

# CORNER STONE



## *Greetings and Prayers for the Millennium*

In this special Bethlehem issue of *Cornerstone*, we investigate the nuances of the millennium, the birth of Christ, its meaning to Christians living in Israel-Palestine and around the world. We are honored to share with you millennium wishes, greetings and prayers from Christian leaders in Jerusalem.

### **His Beatitude Diodoros Diodoros I, Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem**

We follow with great interest the work and activities of Sabeel in enhancing the ecumenical relations between Christians through the meetings and conferences which it organizes, as well as to the strengthening of the Christian presence and witness in the Holy Land. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate is happy to extend its hearty greetings to the Sabeel Center and all of its friends inside and outside the country as we enter the new millennium. May God use this new era in the history of the church to be a time for closer relationships, cooperation, and love among people. Our prayer is for the establishment of peace and stability in Jerusalem, the Holy Land, the region, and throughout the world.

### **Archbishop Mar Swerios Malki Murad, Syrian Orthodox Patriarchal Vicar of Jerusalem and Jordan**

We thank the Almighty for His abundant graces, especially for granting us the privilege to enter the coming century and enjoy the blessings of the third millennium of Christ's birth. We look forward to the prevalence of peace and equity among humankind, so that every individual may live in happiness and security, especially in the Holy Land. We pray that the various Christian communities will live in love, cooperation and sincerity, so that we may all celebrate together the birth of Our Lord, and later His Resurrection, and thereby reach our ultimate goal towards a genuine interfaith union.

### **Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem**

The heralding of the twenty-first century and the joyous celebration of the anniversary of the birth of Christ in a lowly manger in Bethlehem, is an opportunity for all Christians to express and to witness the strengthening of our faith in Jesus Christ Our Lord. We pray that it may also usher in a blessed and fresh millennium, full of love, and understanding, with a more open acceptance of the other as our neighbor, and a determination that peace with dignity will take root and flourish in all nations, so that Christians, as well as Jews and Muslims, will truly rediscover the value and symbol of Jerusalem as a City of Peace.

### **Archbishop Dr. Anba Abraham, Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem and the Near East**

We ask the Lord to help us witness for Christ through our good deeds that glorify His Holy Name and to stand firm in front of all difficulties and obstacles. We pray that the everlasting peace of God will fill the hearts of all Palestinian Christians, teach them to be forgiving, merciful and loving as the Lord who gave Himself for us. We hope and wish that justice and peace will prevail all over the area and the whole world.

### **Father Rafiq Khoury, Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem**

At the eve of the great Jubilee of the year 2000, this Christmas and the coming year are of particular importance for every one of us, for our country, for the entire humankind. We wish a year of liberation for the oppressors and the oppressed, for the poor and for the rich, of reconciliation in Jerusalem, of hope for our people, of justice and peace in our Holy Land, of dialogue and understanding between the children of Abraham and between every man and woman in our world.

## “Let us go now to Bethlehem . . .” (Luke 2:15) by Naim Ateek

*This is a speech delivered by Rev. Ateek to the United Nations earlier this year in Rome. It addresses the project entitled “Bethlehem 2000,” a series of events and celebrations designed to mark the 2000th birthday of Christ in Bethlehem. It also addresses what Christ’s birthday may mean to contemporary Palestinians.*

### **Bethlehem 2000 brings us together:**

The end of a millennium evokes both joy and sadness, expectations as well as anxieties. It is natural to have these mixed feelings at such a great juncture in the history of the world. For millions of people, Bethlehem 2000 is more a cultural symbol than a religious celebration. The year 2000 signifies for many the end of an epoch and the beginning of another; an opening for new opportunities and hope for a better future.

Many people, standing on the threshold of a new century, would like to take a good hard look at the past and ask serious questions about the state of the world in which we live. Have we as humans provided a quality of life that respects the dignity and humanity of all people? Do we respect the value of all life in our world? From this perspective, the year 2000 is not only a milestone but a mirror that will help us look at ourselves and at our brothers and sisters around us.

Yet for many Christians, Bethlehem 2000 is primarily a religious celebration. It stands for the significant event of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is this religious and spiritual event which makes Bethlehem 2000 possible. Furthermore, it is in the light of the person of Jesus Christ, his life and teaching, that we can assess where we are today. For many of us, Jesus Christ is a measure for true humanity. It is appropriate, therefore, as we celebrate Bethlehem 2000 to remember Jesus Christ and what he stood for when he was living in Palestine and what he still stands for today.

At the same time, Bethlehem 2000 has a powerful social and even political significance. It helps us focus on Palestine

and the Palestinian people, both Muslim and Christian. It reminds us of the Palestinians who in 1948 were dispossessed. Many were expelled from their homes and have been struggling for justice and peace ever since. Bethlehem 2000 opens before us a vista to see the face of Palestinians who long for a secure peace based on justice. Yet, Bethlehem and its vicinity are besieged by Israeli settlements which continue to expand through the confiscation of Palestinian land. The area of Bethlehem witnesses these days an almost unprecedented attack on its environs by the settlers. As we commemorate Bethlehem 2000, it is apparent to many of us that many of these settlers are determined to grab as much land as

*A vision of hope is needed for the Palestinians as well as for billions of people who will soon stand on the threshold of the new century with a prayer in their hearts that the future will bring peace and prosperity.*

they can and fragment the area by chopping it to small pieces. One recalls here the words of Israel’s former foreign minister, Ariel Sharon who, after the Wye River agreement encouraged the settlers to grab every hilltop of the West Bank before the implementation of the agreement.

Several months ago, Israeli settlers who were heavily armed came with their bulldozers and started uprooting olive and fig trees from the land of the village of Artas south of Bethlehem, including land of the ancient, historic monastery there. It is not only the settlers who are threatening the Bethlehem area: the Jerusalem municipality is equally encroaching on Bethlehem land. Since 1967 the Jerusalem municipality has been annexing land from the city of Bethlehem. Bethlehem 2000 has highlighted an added critical dimension by exposing the onslaught of Israeli policy against Bethlehem.

In the midst of so much hopelessness and despair of so many people who see that the peace process lacks the proper

ingredients for a just peace, it is important to focus our attention on Bethlehem with the hope that we can receive fresh inspiration for a better future. What our world needs today is a new vision for a new millennium inspired by Christ’s teaching and life. A vision of hope is needed for the Palestinians as well as for billions of people who will soon stand on the threshold of the new century with a prayer in their hearts that the future will bring peace and prosperity.

### **Bethlehem 2000 stirs our memory:**

Bethlehem 2000 reminds us that Jesus was born in the small town of Bethlehem, Palestine, in a humble setting, of a humble mother, in stressful conditions, and under a foreign rule.

Bethlehem 2000 helps us remember the angel of the Lord whose message began with the words, “Do not be afraid...” (Luke 2:10). A message which is desperately needed today. We want the new millennium to dispel the fears of millions of people who need to live in peace and security. We think of choirs and music when we think of the angels who sang, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill towards people” (Luke 2:14). This is, indeed, God’s formula for peace. When people recognize God’s sovereignty, and give God the glory, there will be peace. Peace in turn issues in good will among people. This formula is simple and clear; yet throughout the last 2000 years, we humans have managed to reverse it continuously. We removed God from the center and placed the human being instead, and the whole formula was thrown off balance. Consequently, instead of peace we have been reaping wars and bloodshed; and instead of goodwill we experience ill will and conflict. For many people the new formula reads, “glory to humans in the highest, and on earth conflict, ill will towards people”. Surely we need to go back to God’s formula for peace.

Bethlehem 2000 reminds us of Mary, a young woman who received a deep in-

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sight about the nature of God. In her moving song, the Magnificat, she praises and celebrates the almighty God who "...has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty..." (Luke 1:51-53). This causes us to celebrate women's insights, contributions, and ministry among us.

Bethlehem 2000 reminds us of laborers like the shepherds who work long hours in order to provide a decent living for their families. The holy family helps us focus on the importance of the family especially of women and mothers who carry great burdens and responsibilities not only through childbirth but equally in the upbringing of children.

Bethlehem 2000 brings to mind some good memories that are connected with the birth of Christ. Although there was no room in the inn, surely there were people who extended hospitality to Joseph and Mary and helped Mary in giving birth. Bethlehem 2000 helps us to be thankful for the goodness in people who act kindly and mercifully.

Bethlehem 2000 makes us think of the Magi who traveled from afar to pay homage and respect, not to the high and mighty, but to a humble and lowly child.

Bethlehem 2000 brings to mind the old man Simeon who gave thanks to God for the birth of the baby Jesus, thus celebrating the gift of life.

Bethlehem 2000 brings to memory the milieu of Jesus' birth when Palestine was under Roman occupation. Contemporary Palestine has been recognized as occupied territory by the United Nations for years. Bethlehem 2000 helps us remember all the oppressed people of the world.

Bethlehem 2000 helps us think of refugees. In the infancy narrative of Matthew's Gospel, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus became refugees in order to escape the brutality of Herod. There are more than 15 million refugees in the world today including approximately five million Palestinians who subsist in miserable conditions and who live in the hope of return.

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Bethlehem 2000 also reminds us of the massacre of children at the time of Herod who was moved by jealousy and egoism. It makes us focus on the suffering of the innocent. Herod brings to mind people of power who abuse their authority, oppress and brutalize others, and deny them their basic human rights.

#### **Bethlehem 2000 inspires us:**

Behind the Bethlehem 2000 event stands the person of Jesus Christ. When we think of him, we think of a humble man of great integrity and strength. We think of a person who stood with those in need and with the marginalized; a person who refused to compromise the truth and had a commitment to non-violence. Jesus Christ preached love of others even the love of one's enemy. He critiqued established religion which emphasized the strict adherence to the law with its rites and ceremonies while neglecting the more important basics of justice, mercy, and faith (Matthew 23:23).

Any vision for the millennium must come from the spirit of Jesus Christ; a vision to the wise and learned as the Magi as well as to the simple and common as the Shepherds. It is a vision for peace and reconciliation. I believe that as we reflect on Bethlehem 2000, we can lift a vision to all the people of the world; a vision inspired by Christ that causes us to make several paradigm shifts as we enter the new millennium. It encourages us to shed the old paradigms that have long restricted and enslaved us. This vision can be translated into five models.

1. Bethlehem 2000 inspires us

toward ecumenism. Within the Church of Jesus Christ, the old paradigm of denominationalism and sectarianism should give way to the paradigm of ecumenism. The last 2000 years have been marred by divisions within the churches. The first millennium saw the separation of most of the Christians of the Middle East. The second millennium saw the separation between Eastern and Western Christians. For the last 50 years there have been genuine attempts to find reconciliation within the Body of Christ through the work of the Ecumenical Movement. The third millennium should mark the reconciliation of brothers and sisters within the church. We need to celebrate the unity and rich mosaic of the church within the diversity of its traditions, Orthodox,

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## Church of the Nativity by *Qustandi Shomali*

For most Christians, the Church of the Nativity is the cradle of Christianity and one of the earliest Christian structures. The original Basilica, erected in the 4th century by Emperor Constantine and completely destroyed in the Samaritan Revolt of AD 529, was replaced during the reign of Justinian (527-65) on the same site, by a larger Basilica, slightly different in plan and incorporating different parts of the original building. The Basilica was built in the shape of a cross with a trilateral apse.

Evidence of the turbulent history of the church can be readily seen in the fabric of the building; for centuries it was one of the most fought-over of the Holy Places. It was only by chance that this building escaped destruction during the Persian invasion of AD 614. It was the only major church in the country to be spared. The Persians were surprised to discover a representation of the Magi from Persia on a facade decorated with a colorful mosaic. So out of reverence and respect for their ancestors, they decided to honor these sages by sparing the church. Later, the building was seized and defended by a succession of Muslim and Crusader armies; this explains the fortress-like appearance of its exterior. In the course of time, the complex was expanded by the addition of several chapels and monasteries. Today the Basilica is overshadowed by the Franciscan convent in the north, the Greek Orthodox convent in the southeast and the Armenian convent in the southwest. Also, recent buildings rendered the famous monument quite invisible for lack of a spot from which it can be easily viewed.

The main access to the Basilica is by the very small Door of Humility. Visitors must enter bending over, as if to a real cave. Originally the church had three entrances, two of which have been



walled up. The present small entrance was made during the Ottoman era to prevent mounted horsemen from entering the Basilica. On the occasion of the millennium the door of the Basilica should have been reopened to its original shape in the Justinian Church. However, the rivalries and divisions that exist between the heads of various denominations are impediments to the conservation of the church.

The interior of the church is impressive chiefly because of its simplicity. It contains four rows of monolithic columns of Corinthian order carved from local stone. The columns were painted during the Middle Ages with frescoes of the Apostles. Originally, all the inner walls of the church were covered with mosaics. The remaining mosaics on the side walls and floor attest to the former splendor of the sanctuary. The mosaic floors were covered up with two feet of imported soil, and a pavement of marble slabs was laid at a higher level by the Greeks in 1842. Since the pre-Crusader times the roof has been of cedar wood with the rafters exposed. The present ceiling is from the 14th century, and it was restored in 1842. The two side arms end in a semicircular apse similar to that of the center. In front of the central apse, stands the Iconostasis which was erected by the Greeks in the 17th century. The southern apse opens onto the courtyard of the Greek Orthodox convent. The steps of this courtyard lead down into a series of burial grottoes extending under the southern aisles. The present basilica belongs mainly to the Greek Orthodox, with shares and rights reserved for the Catholics and the Armenian Orthodox. The Armenian Orthodox had succeeded in establishing themselves in the basilica in 1810 by taking possession of the northern arm of the transept. The Protestants are allowed to hold a service on Christmas Eve in the open courtyard.

The part of the Church of the Nativity with the greatest religious and historical significance remains the Grotto of Nativity, the traditional site of Jesus' birth. In the church, two flights of stairs now lead to the Grotto. An altar was erected over the birthplace, and a fourteen-pointed silver star was embedded in the white marble

to mark the birth place of Jesus. It is lit by fifteen silver lamps representing the different Christian communities. Opposite the altar of the Nativity, three steps lead the visitor to the Altar of the Manger, the place where the Baby Jesus was laid after he was born. A third altar has been erected opposite the Manger. It is dedicated to the Wise Men who came from the East to Bethlehem under the guidance of a star. The grotto is decorated with numerous lamps, figures of saints, embroidery, and a variety of sacred ornaments.

The present Franciscan church of St. Catherine of Alexandria is entirely modern. It was built by the Franciscans in 1881 to replace the old chapel of the Augustinian Canons on the north side of the church, which was probably an adaptation of the original chapel belonging to St. Paula's convent. Little remained of this chapel when the Crusaders arrived in 1099; therefore, they built a cloister and monastery which was given to the Canons of St. Augustine and which became in 1347 a Franciscan convent. The fame of this church rests on the solemn Roman Catholic midnight mass celebrated there on Christmas Eve and broadcast live by satellite to TV networks all over the world.

In the center of the cloister, stands a pillar crowned by a capital of white stone with the sculptured figure of St. Jerome. St. Jerome came in AD 384 with a group of pilgrims to settle in Bethlehem and founded a western monastic tradition which has endured with interruptions, till this day. Here, in a cave under the Church of the Nativity, St. Jerome produced his great literary works among them is his Latin Translation of the Old Testament now known as the Vulgate.

The millennium celebrations should have been an occasion to execute repairs and maintenance of the Church of the Nativity, the birth place of Jesus and the focus of the Christian world. However, the guardians of the church inadvertently precluded this, fearing that it will undermine their control. †

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## Manger Dwellings In Palestine by Allyn Dhynes



When people think of mangers, they think of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem or manger sets that are bought and put under the Christmas tree. In the Palestinian Christian town of Taybeh, presumably the Biblical sight of "Ephraim," (John 11:54) there exists dwellings built on top of caves that date back 2000 years and which represent a continuous link to the time of Jesus. Father Joseph Rizek, the priest at the Roman Catholic Church in Taybeh, is an authority on these dwellings. He oversees a well-preserved 'manger' which is located in the courtyard of the Latin Church in Taybeh. He provides an insight into how these dwellings were used, into customs and traditions associated with these homes and into what importance these places hold for Palestinian Christians. The houses were built in a traditional way with the manger existing specifically to house the animals.

Known as "the house of Ephraim," "the Catalima," and more importantly "the Old Palestinian house," these types of structures are becoming more important from a pilgrim's, tourist's and religious historian's perspective. They are gaining importance because of the typical ancient oriental structure that they represent and, perhaps, because they are the best historical example of what houses looked like during Jesus' day. Upon entering the dwelling, the onlooker sees an earthen abode composed of two stories. The top two floors are separated by walls into a granary and a living room. The top floor is parallel to the street and contains an ancient wheat grinder and would be the place to house the grain. From there one goes down to the living area. Once there, one finds examples of biblical farming tools, earthenware and wineskins. This living area, known as the 'upper room,'

'cinacle' or 'Alliyeh' in Arabic, represents another old tradition which has survived until this day. This room is still the center of family life in traditional Palestinian homes and is the place which serves as kitchen, living room and bedroom. The bottom area is composed of the cave which is separated naturally into different sections where different sized domestic animals could be housed.

As people visit Taybeh, Abuna (Father) Rizek tells some of the parables of Jesus. Being present inside the house helps the visitor relate more fully with some of these parables. He might tell the story of the Wise and Foolish Builders (Matthew 7:24-27), the Piece of Cloth (Luke 5:36), the New and Old Wineskins (Matthew 9: 17) or the Story of the Lost Coin (Luke 15: 8-10). When reading the story of the paralytic in (Mark 2:1-12), where the crowd managed to dig open the roof to lower the paralytic, there is difficulty in understanding why there exists a hole in the roof. These houses are built with the roofs at street level. The hole in the roof exists to facilitate access to street level so that hay may be stored more easily. The adjacent upper room can serve the imagination as the room where Jesus sent John and Peter to prepare the last supper.

The most important comparison one can make is the comparison between this house and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Mangers like the one in Bethlehem, exist to this day in Taybeh. Taybeh was settled by two large tribes which comprise the families of Taybeh. Many of these families built their houses on caves.



Every family has their own big house. The same applies to Bethlehem which is where the house of David settled and may have built the inn, or 'Locanda,' on a cave. At the time of the census everyone came to Bethlehem. One viewpoint held is that Joseph and Mary were not necessarily rejected a place to stay, but were hard-pressed to find lodging because of overcrowding. Abuna Rizek thinks that, "the Palestinian norms of hospitality would never reject a pregnant woman. On the contrary, we would run to help. In a house such as the inn where they tried to seek refuge, the most suitable and discreet place for a woman to give birth was down in the cave or manger, with the animals, helped by other women."

Abuna Rizek takes pride that many families in Taybeh have an official replica of the manger. "Unfortunately, today we don't house animals but 30 years ago every family did. Very few farmers remain. The old way is dying out. The decline of agriculture and farming is a big problem. Emigration and the search for better wages are the biggest threats to preserving the long heritage in Taybeh." Before the Israeli invasion, the estimated population of Taybeh was between 3,200 and 3,300 inhabitants. Today there are less than 1,300 with over 8000 people abroad. Abuna Rizek is trying to sensitize people for the great Jubilee. Many people in Taybeh have their manger in their old house and despite economic and political obstacles, traditional faith remains. Abuna Rizek hopes and prays that, despite all the difficulties which this generation is facing, the hope for peace and justice will be renewed along with people's faith as the world celebrates 2000 years of the birth of a baby in a manger. †

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## Peace on earth *by Uffe Gjerding*

*Some reflection on our Christian calling to be peace makers in the Middle East and worldwide...*

It is now 2000 years ago since the glad tidings of "peace on earth" were proclaimed to the shepherds on the fields of Beit Sahour in Palestine. Yet, still today we are crying for peace - seemingly more than ever before. It may partly be due to our more immediate access to information that makes it seem to us as if there are more conflicts in our world than ever - and more complex conflicts. In any case Christians, churches and church-related organisations are challenged by the message of

the Christmas Gospel to constantly review their Biblical understanding of peace and reconciliation and to find new and creative ways of being agents of peace.

This is certainly also true for development agencies such as DanChurchAid with which I have been working for 10 years, 7 of which I have been the programme co-ordinator for the Middle East. In more and more of the situations around the world where there is a need for us to engage with relief aid or long-term development aid, we find ourselves having to deal with conflict. It affects our ability to provide efficient aid and it challenges us to reflect on whether our aid contributes to alleviate the conflict or whether there is a danger that we may through our action actually exacerbate an ongoing conflict. Just to mention a few such complex and ongoing conflicts: Sudan, South Africa, Rwanda, Iraq, Burma, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Israel/Palestine. This has forced us to formulate our Christian value base in

working for peace and reconciliation, as well as to try to develop tools by which we can better assess whether our intervention is useful or potentially harmful. Since both our conceptual understanding and our action is developed and carried out in co-operation with local - mainly church-related - partners around the world, I take this opportunity of having been invited to contribute an article to *Cornerstone* to

share with the readers some of our reflections so far. It is my hope that they may be of relevance also in Israel/Palestine, and that readers may be inspired to respond, so that together we can develop

a Christian understanding of peace and reconciliation that is relevant to our day.

If we turn to the Bible for inspiration, we find that already in the Old Testament peace, "Shalom," "Salam" in Arabic, is a very comprehensive and holistic concept. Peace is when a society is in harmony with itself, when it is permeated by blessing that flows freely between its members. In Psalm 85:10 we read that "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other." The Old Testament understanding is further developed and radicalised in the New Testament, particularly through the commandment from the Beatitudes: "love your enemies" (Matthew 5:43-48). This radicalisation means that there can be no whole or loving community, no Shalom/Salam, unless everyone is part of it, even the enemy. Maybe we can summarise these various dimensions into a holistic "Shalom/Salam paradigm" with four interrelated components: justice; mercy;

truth; peace. These four belong together if a trusting, sharing and interacting community (koinonia) is to be upheld. Reconciliation, then, is the many-faceted and sustained restoration of such community after conflict.

Let us look at these 4 components briefly one by one:

**Justice** as a component of 'Shalom/Salam' can be described as: equality, right relationships, making things right (social justice), restitution. Justice should not only be done, it should be seen to be done - and quickly, or revenge and resentment will fester. But in communities that have just come out of violent conflict, the cry for justice often deafens the need for the other aspects of Shalom/Salam.

**Mercy.** At the interpersonal level the main expression of 'mercy' is forgiveness. At the community level amnesty is an expression of the 'mercy' facet of reconciliation. But, if it is given in a context with no will to peace and rehabilitation of those amnestied, without will to truth-telling by those seeking amnesty - "forgive and forget" - and if no efforts are made to right the wrongs that are amnestied, then it will not help reconciliation and may more likely hinder it. Reconciliation efforts of mercy are often of a spiritual nature and therefore difficult to measure and monitor.

**Truth** in the context of reconciliation can often be used interchangeably with "truth-telling". It involves honesty, clarity, vulnerability, seeing each other face to face. Truth can be a question of willingness to listen to each other's versions of history. But it is also a part of a reconciliation process, which expresses itself in acknowledgement of injustice committed during violent conflict and oppression.

**Peace** can both be seen as a part of 'Shalom/Salam' and as a specific technical term. At a macro-level, the term peace can be understood as: the absence of war or violence in a society; formal peace-making, peace accord, and subsequent peace-process, often involving certain negotiated tasks to

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## Report: "Erez 2" - Bethlehem Checkpoint *by Samuel Jones*

In the great tradition of human rights abuses inflicted upon Palestinians since 1948, history is familiarly repeating itself in Bethlehem. Erez 2, the fetal brother of the Erez checkpoint in Gaza, is currently developing arms, legs and a below ground-level roadway necessary for secluding from view the very people it offends and oppresses. The year 2000 will kick off, not only with gala celebrations and fireworks, but with an Israeli economic squeeze, a militaristic stranglehold on Palestinian mobility and a good hearty laugh at what is called the peace process. In short, what happened once is happening again. Funny, no one seems surprised, least of all the Palestinians.

The Bethlehem checkpoint, currently under reconstruction, deserves scrupulous examination in terms of its socioeconomic implications for Bethlehem and her residents. Once implemented, this security zone nicknamed Erez 2 (the name given to the checkpoint by Palestinians, in reference to the Erez checkpoint in Gaza) can be expected to result in: economic erosion of Bethlehem's economy (based on intensified exclusion from the job market and trade commerce of Israel), increased hindrance to Palestinian mobility, additional Palestinian land confiscation, and restrictions regarding freedom of worship based on decreased access to religious sites within Jerusalem.

It is necessary to first describe the progress of construction for the Bethlehem checkpoint, secondly, the potential effects this development may have on Bethlehem, thirdly, consequences for Bethlehem residents, and finally, implications regarding the freedom of worship. Until recently, construction on Erez 2 was moving along at a languid pace. Although speculation and rumors regarding the project circulated widely, the only evidence of implementation was the construction of a parking lot, designed to hold up to 700 Palestinian automobiles restricted from entry into Jerusalem. However, during the course of the last several months, the pace has escalated, with re-fortifications and additions to "security walls" surrounding Rachel's Tomb and preliminary construction on a receptacle road, which will serve as a drop-off and pickup point for Palestinians entering Jerusalem.

The implementation of Erez 2 would

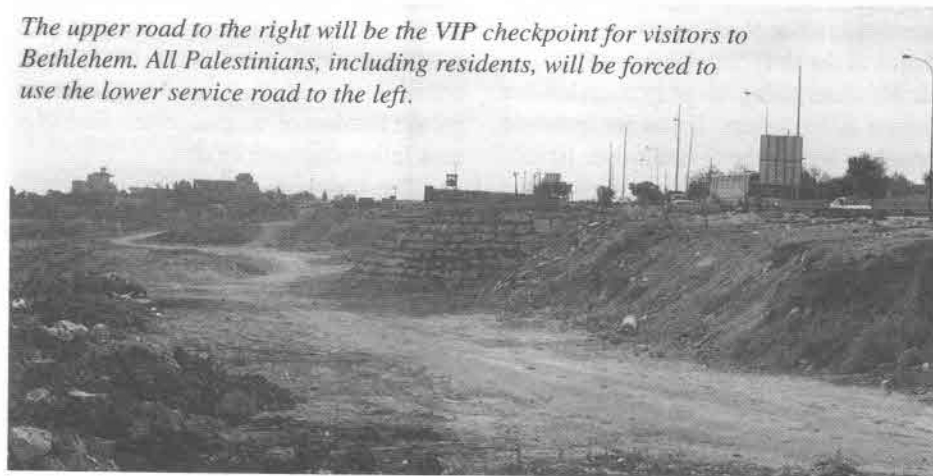
have disastrous consequences for both Bethlehem and her residents. According to plans, the checkpoint would include two security stations (similar to Gaza), one for tourists, VIPs, and settlers, and one for Palestinians, holding valid Jerusalem permits/ID cards. While tourists, VIPs, and settlers will continue to use the existing checkpoint located on the Hebron Road, Palestinians will follow an alternate path, which will lead them to a separate checkpoint and a 650 meter walking path. This new checkpoint would effectively isolate Bethlehem from Jerusalem, starving the local economy and exacerbating the already tenuous status of Bethlehemites in terms of their civil rights (such as freedom of movement) and quality of life.

With regards to economic concerns, the Bethlehem checkpoint will further quarantine Bethlehem residents and businesses from Jerusalem, a city they depend on for employment and commerce. Since Israel implemented military closure around the Jerusalem municipality in March, 1993, under the Oslo accords, neighboring Bethlehem has suffered a marked increase in unemployment and a decline in personal income. According to World Bank figures, unemployment among Bethlehemites rose 18% and per capita income decreased by approximately 20% since the 1993 closure. As Erez 2 intensifies the degree of separation between Bethlehem residents and Jerusalem, it stands to reason that further individual and commercial economic deterioration will follow. In addition, Bethlehem depends upon Israel for trade, in terms of importing/exporting goods and services. According to

Badil Resource Center, 85% of Bethlehem's imports and exports are with Israel. With a heightened state of "security" (i.e. more soldiers, inspections, etc.), including the inevitable transportation difficulties (traffic, delays for security inspections, etc.), Palestinian workers, entrepreneurs, and businesses will undoubtedly suffer from the effects of reduced commercial mobility, employment difficulties, and decreased capital for local development/investment.

In addition, the geographical isolation of Bethlehem, resulting from Erez 2, will further restrict Palestinian freedom of movement and inevitably involve the confiscation of additional Palestinian land. Based on schematics for construction and Israeli security policy employed at Erez I (Gaza), Palestinians, once separated from tourists, settlers, and VIPs, will enter into a laborious series of inspections and waiting, before being granted access through the checkpoint. Basing traveler separation and varying degrees of service upon racial/ethnic grounds is tantamount to apartheid. Upon limited inspection of the construction sight, planned Palestinian exclusion is already evident, as a receptacle road is currently under development. This passage and the corresponding walking path will be conveniently out of sight, built below the existing checkpoint and road leading into Bethlehem. Similarly, in Gaza, walls were built to conceal the processional of thousands of Palestinian laborers travelling to/returning from work in Israel. In fact, the walking path in Bethlehem will actually be longer (650 meters) than its Gazan counterpart (600 meters). Such limitations on individual free-

*The upper road to the right will be the VIP checkpoint for visitors to Bethlehem. All Palestinians, including residents, will be forced to use the lower service road to the left.*



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dom of movement is contrary to international law, as enunciated by Article 13 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence in any State."

Further, the expansion of the Jerusalem boundaries under Erez 2 plans, will entail the confiscation of additional land from Palestinian Bethlehemites. According to estimates by *al-Ayyam*, an Arabic newspaper, Israel will expropriate roughly 4,500 dunums (one dunum = one quarter acre) of Bethlehem in the implementation of the checkpoint. During previous territorial aggrandizement by the Jerusalem municipality, Bethlehem lost approximately 9,000 dunums of land (7,000 in 1976 and 2,000 in 1996) (Brubacher, *Challenge*, No. 57, p.7). Again, Israel, in employing a policy of land confiscation, is in clear violation of international law, specifically with regards to Article 17 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which reads, "Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property."

Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. reads, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion ... and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." The opening of Erez 2 will directly violate international law, as it grossly impairs access to religious sites within Jerusalem among Palestinian Christians and Muslims. Imagine you are a Palestinian Christian planning to worship at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre or a Palestinian Muslim going to pray at Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. If you are fortunate enough to secure the ever-illusive, Israeli-issued, travel permit, you depart your home in Bethlehem for the checkpoint. Upon arrival, as a Palestinian, you are forced to park your car or vacate your taxi. You then traverse the 650 meter walking path. Then you wait. Despite the heat, despite the cold, despite the rain or the condition of your health, you wait. Intent on exercising your right to worship in Jerusalem, you endure this delay, all the while watching the road

above as tourists, and settlers pass expediently through, expediency that is a direct result of your present condition. At the end of this processional, you are confronted by the Israeli Defense Forces, at a checkpoint designed specifically for you (for Palestinians). Procuring your travel documents, answering numerous questions regarding the purpose of your visit to Jerusalem, enduring searches of your person, you are finally granted access...or not, depending upon the discretion of the inspecting officer. As "Erez 2," under its re-enforcement and reconstruction, is not currently operating, it is impossible to determine the time involved in this process. However, its Gazan counterpart generally requires suffering between 2-3 hours of delay from the time Palestinians are dropped off until they reach taxis waiting on the other side. Muslim or Christian, these apartheid-like measures are not divided down religious lines, rather Palestinians suffer because they are Palestinians.

Sabeel Palestinian Liberation Theology Center believes we are called to solidarity in suffering with, and care for, one another, when human beings are assaulted. In the case of Erez 2, the limitations placed on religious expression, necessitate a response from the religious community at large, locally and internationally, in defending the oppressed among our larger family. For we are truly members of the same body and suffer collectively as 1 Corinthians 12:24-27 states, "But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." Consequently, as advocates of the larger ecumenical community, it is our mandate to protect freedom of religion for all those who seek fellowship with God.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides the framework for a system free from occupation, free from checkpoints, and thus, free from the limitations of freedom of religion. Sabeel calls upon the international community to oppose measures such as the Erez 2 checkpoint, which defies specific rulings of international law and the spirit of peace with justice. †

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*Bulldozers and barricades prevail in Bethlehem as construction continues.*



*Cornerstone* is the quarterly newsletter of *Sabeel*. We welcome any comments or inquiries you may have. (Email us at [sabeel@sabeel.org](mailto:sabeel@sabeel.org).) *Cornerstone* is made available at no charge, however, we do request a voluntary annual subscription to cover publishing and distribution costs. (Note: *FOSNA* membership includes subscription costs). We ask for your prayers as we seek each quarter to serve you by providing news and information from within a Palestinian theological context. We also welcome donations for the development of our local and international ministry programs and conferences. *Many blessings and thanks for your prayers and support.*

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## Eastern Christianity: Development across the two millenia *by Maroun Lahham*

*This is the first of a two part article on Eastern Christianity translated from Arabic. It is an attempt to explain the differences between Eastern and Western theology in hopes of removing any misunderstandings or misjudgments between the two. Part 2 of the article will be printed in the next issue of Cornerstone.*

### *Ex Oriente Lux.*

Light sprouts from the East. Thus was said and thus it occurred. The light of monotheistic faith spread across the corners of the earth. Eastern Christianity has remained loyal to the essence of the message bestowed upon it by providence although the path was often uneasy.

In this article I will address issues related to Eastern Christianity:

- I. The underlying political and religious conditions
- II. The theological dimension of the history of the Eastern Church
  - a. A Mystery After the Model of the Trinity
  - b. Combining the Unity of Faith and Diversity of Traditions
- III. Prospects for the Future.

### **I. Political and Religious Conditions**

Connecting the political and religious dimensions is a result of what happened on the ground. Through various phases in the development of Eastern Christianity, political conditions have affected religious attitudes and vice versa. The two aspects are largely inseparable.

The Church was established in Jerusalem at Pentecost AD 29 following Saint Peter's Spirit-inspired preaching when thousands, both Jew and Gentile, came to faith. With time, there were more Christians from Gentile backgrounds than Jewish which necessitated the Jerusalem Council in AD 50.<sup>1</sup> Gradually the Eastern Church began acquiring a universal character electing Mark,<sup>2</sup> a non-Jew, as the Bishop of Jerusalem.

Pax Romana allowed the Church to spread easily, especially after the edict of Milano in AD 313, when Christianity was adopted as state religion. Dogmatic discussion persisted. On the one hand, there was a need to mould the Christian faith with the prevailing Hellenistic thought, including devising theological expressions comprehensible by the intellectuals of the day. On the other hand, the diversity of cultures, languages, rituals and traditions resulted in deep disagreements. Successive

ecumenical councils were held seeking to find a common theological language on issues related to creed. Consequently, deep divisions tore the family apart and left indelible traces on the Eastern Churches. The controversy included matters related to the essence of faith, such as the Incarnation and Divinity of Christ. Divisions were not always dogmatic but were philosophical, cultural, political, and social as well.<sup>3</sup>

With the spread of Arab rule, the profound political and religious influences affecting the Eastern Churches continued. The Eastern Churches coexisted with Islam. The churches experienced the tolerance of the Omayyads, the severity of the Abbasids, cruelty of the Fatimids, domination of the Crusaders, corruption of the Mamluks, and the oppression of the Turks. The Church survived all and did not disappear. "The Eastern Church did not have the sense of triumphalist Christendom that emerged at the end of the first millennium in Byzantium and Western Europe. The Eastern Churches had to live in humility and sometimes undergo humiliation. They did not know the glory or delusions of Rome, or the second Rome (Constantinople), or the third Rome (Moscow)."<sup>4</sup>

The current era has not been less painful to the Eastern Churches. Successive wars since the beginning of this century have dispersed people to various Arab countries and the Diaspora. Furthermore, the West focused on recruiting Eastern Christians into new churches. Experience has shown that this was not the ideal way to serve the Eastern church nor did it contribute to the unity between East and West.<sup>5</sup>

To summarize thus far:

1. The Eastern Church has suffered in a way that no other church has;
2. The Eastern Churches have had to adapt to many changes imposed upon them throughout their history. This fact has to be considered before passing any judgement on them;
3. In spite of "the services" offered to the Eastern Church over the years, it continued its journey through its own dynamic power and the efforts of its people. By doing so it remained faithful to what was handed down by the Apostles.

### **II. The Theological Dimension in the History of the Eastern Churches:**

The God of history has a purpose for the life of the Eastern Churches. Discovering this purpose, understanding it, living by it, must be the goal, not only for the Eastern churches, but for the Church universal.

The first thing to be aware of regarding the Eastern Churches is their emphasis on the centrality of Christ. They comprise a portion of the people of God under the authority of a bishop who through the power of the Holy Spirit, and in the light of the word of God, is the successor of the Apostles. It is the Church incarnate in the "here and now," the one, holy, catholic Church throughout the world.

The East has its own way of expressing the reality of the Church and its own pattern of understanding it and living it. While the Christian Church is one and the same at all times and places, it is distinguished in the East as being a mystery after the model of the Trinity, one that combines unity of faith with diversity.

#### *a. A Mystery After the Model of the Trinity*

The visible features of the Church, whether canonical, existential, or organizational are all important, but have to be closely linked to the Church and reveal its mystery. The divine dimension has to take precedence and must be revealed through what is seen or sensed.

The Church is a mystery. It is that amazing, divine providence "that was kept secret for long ages" (Romans 16:25) and which God revealed to us "when the fullness of time had come" (Galations 4:4) "in the Beloved" (Ephesians 1:6) "to gather up all things in him ..." (Ephesians 1:10). This means that the Church was created by God and constitutes a community of people gathered together first and foremost by the grace of God, "who were born, not of blood, or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God," (John 1:13).

This mystery has two dimensions, divine

*This communion flows from a living theology that changes human beings into a renewed and transformed people, called by God, existing through God, and walking in God's holy way.*

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and human. It starts and ends with God and is directed to human beings. It thus creates communion between God and human beings. This concept of *Koinonia* is fundamental when it comes to understanding the nature of the Church, the way it was understood in the East for centuries.<sup>6</sup> The Eastern Church lived the mystery of this communion by focusing on the unity which is based on the one faith and the same sacraments. It is a unity symbolized by the office and presence of the bishop, through the liturgy and understanding that the Church is a mystery rather than a human institution. This communion flows from a living theology that changes human beings into a renewed and transformed people, called by God, existing through God, and walking in God's holy way. God is holy and has gathered his people in a way that surpasses human understanding. The Church is a gift which proceeds from the unity of the one and undivided Trinity and offers us a model to live by.

In the theology of the Eastern Church, the Holy Spirit holds a special place because through the power of the Holy Spirit the Church became the body of Christ after Pentecost. The birth of the Church is the same as the motherhood of the Virgin Mary, a mystery. It came to be through the power of God and not by human will-power.

The fact that the Church is created in the image of the Trinity, according to the theology of the Eastern Church, has implications on the life of the believing community who are the backbone of the Church. If every person of the Trinity is in essence "directed towards the other,"<sup>7</sup> which means a gift to the other in absolute divine transparency, then every human being is created "in the image of God." This means that the *raison d'être* of every person is to love and be loved in the likeness of the Godhead.

#### *b. Combining the Unity of Faith and Diversity of Traditions*

Ever since the light of faith shone on the East, it realized that the mystery of the one God is beyond expression through one language, one culture, or one ritual. It is possibly beyond any human expression. The Eastern Church was able through long and difficult experience, in spite of some failures along the way, to combine unity of faith with diversity of ritual, as well as theological, spiritual, and canonical tradition. The Eastern Church has tried to maintain a delicate balance between unity and

diversity. It realized that "unity without diversity is despotic, while diversity without unity is chaotic."<sup>8</sup>

The Eastern Churches were able to maintain their unity through remaining true to their faith, the living and common apostolic traditions handed down by the Apostles. This includes the sacraments of faith and in particular the sacrament of apostolic succession and the fellowship in love especially among bishops who represent, in a mystical way, the twelve disciples. The real measure of truth and unity in the various traditions of the Eastern Church lies in the degree of participation in the one and only apostolic tradition. This is the meaning of the word "catholic" in the theology of the Eastern Churches. According to St. Ignatius of Antioch, who turned the word "catholic" into a Christian term, it literally means: "according to all, or through the participation of all." This means that the "all" is in every part, just as the soul is in every part of the living body.<sup>9</sup>

Unity is guaranteed by the sacrament of apostolic succession. The tradition handed down by the Apostles does not view the local churches mechanically but rather saw in every church a creative dynamic. In Western thinking, the Church, i.e.: "the catholic church," is incarnated in the "here and now" of the local churches. The latter are in turn created "in the image of the one catholic church." In contrast, Eastern thought gives priority to the local church which has all the elements of the "catholic" church because it is both apostolic and catholic, in other words, the whole is embodied in the part. The "catholic" Church is essentially the body of the local churches. The body is held together by one faith, based on one apostolic tradition. That is why churches with diverse traditions recognize each other. Each sees in the other the mystery of the one Church while retaining its own legitimate particularities, provided that the Church stay within the communion of faith and love with the other local churches.<sup>10</sup>

Historically speaking, it was not easy to maintain this delicate balance between the unity of faith and the diversity of ritual, spiritual, and canonical traditions. This is evident in the many divisions and local feuds that exist until this day. The unity of faith was deeply shaken following the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 when disagreements surfaced over the two distinct natures of Christ. Quite often, what

was legitimate diversity of ritual turned into closure, monopoly, ignorance of the other and competition alien to the spirit of the Gospel. Furthermore, churches began to proselytize each others faithful and to lure them in every way.<sup>11</sup>

Most Eastern Churches took on the character of "national churches" and focused on the legitimate autonomy of the local church. Soon, this autonomy came to be associated with a specific country and people. Along with that, each church distanced itself from other local churches with whom it shared a common faith. These difficult conditions lasted for centuries and marked the Eastern Church with a special character of paranoia, closure, suffering and a search for identity.

One of the temptations that the Eastern Churches fell into, because of their strong attachment to the "sanctity" of tradition, is their belief that the Christian faith and tradition give the believer a human nature and a culture which is different from that of the non-baptized. In fact the mother Church is an indigenous church constituted of all the people it ministers to. It does not create a Christian society as opposed to another non-Christian society on the grounds that the two do not share the same faith. The importance of the Christian Church is that it is the yeast of God's kingdom working from within our social and cultural reality. Our ancestors comprehended this fact as evidenced in the great amount of heritage they handed down. It all reflects the incarnation of faith in more than one language, civilization and culture that successively prevailed in the East. This is something that later generations failed to fully understand.

Another challenge which the Eastern Church failed to meet is the need to connect faith with changing reality of everyday life. They did not develop a social outlook or vision based on the Gospel. It assumed that holding onto tradition meant resisting change. As a result, faith failed to influence changing social conditions.

One important explanation of this is the fact that Church tradition has two sources, divine and human. On the one hand it is a gift of grace, while on the other hand it is a fruit of the endeavors of our ancestors in faith. It is also a product of history. As a product of human endeavor it involves dangers which our ancestors attributed to "the spirit of the world." This means the

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## A Child is Born by Nora Carmi

denominational spirit and the literal practice of liturgical ritual and pride in its beauty, while "their hearts are far from me" (Mark 7:6). It also meant forsaking God's commandments and holding onto tradition (Mark 7:7-8).

Undoubtedly, this caused deep scars that left their imprint on the heart of the Eastern Church. It did not disappear, but suffered and bled because of its internal divisions. It was weakened by the "Dhimmi" system, by Turkish hegemony, by its own liturgy and by simple daily religious practices that failed to express themselves on a cultural level.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, during the last century, Protestant and Catholic missionary work operated within a mentality that did not take ecumenism into consideration. As a result, fear prevailed within the Eastern Churches and caused it to become closed and isolated which in turn brought forward what it feared most: deterioration, emigration and extinction. †

*Father Dr. Maroun Lahham is the Rector of the Latin Patriarchate Seminary in Beit Jala.*

### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Acts 15.

<sup>2</sup> Historian Eusepius 4 - 6.

<sup>3</sup> Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East, *So that they will all be one, Ecumenical movement*, Easter 1999, No 10-11.

<sup>4</sup> Patriarch Ignatius IV, *From Antiochian Experience To Its Mission*, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Catholic Orthodox Encounter, Balamand (Lebanon) 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Koinonia is a basic concept of the second Vatican Council concerning the Church ... Gathering the faithful as one people.... "The light of nations," No. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Rebelief's Icon of the Trinity.

<sup>8</sup> Rev. Jamal Khader, *Identity of the Local Church across the ages*, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Acts of the Second Vatican Council, *Creed Dogmatic of the Church*, light of nations, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the Church, *Mystery of the Church* no. 33

<sup>11</sup> Message of the Catholic Patriarchs of the Orient, "So that they will be one", April 1994.

<sup>12</sup> Patriarch Ignatius IV, *The Ecumenical Issue in Light of the Antiochian Experience*, p. 34.

"It's a boy!" As the words slowly seep into her brain, a small tear of joy trickles down Mary's cheek. Her firstborn will be warmly welcomed into the family and the Palestinian community. According to custom, since her husband Yousef has no brothers, the baby will be named after his paternal grandfather, Manuel.

Outside, Mary can hear Sunday church bells and muezzin calls to prayer. Her glance travels over Bethlehem and Beit Jala. Beyond the busy main street, church steeples and minaret crescents dot fruit orchards and olive groves, but the view is scarred by the bypass roads and tunnels built for Israeli settlers. Abu Ghneim (Green Mountain) is no longer green, marked by the foundations of new settlements. The confiscation of their lands deprive Palestinian owners of their livelihood - agriculture - and their water resources; while water pumped into Israeli settlements nurtures green lawns and fills swimming pools, the majority of Palestinian residents are left without a single drop of tap water for days at a time.

Mary remembers another birth in Bethlehem... and all that it should have meant to humanity.

*"The Word became flesh and lived among us. We have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)*

Two thousand years later, evils that Jesus came to destroy still prevail, Mary thought. Is there no end to injustice? Where is the peace announced by the angels to shepherds a few miles down the road?

Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour (land traditionally known as the Shepherds' Fields), the hometowns of 37,000 Palestinians (58% of them are Christians), are officially under Palestinian rule. Although Israeli soldiers have been redeployed from the main cities, the surrounding lands and connecting roads are under their full control. Access to and

from Jerusalem is dependent on Israeli checkpoints and a permit-system imposed under the guise of "security."

"We are more than ever in a large prison," sighs Mary. She wonders when she will be able to introduce Manuel to his grandparents, who live not far from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, or if she will be able to take him to a doctor there, in case of emergency. "Soon, there will be no room for you in your own country, my son."

*"... there was no place for them in the inn." (Luke 2:7).*

A slight movement at the door brings up Mary's head. Yousef is there, reassuring her, his expression of love is a more valuable gift than the small bunch of roses in his hand. Driving home from the Holy Family Hospital towards Star Street and the Manger Square, Mary notices the new hotels springing up. A multitude of pilgrims are expected to flock to this town to celebrate the Incarnation; but will there be peace in the year 2000?

The car stops. "We are home," smiles Yousef. Mary whispers to her son: "No matter what your future may be, my son, we are not alone. Emmanuel - God is with us. Together, we will strive for justice and work for reconciliation. Yes, there is still hope - and maybe we can all learn to love again." †

*Nora Carmi is a staff member at Sabeel.*

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## Faith, Dollars, and the Millenium *by Naim Ateek*

The eclipse of the sun on August 11, 1999 was an unusual phenomenon that made some people expect the end of the world. According to one report, three people committed suicide, because they were sure the end was coming. Others shut themselves in their homes with their children and expected extraordinary events to take place to usher in the eschaton. In spite of all of our scientific knowledge today, even the natural phenomenon of an eclipse causes big uproar and fear in people. One wonders: If an eclipse can raise such a stir, is it hard to imagine what the end of a millennium can do?

In Israel/Palestine, the eclipse slipped by with almost no noticeable change. On the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the day was marked by a public holiday. Most people stayed indoors having been warned through the media against the dangerous rays of the sun and its effects on the eyes. And so the eclipse came and went. The sun kept shining, there was no darkness, and the weather was hotter than usual.

How are our people thinking about the end of the millennium? To begin with, most of the people of Israel and Palestine are Jews and Muslims. In our two countries, there are approximately 5 million Jews, 3.5 million Muslims, and 170,000 Christians. Jews and Muslims have their own calendars. The Jewish year normally begins in September, and it is currently the year 5759. Muslims, too, have their own calendar which they calculate from the Hegira, or flight of the prophet Muhammad from the city of Mecca to Medina. This year it is 1420. It is true that as far as practice is concerned, everybody uses the Christian calendar, and to be more precise, the Gregorian rather than the Julian one.

At the same time, the Eastern churches still calculate their holy days according to the Julian calendar. From a strictly religious perspective and for most of the people of our country – Jews and Muslims – the end of the millennium has no special meaning and will not be observed in any special way. Obviously, due to practical and commercial considerations, some will join the Christian celebrations. There are people who always look for an opportunity to celebrate and to

make money, and the end of the 20th century is a good occasion to do so. I do not believe, however, that it will have any special religious or spiritual meaning for Muslims or Jews.

As for the relatively small Christian community, they will be celebrating the last Christmas in this century and the 2000 New Year. Many Palestinian Christians are aware that the year 2000 has been designated as "Bethlehem 2000," when millions of Christians all over the world will be celebrating the 2000<sup>th</sup> birthday of Christ. It is estimated

*We are challenged and inspired by Christ to work for God's Kingdom on earth as we daily pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." This Kingdom, we believe, is...righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."*

that 15 million Christians will visit Rome next year, while no more than 3 to 4 million will come to Bethlehem. For most of our people, be they members of government (Israel and the Palestinian Authority) or ordinary people (Christians, Muslims and Jews), there is hope that the year 2000 will mean good business and economic prosperity. When one considers the life of the Palestinian community, both Christian and Muslim, which has been living under an oppressive occupation for over three decades and has suffered politically and economically, it is quite understandable that their primary concern has to do with daily existence. They are not worried or even thinking about the end of the world. They are worried about making a living for their families. They are concerned about justice and freedom. They want to see an end to the Israeli occupation of their country and the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state. It is not the end of the world they are worried about, it is their own end. The common sentiment expressed today is "come what may cosmologically. It is not going to be worse than our life today under occupation. In fact, if the world ends, it might put an end to our misery." There is a popular saying in the

Palestinian community: "whatever comes from God is good." In other words, it is easier for people to accept any natural disaster than to accept the oppression and injustice imposed by their fellow human beings. Therefore, come what may, it is not going to be worse than living under occupation.

It is true, however, that many Palestinian Christians see Bethlehem 2000 as an occasion that will bring many Christian celebrities, including the Pope. They want to feel proud of their faith. Since they are small in number, they feel the need to be connected with Christian brothers and sisters from all over the world. This certainly reflects a deep psychological need for many Palestinian Christians to be affirmed and recognized.

In addition to all of this, there is, however, a small segment of the Palestinian Christian community that has been exposed to Western Christian thinking about the end times. This has happened either through contact with tourists, or travel, or study abroad. For most of them it does not constitute a belief on their part. Those who actually believe that the end is near are relatively a handful. They have been influenced either by a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible or by the work of Jehovah's Witnesses who preach such a doctrine. Generally however, most Palestinian Christians belong to the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches and they are not exposed to these ideas. In fact, the Roman Catholic Church's teaching is still influenced by St. Augustine who held that the end times reference for a thousand years in the Book of Revelation is symbolic and not actual.

Generally speaking, therefore, most people are going about their business as usual. They are hoping that Bethlehem 2000 will offer them some lucrative gains. In fact, in the minds of most people it has never been primarily a religious celebration. The economic side is the most prominent. Some see an important political aspect to it. Some of us are working hard to keep the religious and spiritual dimension of it paramount.

Several years ago, the Israeli government started preparing Nazareth for the year

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2000. It anticipated the return of Bethlehem to the Palestinian Authority and wanted an alternative focus that would attract Christian tourism to Israel. It started pouring millions of shekels into giving a new face to Nazareth.

It is ironic that after so many years of Israeli government neglect of the Arab sector in Israel, Nazareth, the largest Israeli Arab community, started receiving all these funds, not because the Israeli government had repented its discriminatory policies against the Palestinian Israeli Arabs, but because it wanted to improve the chances of Nazareth competing with Bethlehem for tourist money.

At the same time in the south of Palestine, it is not as though the people of Bethlehem are going to reap all the economic benefits of Bethlehem 2000. Israel is making sure that this will not happen. A number of new plush hotels have been constructed in "Jewish" Jerusalem. Attractive programs and itineraries are being offered so that tourists and pilgrims will spend a minimal time in Bethlehem and a maximum of time within Israel. The goal is to accommodate them in Israeli hotels, where they are expected to spend most of their money.

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Given the degree of confusion flowing from some Western evangelical circles, what is the meaning of the millennium to Palestinian Christians? Before I answer this, it is interesting to reflect briefly on the way Christians celebrated the end of the first millennium in Europe.

Regarding the end of the first millennium, scholars are divided between those who interpret it apocalyptically and those who do not. For many years, the generally held view was that people in Europe lived in fear, believing that the end of the world was coming. This event signaled for them one thousand years of the reign of Christianity and thus fulfills what is written in the Book of Revelation, Chapter 20. It was held that thousands of people rushed to Jerusalem to await the Second Coming of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

It is argued, however, that many people in Europe were not aware of the significance of the one thousand years, because even the Christian calendar, Anno Domini (the year

of our Lord) was not, up to that time, universally observed. Scholars also contest this

point. Some insist that the Christian calendar was already established in the monasteries of Western Europe.<sup>2</sup> Professor Richard Landes of Boston University believes that the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Christ, as well as the commemoration of his death in 1033, were perceived by people in all strata of society as apocalyptic phenomena.<sup>3</sup>

Apparently, many events were interpreted in association with these two significant millennial anniversaries. The apocalyptic fervor was running high. Plagues, disasters, heresies, corruption among clergy were all regarded as pre-staging the end of the world and the coming of the antichrist. In some cases it produced repentance and a return to God on the part of the citizenry; acts of piety and a commitment to do justice and create peace on the part of people in power. This was the picture presented by Ralph Glaber who wrote his works at the beginning of the second millennium. It is important to remember, however, that as far as the rest of the world was concerned, which was not Christian, the event of the first millennium (probably) went by unnoticed.

Interestingly, Glaber mentions that after the two events of 1000 and 1033 passed peacefully, a group of bishops meeting together, raised their hands to God and shouted, "Peace! Peace!"<sup>4</sup> It was as if they were saying that since the world had not ended, they were ready to continue their life and work afresh in the brand new millennium.

Well, what about Palestinian Christians standing at the verge of the end of the second thousand years after the birth of Christ? I believe that most of our people do not expect the Second Coming of Christ in a global, apocalyptic, and cosmic sense. Christ's words must be remembered, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, we must always be ready for Christ's coming. It is a very important tenet of our Chris-

*It is far better to be ready to meet Christ, when our own world might at any moment come to an end, than to keep speculating about the end of all things.*

tian faith. We proclaim it regularly whenever we recite the Nicene Creed, "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." Theologically speaking, Christ always comes to us. We meet him daily in so many different ways. We meet him in the face of the other, especially the poor and the oppressed. He comes to us, and we recognize him in the Breaking of the Bread.

Admittedly, many people, especially in the West, are concerned about the end of the world and the "Second Coming" of Christ. It is significant to point out that the New Testament does not use the phrase the "Second Coming" of Christ, but rather refers simply to the "coming."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, we must always be ready for his coming. More importantly, we must be ready for the end of our own world. The possibility of our own end is always present, and Christ will come to meet us. As Christians we must maintain this assurance of faith. It is futile to speculate about the end of the world. Unfortunately, the conjecture runs rampant, especially as we approach the end of this millennium. It is far better to be ready to meet Christ, when our own world might at any moment come to an end, than to keep speculating about the end of all things.

Furthermore, it is important to be careful in our interpretation of the Book of Revelation. It is one of the most abused and misinterpreted books of the Bible. It continues to confuse people. The succinct message of the Book of Revelation is that God, who has already defeated the satanic powers in the death and resurrection of Christ, will bring to completion his ultimate and inevitable triumph over evil. Victory, therefore, belongs to God. God will triumph in heaven,<sup>7</sup> on earth,<sup>8</sup> and even in the underworld.<sup>9</sup>

It is a powerful message for Christians who live under the domination of an oppressive political or economic system, and everything around them seems hopeless. In times of despair and frustration, when God seems far off or even totally absent, the

*(continued on page 19, FDM)*

## Snapshots of Our Activities

### Local Program Department:

**Clergy gatherings** - The monthly clergy gatherings that started five years ago are still going strong. In September, the usual crowd was joined by a newcomer, Maronite priest Jean Maghamis thus adding another committed member to the fold. The book chosen for this year's study is *Vie et mort des Chritiens D'Orient*, (in English: *The Life and Death of Palestinian Christians*). It is written by Jean Pierre Valognes, a French author who has lived in the Middle East. French educated priests have been asked to summarize and present a chapter to their colleagues at each meeting.

In preparation for the year 2000 and in addition to the regular encounters, the clergy will undertake visits to towns and parishes in order to renew relationships, but also to encourage clergy, women and



youth to fully participate in the revival of our faith. Ein Areek, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala are the first three towns to visit by the end of 1999.

Two Dominican Iraqi nuns, Sisters Geneviève and Victoria joined the Clergy for the October meeting bringing in a fresh new presence.

**Clergy Retreat** - The annual ecumenical clergy retreat was held this year at the Latroun Convent on November 24 and 25. Twelve priests representing the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Maronite, Greek Catholic, Syrian Orthodox and Anglican churches spent 24 hours together reflecting on "The spiritual meaning of the Greater Jubilee," "Identity Crisis" and Reformation and Rejuvenation of the Church" led by Archimandrite Atallah Hanna, Father Jean Maroun



Mghamus, and Naim Ateek.

**News from Nazareth** - On Sunday October 24, the Sabeel family in Nazareth organized another one of their popular root searching trips, this time to Ailaboun and the northern villages. In Ailaboun the group was welcomed by father Suhail Khoury, the Melkite parish

priest, as well as Dr. Hanna Swaid, head of the local Municipal Council. Dr. Swaid gave a short explanation about the village that was commemorating, on that Sunday, the sad events of October 29, 1948 when Ailaboun was occupied by Israeli soldiers (remember the Israeli State was proclaimed on May 15). Fifteen young men were killed in cold blood and a large number of the

villagers were pushed out to the Lebanese border. It took the concerted efforts of courageous citizens like Father Morcos Muallem and the late Dr. Sami Jeraiseh, who kept urging the United Nations and the Red Cross to put pressure on Israel to allow the villagers to return home. The Sabeel group then placed a wreath at the foot of the memorial for the victims while a Greek Orthodox "troubariyyeh" (hymn) was sung for the souls of those fallen for their country. This was followed by mass at the Melkite Church; the warm and pleasant presence of Monsignor Butrus Mua'llem, Bishop of the Melkite Church in the Galilee was a definite booster to all Sabeelers. As refreshments were served, the Nazareth coordinator Violette Khoury presented both the priest and head of the council

the Year 2000 calendar of Sabeel. In Ailaboun, Sabeelers felt the need to expand the ministry of the Nazareth branch as there were numerous requests from the people to revive their faith and work ecumenically.

The next stop was "Kursi" on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Kursi is the site of Jesus healing the Gadarene demoniacs. The reading of the Gospel in Ailaboun had also been the same (Matthew 8:28-34). At Kursi, there are remains of a Byzantine church and new excavations. The next part of the trip was of a different nature as the bus began its ascent towards the Golan Heights, passing through the Druze village of Majdal Shams, and ending in Baniyas, Caesarea Phillipi, where Simon Peter clearly stated: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 17:13-20).

Lunch was at the National Park in Dan and on to Safad, the city at the top of the hill where the group visited the old citadel. It was dark when the bus finally reached Nazareth; though the participants were exhausted, many expressed a feeling of deep satisfaction and fulfillment.

**Women's Activities** - As soon as the announcement for the spiritual and recreational trip to Nablus and Bourquin (the site of the healing of the ten lepers) was sent out, reservations started pouring in and we could not limit the number of participants to only one bus load! So on October 4 eighty women and two male staff members set on their sightseeing, root searching expedition. There were over 30 attendees who were eager to learn more about Sabeel. On the way, important, significant sites were pointed out along with apparent changes in the topographic characteristic of the area due to newly sprouting Jewish settlements.

Father Yousef Sa'adeh, the Greek Catholic parish priest of Nablus and Rafidia, the spiritual guide for the day, was waiting for the buses at the site known as Jacob's Well and also as the Samaritan woman's well (John 4: 1-42). Mount Gerezim and the Samaritan community were of special interest to the group. There were a few tense moments as the driver skillfully swung the bus

along the narrow ascending curves to the top of the mountain.

Bourquin was a new and emotional experience for those who visited it for the first time. Walking down the streets of this very important but neglected village, talking to the inhabitants sitting in their doorways, being inside the recently renovated Orthodox Church / caves (Luke 17: 11-19), filled the participants with feelings of awe, pride, respect and also sadness. The Greek Orthodox parish priest Father To'meh Daoud, a regular at the clergy meetings, who as a child had grown up in the village, had come from the neighboring town of Zababdeh to be with the Sabeelers. Members of the Greek Orthodox parish council greeted the guests and pledged to fully support Celebrations 2000. There was a short stop at Sebastia, a quick, late, but delicious lunch in Rafidia at Rozana restaurant, and then the highlight of the day: the meeting with the Rafidia and Nablus ecumenical Bible Study women's group.

For the past 19 years, this ecumenical lay women's group has been regularly meeting every Monday afternoon to study the Bible together! There was not enough time for Sabeelers and Nablus women to get properly acquainted but this was a start, as both share the same concerns and interests. Samira Wahbeh led a mesmerized audience into reflections about how we should embark on the new millennium as Christians: "with changed hearts and new commitment to Christ." The women from Nablus and Rafidia will soon be visiting Jerusalem (December 3<sup>rd</sup>) to follow upon the journey of faith together.

Of course a trip to Nablus without buying the famous Nablus sweets, especially kinafeh, would have been like an unfinished symphony, so the sweet shop was invaded and beaming women returned home with both material and spiritual gifts.

In the afternoon of November 10th, forty three Palestinian women, mostly from Jerusalem, arrived at Sabeel, several for the first time, to listen to Naim explain the meanings and implications of Palestinian Liberation Theology.

**Youth Activities** - As a part of the educational and youth empowerment program, the

youth department will be launching its new Quarterly Ecumenical Leadership Training and Youth Group interactive program, "The Roller Magazine," with the kickoff of the millennium. In addition, Bible competitions and Bible-studies will be held at the Sabeel Center and other youth centers in preparation for ecumenical youth gatherings and mission trips to build or renovate homes for Palestinian Christians.

As a continuation of the Youth Action Plan (YAP) project, a Swedish delegation of three, headed by Rev. Marie Körner, visited the West Bank for a week. The focus of the program was on human rights and was planned around the Bethlehem, Ramallah and Jerusalem areas. The sites and two field trips involved visiting home demolition sites (in some cases homes scheduled to be demolished), expanded settlements, and ecologically affected areas caused by the Occupation as well as unrecognized villages and demolished towns in Galilee. The delegation also visited Sabeel, Wi'am, Al-liqa', The International Center in Bethlehem, and the Palestinian Center for Rapprochement Between People. The members of YAP actively participated in discussions with the staff during presentations concerning the current situation. Relationships between Israelis and Palestinians, as well as Muslims and Christians, were discussed. In addition, other human rights related centers were visited throughout the week such as the Alternative Information Center (AIC) in Bethlehem, Women's Rights and Panorama centers in Ramallah, and Al Baqa' center in Majd el-Krum.

The YAP Palestine committee meeting held recently in Malmo, Sweden explored ideas and actions necessary to promote a just peace in the Occupied Territories. The YAP project has been beneficial in helping our youth to continue moving forward in working for a just peace in Palestine/Israel. Sabeel is thankful for the partnership with YAP and sees it as a blessing to both its ministry and to the Palestinian community.

### **Celebration 2000 - Local Conference**

As the countdown for the millennium continues, the Local Department of Sabeel is diligently toiling at finalizing the program of its two upcoming conferences in Bethlehem and Nazareth. The dates for the Bethlehem Conference have been changed to March 11 and 12 instead of 18 and 19. The Nazareth dates remain April 8 and 9. Contacts with nine Palestinian towns and villages are underway and six different sites in Israel have also been designated for the mobile celebrations.

The ground work of mobilizing clergy, the community, new women attendees and youth is of crucial importance. In an effort to promote this idea of shared celebrations, a group of clergy and Sabeelers visited the small town of Ein Areek on Monday, November 21. They met with the local Catholic Parish Priest Giovanni Cianti, Italian order of the Small Family of Annunciation, and the Greek Orthodox priest Father Nicholas Shaheen. The village has a population of 1200 inhabitants, 1/3 of which are Christians of the 2 denominations mentioned above. Telephone lines and running water have still not reached this picturesque village. The faith of this handful of believers who live in great harmony with their neighbors should be contagious to the larger towns.

It is customary for Muslim neighbors to open their homes to accept condolences for the loss of their Christian neighbors and for the Christian neighbor to do the same.

At the same time that the clergy were discussing their concerns and ways of rejuvenating life in this small village, two other meetings were held to encourage the women and the youth to organize and plan for their celebrations. The enthusiastic response was to set a date at the end of June 2000 for a small, happy festival.

#### **Upcoming events:**

**Women's meeting:** December 3<sup>rd</sup>

#### **Clergy Visits:**

December 6th (Beit Sahour)

December 13th (Beit Jala)

#### **Christmas Dinner:**

December 16th (Nablus)

December 19th (Jerusalem)

## Snapshots of Our Activities

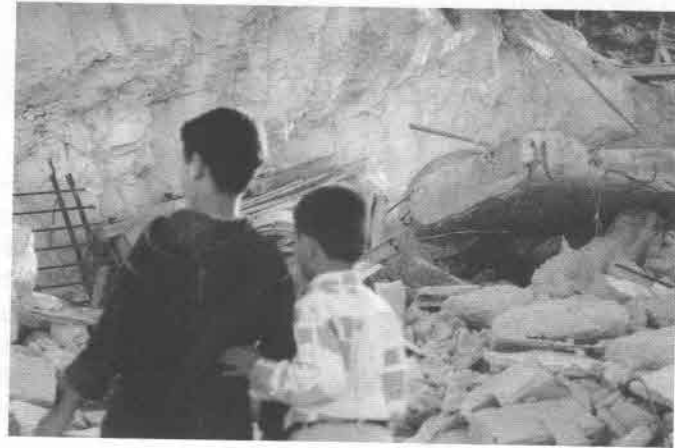
**Canon Ateek and Jean Zaru Visit Friends of Sabeel (FOS) in Canada and the United States** - Canon Ateek and Jean Zaru delivered lectures and met with FOS delegates during a series of conferences held across the United States by Friends of Sabeel North America. The conferences took place in: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, October 15-16, Toronto, Canada, Oct. 22-23, Boston, Massachusetts, Oct. 30, and Pasadena, California, November 1-3. Outside of the conferences, Canon Ateek maintained a heavy schedule of lecturing at several different types of events during the course of his trip. These included: The House of Bishops in Canada, a Jewish synagogue in the Boston area, Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, focusing on the theological and political aspects of peace in the Middle East, and the University of Dayton where he was invited to speak on the future for Holy Land Christians. Canon Ateek also participated in "The Incarnation - Year 2000" conference in Denmark. On November 18, in Barcelona, Spain, he took part in a UNESCO conference entitled, "Israel-Palestine - Monotheistic Religions: From Confrontation to Peace." He served as part of an inter-faith panel with Jewish and Muslim panel members. Canon Ateek extends his heartfelt thanks inter-

nationally to the many people responsible for organizing his visits and lectures.

**International Program Department: "Meet the Palestinians"** - Sabeel's "Meet the Palestinians" program continues to develop under the recently expanded "Ahlan wa Sahlan" project. The Center hosted over 350 students, theologians, pilgrims, scholars, peace workers, and volunteers from September to November. Participants listened to presentations from the Board and staff of Sabeel, and viewed the Sabeel photo exhibit entitled: "Qissatuna: Our story." The issues covered concerned the history and identity of Palestinian Christians, as well as the religious and political issues affecting their lives.

Representing organizations such as Presbyterian Women (Presbyterian Church USA), Church Mission Society (UK), the Church in Wales, Christian Peacemaker Team, Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, Inc., the Middle

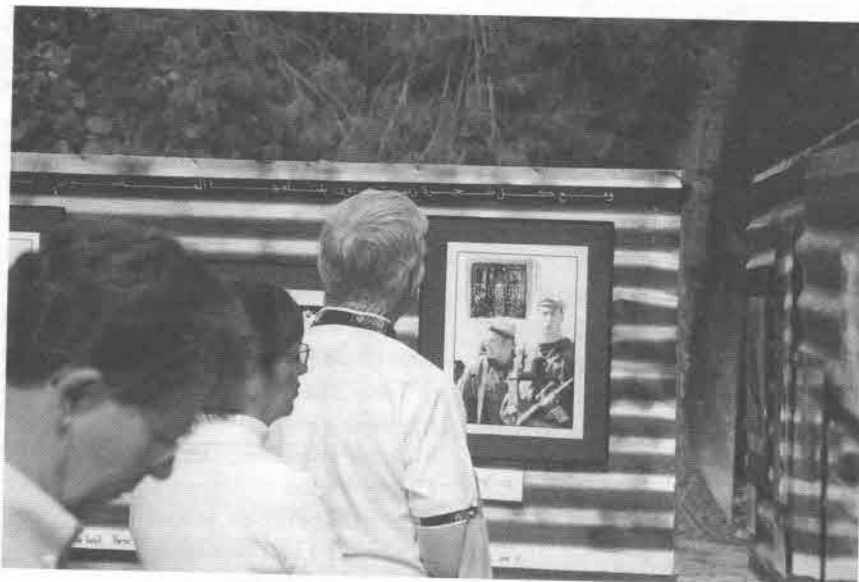
*Two young boys stand amidst the rubble of their demolished home in Al-'Aisawiyeh, a West Bank village annexed by Israel in 1967 as part of Jerusalem. A visiting group from Sweden talked and prayed with the boys and their family during a Contemporary Way of the Cross tour hosted by Sabeel. The group also viewed the Sabeel photo exhibit at the Jerusalem headquarters (bottom).*



East Exchange Program, and Temporary International Presence in Hebron, numerous delegations visited Sabeel, discussing the Center's ministry, programs such as "Ahlan wa Sahlan," and inter-organizational cooperation.

Approximately 25 representatives of the Presbyterian Women International Exchange Program met with the Sabeel staff and members of the Board during part of their fact-finding mission throughout the Middle East. The group participated in discussions concerning the work of Sabeel, political/religious issues facing the Palestinian community, specifically with regards to Palestinian women. Sabeel extends its appreciation to the Presbyterian Women for their continued involvement in our ministry, and for their dedication to this valuable work, recognizing and addressing various issues within Palestine and the larger Middle East.

"Meet the Palestinians" continues to serve Sabeel's ministry of creating international awareness and solidarity among the global community in terms of the political and religious concerns in Palestine.



**Hilary Rantisi visits the United States and Canada** - Hilary Rantisi, Special Projects Coordinator and member of the Sabeel International Department traveled to the United States and Canada September 22 through October 27th. In Canada Hilary helped to complete production on Sabeel's newest book (in English) *Our Story: The Palestinians*. In the United States, Hilary was invited to speak on behalf of the Palestinians as an International Peacemaker by the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA). Each year representatives from various countries speak in presbyteries around the United States on behalf of peace and justice issues. For two weeks, Hilary told the story of contemporary Palestinians to the Saint Augustine Presbytery in Florida, Missouri Union Presbytery, Missouri, and the Presbytery of East Tennessee. After speaking to over 1200 people in churches, colleges, youth groups, and Bible Studies, Hilary felt that some were hearing the issues for the first time, "There were many people I spoke with who knew nothing. So I told them what everyday life is like here in Palestine. I told them the truth. You plant a seed and you hope it will grow." Her new experiences and friendships with fellow activists proved exciting and insightful, "Follow up is now important." Staying in touch, educating each other as to peace and justice issues, unites a worldwide effort to stop oppression. Hilary, and Sabeel thank the Presbyterian Church USA for their continued support of Sabeel and for supporting peace and justice issues in Palestine. Hilary also extends her personal thanks to all of her gracious hosts and hostesses, new friends, old friends seen along the way and fellow international peacemakers.

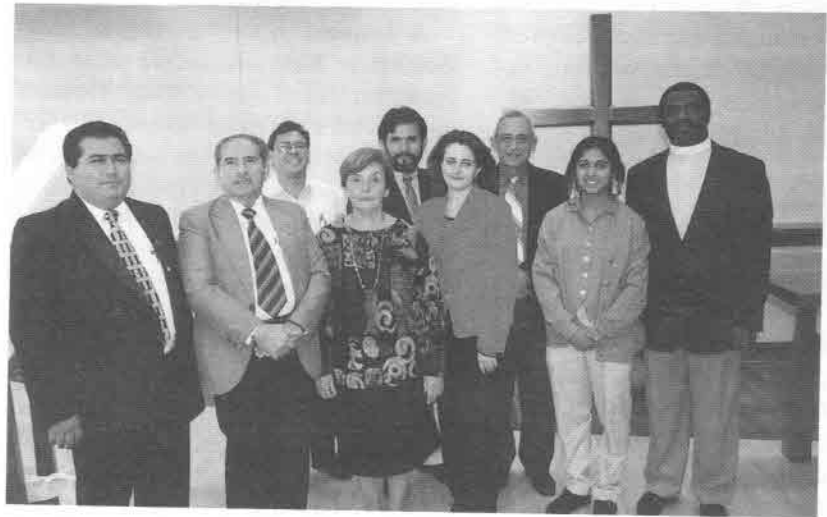
**Update of Sabeel website, [sabeel.org](http://www.sabeel.org):** Sabeel's website [www.sabeel.org](http://www.sabeel.org) is being re-launched after two years of occasional updates. Our website developer, Dan Richards from the UK, is back in our Jerusalem office and will be updating the site weekly.

The current 100 plus pages include background material on Sabeel, its local and international programs and resources on justice and peace. The largest section

on the site contains archived issues of *Cornerstone*. Take a look at conference programs and worship, Sabeel statements and publications, and opportunities to visit with Sabeel through our "Ahlan wa Sahlan" program.

In the future, look for an events calendar of Sabeel and Friends of Sabeel activities worldwide, weekly updates on news and advocacy, an ecumenical calendar, ways to support Sabeel's ministry, live audio from our conferences and events, and much more. Take the opportunity to help us shape the look and content of the site by completing the online survey at [www.sabeel.org](http://www.sabeel.org).

**A Sad Goodbye...**After helpful volunteer work, much laughter and good friendship, Hanne Pederson, our Danish volunteer from DanChurchAid, is leaving us. She will be returning to Denmark in December. We will miss her laughter, her warmth, and her invaluable help with our youth ministry. We love you Hanne and wish you well.



*International Peacemaker Representatives from left to right: Rev. Buenaventura Fuentes, Mexico, Joao Dias and Ithamar de Arajo, Brazil, Pastor Gadiel Gomez, Guatemala, Rev. Esteban Arias, Columbia, Hilary Rantisi, Palestine, Rev. Ismael Madruga, Cuba, Hina Abel, Pakistan and Rev. Uma A. Onwunta, Nigeria.*

**[www.sabeel.org](http://www.sabeel.org) - log on now.**

please note:

our new email address is [sabeel@sabeel.org](mailto:sabeel@sabeel.org)

*As a staff and a family  
we give thanks to God . . .*

... for Sabeel family members and friends around the world;  
... for the safe return of Naim, Sami Hilary and Jean from travel abroad;  
... for our staff;  
... for Cedar's improved health;  
... for hearts, minds and spirits worldwide who, through strength in Christ, refuse to succumb to disappointment, heartache, sickness and oppression;  
... for the hope that we have in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

*"Commit your way to the Lord; trust in Him and He will act."*

*Psalm 37:5 NRSV*

(continued from page 3, *Let us*)

Catholic, and Protestant.

2. Bethlehem 2000 inspires us to adopt another paradigm, that of religious pluralism. For most of the last 2000 years, we have witnessed in Palestine the tranquility and the tension among the three major religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Religion, in our long history together, has been used by people of power as an instrument of oppression and the chasm between us has been, at times, deep and painful. In the name of Christ, many Christians, especially in the West, killed and humiliated the other. This is not the Christian faith that we know and the Christ it proclaimed is alien and foreign to us. The Christ of Bethlehem inspires in us respect, acceptance, and love of the other. We live today in a pluralistic society with deep religious allegiances. The new paradigm for the new millennium demands greater toleration and acceptance without compromising one's faith or religion. Peace among religions will inevitably enhance the peace among nations and peoples. The new paradigm of pluralism, once adopted, will create greater communication, cooperation, coordination, and even partnerships among our religions. It will facilitate the joint work on issues of human rights, the integrity of creation, controlling religious extremism as well as many other issues.

3. Bethlehem 2000 inspires us to adopt the paradigm of the Jubilee. Jesus Christ emphasized the Jubilee theme in his ministry. Jubilee has to do with economic and political justice and liberation. When Jesus inaugurated his ministry in Nazareth, he highlighted the motif of Jubilee. He read from the prophet Isaiah, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). This is the year of Jubilee. The year in which God demands the liberation of all the people of the land (Leviticus 25:10).

Jesus emphasized that God's purpose

as creator is that all human relations in the world be based on justice and love. Yet, what obstructs human relations today is the abuse of power. We daily encounter it in the economic exploitation of the poor and the political injustice of the oppressed. At the heart of the biblical jubilee which Jesus Christ proclaimed is equality for all. This equality is not an act of generosity on the part of the rich and the powerful, but stems from God's demand for justice for all. For the God who loves justice always takes the side of the poor and the oppressed. Injustice breeds violence and violence produces insecurity. Without justice there is no peace or security. Furthermore, it makes us emphasize the importance of economic justice for all, the forgiveness of debts of all the poor countries of our world, and the adoption of a more simple lifestyle so that we can care for today's generations as well as future ones. The new paradigm of Jubilee helps us to focus on liberation for all the oppressed people of the world, especially in our case for the Palestinians.

4. Inspired by the teachings of Jesus, Bethlehem 2000 lifts before us another paradigm, that of non-violence. This century has been the most violent of all centuries in the history of the world. On the one hand, it has seen greater advancement in science and technology than all the previous epochs of history. On the other hand, it has been the most atrocious of all centuries. Scholars tell us that more people have already been killed in war in this century than in all the preceding ten thousand years combined (Wink, 1998, p.137). It is estimated that approximately 109 million people have been killed in wars and conflicts during this century; more than 50% of them have been civilians. Indeed, it is a feature of 20<sup>th</sup> century warfare that the majority of victims are non-combatants. In earlier wars soldiers killed soldiers. With our advanced technology of war today, civilian casualties are in the ascendancy. Bethlehem 2000 reflects the spirit of Jesus Christ who lived a life of nonviolence and suffered violently himself at the hands of others. Jesus rejected violence and inspired people to live in peace.

Those who live and make peace, he called, children of God (Matthew 5:9). Inspired by Bethlehem 2000, we hope that the new millennium will eschew war, and never experience it. We need to end war and instead strengthen the international will to promote justice and peace through nonviolent ways.

5. Jesus Christ inspires us to adopt the paradigm of compassion. So much of the world we know is built on harshness and violence. We have become hard and callused. We live in many contradictions and inconsistencies. We bomb and kill people and then turn and offer them humanitarian assistance. Jesus Christ inspires in us kindness and compassion. He said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). It is this quality that we must aspire to as we move into the new millennium. For most of its history, our world has functioned according to the paradigm of domination. It is time for the new millennium to shed that and adopt the paradigm of partnership.

This is, indeed, a new vision of justice, peace, and reconciliation, inspired by the person of Jesus Christ whose birthday we are celebrating and whose birth has given us Bethlehem 2000. Reflecting on Christmas 2000, Howard Thurman has written:

When the song of the  
angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and  
princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back  
with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among others,  
To make music in the heart. †

*The Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek is Director of Sabeel Ecumenical Theology Center, Jerusalem.*

(continued from page 13, FDM)

writer of Revelation reminds his readers, who were themselves living under the brutal persecution of the Roman Empire, that they should not lose hope. God is still on the throne. To God alone belong dominion, power, and majesty.<sup>10</sup> The writer is convinced that ultimately the evil domination systems will be vanquished by God, and God will reign forever and ever.<sup>11</sup> This is the message of the Book of Revelation. It is a message of hope and trust in God. It is a relevant message for every Christian community and especially for those who are oppressed.

When envisioning the future with God, some of the prophets of the Old Testament spoke of a time when people "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid...."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Isaiah saw a time in which "the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them...."<sup>13</sup>

We do not hope for an Armageddon, nor do we look for a violent end of the world. We do not believe that our God is a God of war and violence. God is a God of justice, truth, and peace. At Jesus' birth, the angels sang of "peace on earth."<sup>14</sup> In his adult life, Christ challenged his disciples to be peacemakers, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God."<sup>15</sup> We are challenged and inspired by Christ to work for God's Kingdom on earth as we daily pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." This Kingdom, we believe, is "... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."<sup>16</sup> †

#### NOTES:

(All Biblical references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version)

1. Damian Thompson, "The Mystery of the Year 1000," in *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*, edited by Malcolm Bull, Blackwell, 1995, 50.
2. *Ibid*, 57.
3. Richard Landes, "The Apocalyptic Year 1000," in *The Year 2000: Essays on*

*the End*, editors Strozier and Flynn, New York 1997.

4. Glaber, *Histories*, IV, 4-6 in Thompson *Ibid*, 56.
5. Mark 13:32-33.
6. With the exception of Hebrews 9:28, the phrase does not appear in the New Testament. See Matthew 24:3; I Thessalonians 2:19; James 5:7; II Peter 3:4.
7. Revelations 12.
8. Revelations 19-20.
9. Revelations 20, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplementary Volume*, s.v. "Revelations, Book of," by E. Shussler Fiorenza.
10. Revelations 5:13, 7:9-12, 19:1-4.
11. Revelations 19:6.
12. Micah 4:3-4.
13. Isaiah 11:6.
14. Luke 2:14.
15. Matthew 5:9.
16. Romans 14:17b.

(An edited version of this article will appear in the *Middle East Report*, Winter 2000.)

(continued from page 6, POE)

be fulfilled within a given time frame. At community level peace involves the fulfilled life of a sustainable community, such as: economic well being, social harmony and security.

Depending on the context, any effort within each of the four facets of 'Shalom/Salam' can be a reconciliation 'project'. And they can hopefully be used in any specific context to test whether peace and reconciliation being pursued is really holistic and comprehensive.

I will not attempt here to make an in depth assessment of how the present situation in Israel/Palestine and the so called "peace-process" compares to the 'Shalom/Salam paradigm' as outlined above. But I will venture a few observations. Certainly **justice** does not yet prevail. There isn't even a consensus between the conflicting partners as to what constitutes justice for Jews as well as for Palestinians. **Truth-telling** has very slowly begun in certain quarters. But there is still a long way before the stage is reached where the partners recognise each other's

histories and where myths can be dismantled. Only then will it be possible to speak of sacrifices and focus on meeting each other as people and starting a healing process. **Peace** is being negotiated at present by politicians, but is it also the peace of the people? Has it got reminiscences of our Biblical understanding of peace? And, finally, what about **mercy** (forgiveness)? Is it at all reasonable to insist on this dimension, if truth and justice are as yet so incompletely dealt with? I believe it is an inescapable dimension of a Christian understand of peace and reconciliation; it is the most radical and most difficult aspect of it. And even if under the present conditions it cannot be fully applied, forgiveness must be offered to the opponent with an outstretched hand, one that is ready, once the elements that have caused pain have been fully laid open and a sharing of the guilt accepted.

As indicated initially, I share these thoughts not as a complete formula for peace and reconciliation, but rather as a humble contribution to an ongoing dialogue. I have always been inspired and challenged by local partners in the Middle East to reflect on the meaning of peace and reconciliation in Christian terms. Most meaningful and most painful have often been the Christmas letters coming from the Middle East. Year after year the stark contrast between day to day reality as described by those living in the region and the Christmas message to the shepherds "Peace on earth!" has been evident. And I have always thought: if local Christians, in spite of all the hardships they experience, can still hold out this message as a promise and as a vision, then we, brothers and sisters around the world, must also feel challenged and inspired to engage in a common and ongoing struggle with them. We have been entrusted with a unique message. We are committed to witness to it through our life and acts of diakonia. We need together to keep listening to the call to be peacemakers and use the gifts bestowed on us and the resources given to us, to work jointly for a holistic peace. †

*Uffe Gjerding is the Programme Coordinator for the Middle East, DanChurchAid.*

## 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.)

For more information on *Friends of Sabeel* groups in your area please contact our International representatives or email Sabeel in Jerusalem:

### Friends of Sabeel

#### **North America (FOS-NA)**

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Ann Arbor, MI 48106 USA  
Tel: 1 734 764 0350  
Fax: 1 734 764 8523  
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*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.

*We would encourage those who feel led to make a financial contribution to any aspect of our work. We too are encouraged when we know that others believe in what we are doing.*

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