors. Their heroes of faith are the prophets and patriarchs of ancient Israel. Their language in describing God is rich in biblical terminology, especially from the Old Testament. Messianic Jews often begin with a theology that starts with an eschatology of the land and Israel's miraculous triumph over its enemies, all accompanied by a narrative of suffering and distinct separation.

The majority of Messianic Jews were not born in Israel, yet the land is a crucial part of their identity. They understand that God is the ultimate owner of the land, but the land of Israel is the covenant inheritance of the Jewish people.

This land is a place of conflict, but more importantly for them, it is a place of promise, where their

eschatological hope lies. They have always been adamant supporters of Zionism as they believe this is a fulfilment of biblical prophecy. The Messianic Jewish community were greatly influenced by political dispensationalism and believe scriptural and historical events are interconnected. Their ethical and moral beliefs are similar to those of fundamentalist Christians. Most hold a literal hermeneutic, especially in reference to scriptures related to Israel. Messianic Jews feel they are returning to the land of their ancestors and believe living here is an important step in their faith journey. Choosing to live in this context, not only connects and strengthens their own faith, but affirms their understanding of the chosenness of the Jewish people. They feel a sense of belonging amidst the Jewish people and a responsibility in seeing the promise of salvation for all Israel come to fruition.

Although the community feels some sense of belonging and purpose, they are not without theological and practical challenges. Theological differences are often brushed aside and not openly discussed. This has created a trend of conflict avoidance and homogeneous fellowship. The most pressing and often most divisive questions facing the community are "*Who is Yeshua?*" and "*How do we understand the persons of the Godhead and their interrelation?*" The specific question of the Trinity has tormented the community and even caused some to compromise their view of Jesus as God in light of rabbinical law. The community walks a line between the influence of traditional

Judaism and Protestant evangelical understanding. On one side, they desire to connect with their Jewish identity, so they follow the Torah and rabbinic leaders. They believe the Torah holds lasting significance for the Jew who follows Jesus as it refers to God's unique revelation to the people of Israel. On the other side, the majority of Jewish believers, have developed a more charismatic interpretation which acknowledges the Torah's significance yet leans away from strict observance. This tension between the two groups has the power to divide communities and cause a crisis of identity for many.

This deep theological belief in the importance of Israel and their end time theology has influenced their concept of justice, especially in relation to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Their national identity has been conflated with their spiritual identity, so it is understandable that Messianic Jews choose to identify strongly with the nation of Israel. Neglected in many Messianic Jewish writings is the issue of justice as they tend to align with their Israeli identity and view security as the primary concern.

An existing, underlying fear about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is that to deal with issues of inequality, corruption, and oppression by the state of Israel would be to challenge their own Israeli Messianic Jewish identity. There is a pessimism towards the idea of peace based upon their scriptural views that peace will only come in the land when prophecy is fulfilled. A rare, incarnational hermeneutic emphasizes holiness,

justice, and peace which seeks to bring Jewish and Palestinian people into relationship. Some Messianic Jews argue that biblical justice cannot be divorced from God's election of Israel. Love, justice, and mercy have to be present in the land.

The community continues to wrestle with their identity and asks the question, "Who are we?" They are a community plagued by difficult questions of identity and theology. They fight to remain relevant and active in a context of confounding cultures and tangible conflict. They live within a Jewish majority and alongside a Palestinian Christian faith community, as a Messianic minority. Their political and social context has greatly influenced their identity. They are marginalized within the state of Israel and tend to feel the most belonging among the secular communities more than the religious community. Even though they support the Jewish people, the majority does not understand nor relate to the religious Jewish community. Their theology of the land and Israeli nationalism has severed relationship with their Palestinian Christian neighbours.

In recent years, the Messianic movement, like the rest of Israeli society, has moved to the right politically and religiously. Corollary to this shift, is a strong desire to identify with their Jewish identity which continues to widen the gap between them and their Palestinian brothers and sisters. Even so, there is a small portion of the Messianic Jewish community which participates in genuine efforts for reconciliation.

This article only represents a brief glimpse into a young movement and complex identity that is haunted by a painful history and confronted by present challenges today.

[Adapted from *Through My Enemy's Eyes* by Salim J. Munayer & Lisa Loden]



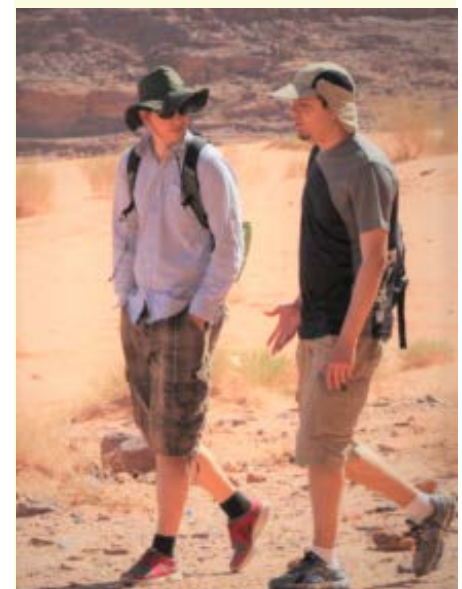
Dr Salim J. Munayer is founder and director of Musalaha Ministry of Reconciliation and former academic dean of Bethlehem Bible College. He has published several books on Reconciliation, the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, and Christians in Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

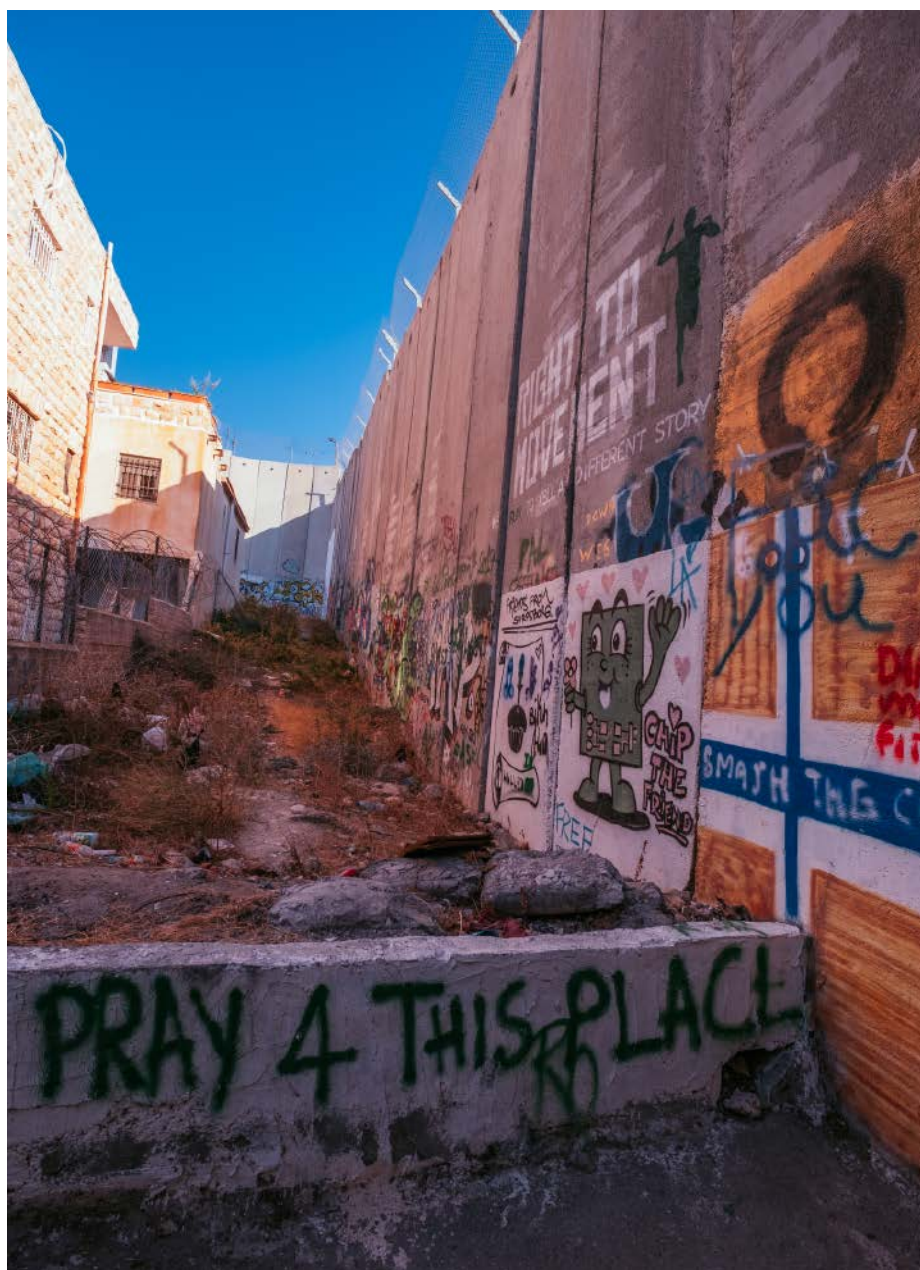


ABOUT MUSALAHA

Musalaha is a non-profit organization that promotes and facilitates reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds.

For those who have a common faith, they advocate and facilitate reconciliation encounters among Israeli and Palestinian believers based on the life and teaching of Jesus. Within the wider community, they seek to impact our societies through building bridges among Muslims, Christians, and Jews according to Abrahamic moral principles contained in all three faiths.





SABEEL 1ST INTERNATIONAL GATHERING 2ND - 7TH DECEMBER 2019

Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre is preparing for its 1st International Gathering this year. The dates are Sunday 1st (the gathering will begin on Monday 2nd) to Saturday 7th December 2019, in Bethlehem, Palestine.

We begin this introductory rationale with a big welcome to every one of our friends. We would love to have you join us. Come and bring your friends. It will be a great encouragement to have you with us. It is said that theology is like a cross which vertically leads humanity to God, and horizontally leads us to our neighbour. For Palestinian Christians, this link was damaged during the Nakba. Unable to go back to our former theological thinking while struggling to find a way forward. Whether it was Western feelings of guilt, the theology of Christian literalists, or the ideology of Zionism, the bible was used to grant approval to the tragedy of the Palestinian people. This is the Faith Nakba, from which various Palestinian Christian theologies have sprung. We at Sabeel believe it is now time to celebrate these theologies, the answers they provide, and the questions they raise; and to gather to recommit ourselves to keep on the struggle until justice, liberation, and peace are realized.

As many of you know, Sabeel has been able, over the years, to address many pertinent issues including that of Jerusalem, Christian Zionism, Jubilee, Palestinian Christianity, the Bible, and many others. In our 1st international gathering we hope to do the same by looking at some of

the pressing issues that challenge and threaten the very existence of our people. Confronting and addressing these issues are an essential part of our faith and commitment to both oppressed and oppressors. We must take seriously the words of Christ to love our neighbour as we love ourselves.

The Gathering is a chance to learn/be updated about the current political situation and about the ongoing realities on the ground. Alongside this, you will have the chance to worship and have fellowship with the Christian community and to meet with our Muslim and Jewish brothers and sisters.

What is special about this gathering?

- **Working within the Christian community**

This gathering will bring together various organisations working for a just peace in Palestine and Israel. Individual organisations will take part of the programme to illustrate their work and you will have a chance to meet, interact, question, and work alongside these organisations. Sabeel believe that, in order for work towards justice and peace to be effective, it needs to be a joint effort. Therefore, we have brought together the following organisations from a variety of backgrounds: Kairos Palestine, Bethlehem Bible College, Musalaha, al-Liqa, and Dar al-Kalima. Each organisation will concentrate on a specific topic from cultural resistance to

Christian Zionism.

- **Nonviolent action to achieve a just peace**

Taking the lead from the Kumi Now initiative the gathering will explore how, alongside organizations from across the world, we can form a worldwide community of action to achieve a just peace in the land of the Holy One.

We will explore how Kumi Now works, its effects so far, and hear from some of the organisations involved in the first year of the project.

Based on the principles of inclusivity, justice (in accordance with international law), and nonviolence, we will seek to develop on the work of the Kumi Now project and, with the help of various speakers, will begin to explore how this can be developed internationally, creating a Kumi Now Global initiative to sit alongside Kumi Now Palestine.

Again, we call on our friends to come and join us in this important gathering. Your presence gives us hope and encouragement as together we continue on the path of peace and justice.

Rev. Naim Ateek
Chair, Sabeel Board

Costs & Information

The Gathering is scheduled to take place following the Kairos Conference (29th November) to allow those wishing to attend both to do so.

The cost of the Gathering is \$1,250 (\$400 single supplement) and this will cover accommodation, lunch, dinner and all conference costs.

Following the conference, Sabeel will hold a visit for those who wish to spend some time visiting the Holy Sites in Nazareth, Sea of Galilee, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and the Jordan River. This will cost an additional \$750 (\$200 single supplement) and numbers are limited.

To register go to
www.sabeel.org

PROGRAM OUTLINE

Below is the outline of the program for the Gathering. Please note that this is an early version of the program and it is liable to change before December.

Sunday - December 1st

Arrivals

Registration desk open 2pm - 7pm

Hotel Check-in

Welcome Dinner

Monday - December 2nd

Update on the current political landscape in Palestine

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|---------|--|
| 7:00am | Breakfast |
| 8:15am | Opening Worship 'The Faith Nakba' |
| 10:30am | UN Presentation - Response from the Palestinian Authority |
| 12:00pm | PLO/Palestinian Authority - Response from Civil Society |
| 1:00pm | Lunch |
| 3:00pm | Israeli member of Knesset - Response |
| | KAIROS PALESTINE |
| 4:30pm | Palestinian Christians - Response from Muslim Community and International Church |
| 7:00pm | Dinner with the Christian Community of Bethlehem |

Tuesday - December 3rd

Realities on the Ground

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|--------|-------------------------|
| 7:00am | Breakfast |
| 8:00am | Morning Devotions |
| 9:00am | Tours with various NGOs |
| 1:00pm | Lunch |

BETHLEHEM BIBLE COLLEGE

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| 2:00pm | This afternoon will focus on the work of Bethlehem Bible College, the Evangelical Christian Community, and their work combating Christian Zionism |
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| 6:00pm | Dinner |
| 7:00pm | Debriefing |

Wednesday - December 4th

Meeting with our Muslim and Jewish Brothers and Sisters

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|--------|---|
| 7:00am | Breakfast |
| 8:00am | Morning Devotions |
| 9:00am | Half day with Muslim community in Jerusalem |
| 1:00pm | Lunch |
| | Meeting the Jewish Community and Jewish organisations |
| 3:00pm | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Israel - political landscape • Nation State Law (Basic Law) • Israeli Left - challenges and possibilities |
| 7:00pm | Dinner and evening event with the Jewish community |

Thursday - December 6th

Kumi Now

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|--------|------------------------------|
| 7:00am | Breakfast |
| 8:00am | Morning Devotions |
| | What is Kumi? - Bible Study |
| 9:00am | How to Kumi |
| | Kumi Organisations |
| 1:00pm | BBQ Lunch at Tent of Nations |
| 2:00pm | Nonviolence Workshop |

AL LIQA CENTRE

- This afternoon will focus on Palestinian interfaith relations, anti-Muslim theology, and the work of the Al Liqa Centre.
- 3:00pm
- 6:00pm Dinner
- 7:00pm Debriefing

Friday - December 6th

Culture and Resistance

- 7:00am Breakfast
- 8:00am Morning Devotions
- Places of resistance
- Nabi Saleh
 - Bilin
 - Nilin
- 9:00am
- 1:00pm Lunch

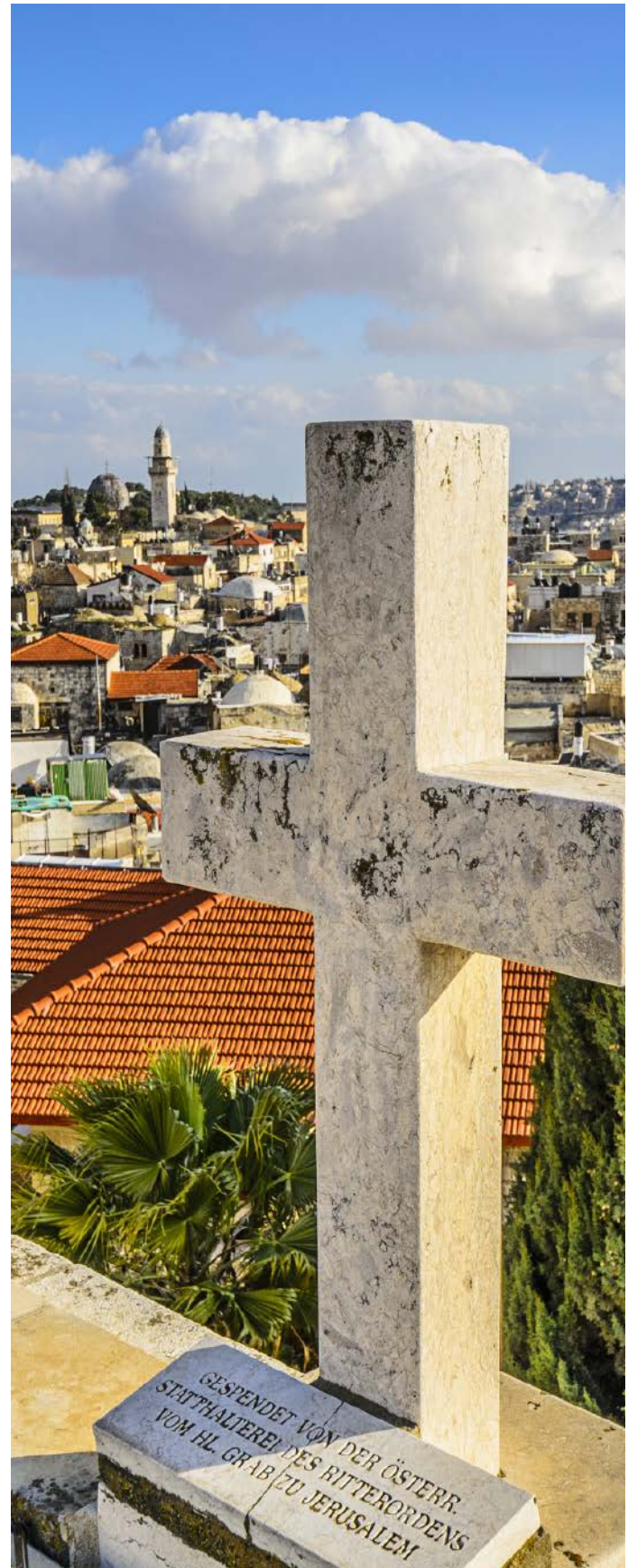
DAR AL KALIMA

- This afternoon will be a time to learn about culture and resistance in Palestine.
- 2:00pm Hearing from artists from throughout Palestine and taking part in workshops demonstrating some of the work being done at Dar al Kalima
- 6:00pm Dinner
- 8:00pm Debrief

Saturday - December 7th

Departures

We invite anyone who wishes to join us for the lighting of the Christmas Tree in Manger Square, Bethlehem this evening.



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KUMI NOW

An inclusive call for nonviolent action to achieve a just peace

Join us as we bring organisations, churches, and other groups
from across religions and nations together in short, simple
actions to achieve a just peace in Palestine and Israel

www.kuminow.com

PURPOSE STATEMENT *of* SABEEL

Sabeel is an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians. Inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, this liberation theology 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 a spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities. The word 'Sabeel' is Arabic for 'the way' and also a 'channel' or 'spring' of life-giving water.

Sabeel also works to promote a more accurate international awareness regarding the identity, presence, and witness of Palestinian Christians as well as their contemporary concerns.

It 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.

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