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SPECIAL ISSUE

Breaking Ground

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A Look Back, the *Way Forward*

by *Naim Ateek*

During the 9th international conference, we will be doing two things. First, we will address the theme, the Bible and the Palestine-Israel conflict. We will also celebrate 25 years of Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT). It is important to note that Sabeel as a center was established several years after the emergence of PLT.

Practically, however, the movement towards a liberation theology started during the first intifada in 1987, when some Palestinian Christians were reflecting on the meaning of faith and resistance under the Israeli occupation. Officially, the name PLT was adopted with the publishing of my first book, *Justice, and Only Justice, a Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, Orbis Books, 1989.

During the 9th conference, we will celebrate those first shoots of this theology that would prove relevant to Palestinian Christians.



In this Cornerstone issue, we are reflecting on the beginnings of PLT that eventually led to the establishment of Sabeel. Our objective is to help readers capture the expressions and nuances of those beginnings. Indeed, PLT and its Sabeel Center gave hope to Palestinian Christians and lifted some of them out of their political, religious, and theological despair. Sabeel empowered many to work for justice and peace through non-violence. Sabeel impacted many people's lives and helped change their theological outlook. In some cases, it restored faith to people who had given up on the church for its lack of involvement with the real issues of life.

We hope that by looking back on the beginnings of PLT, we will inspire our readers going forward to continue walking the *Sabeel* (the Way), as all of us face the challenges ahead in the struggle for liberation for all of God's children.

Faith and Liberation

Looking back at the last 25 years, three verses stand out for me:

Jesus said, "*I have come in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness*" (John 10:10).

Jesus said, "...*you will know the truth and the truth will make you free*" (John 8:32).

Paul said, "*For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*" (Gal 5:1).

The above three verses constitute a good basis for a Palestinian liberation theology movement. I would like to think of the first verse in a universal sense and its application must include all people. From a Christian perspective, the coming of Jesus Christ was not only for a small segment of humanity but

for all. Therefore, the life that Christ offers every person is one that has the potential of being lived in all fullness, or abundantly. This fullness is predicated on a life of love and service – love of God and service to others.

In the second verse, Jesus says that it is the truth that makes us free. I like to understand the word "truth" in a comprehensive way. It is the truth of God who is the source of all truth. It is the truth that was manifested to us in Jesus Christ who is the incarnate word of God. It is the truth that is the real, accurate, and authentic state of things that is in conformity with facts and reality. It is also the truth that is the opposite of falsehood, fabrication, and deceitfulness. The knowledge and the commitment to this kind of truth can sustain the followers of Jesus Christ in their life's journey and can be a source of freedom and liberation.

The third verse reflects the Apostle Paul's faith. For Paul, our liberation does not come from human beings but from Christ. Christ is our great liberator. God in Christ wills that we should be free. Our liberation has already been achieved by Christ through his death and resurrection. Therefore, we need to stand firm and must not submit to a yoke of slavery. Paul was talking about what constituted enslavement in his own time experienced by the early Christians living in Galatia.

The implication for us today is clear. No human being should be enslaved. Enslavement is not limited to the classical slavery that our world has known, although there are still people today who suffer from such abhorrent conditions. I am not only talking about

the millions of people in our world today who are enslaved to sin and evil and are in need of forgiveness and new life, but also the millions enslaved to injustice and oppression by people in power and who are in need of political liberation and a new life of freedom. The case in point is the Palestinian people who are living under the illegal Israeli occupation. So long as people are living under conditions of domination and injustice, they are enslaved and are in need of liberation.

In other words, there is a logical linkage between the above three verses. Truth and liberation are linked with what Christ has come to offer us – a life that can be lived in its fullness.

Consequently, when we see people living under the yoke of "slavery," we know that our faith must not tolerate this. Christ has come to set us free and to empower us to work for the liberation of others so that they too can experience the abundant life. Paul's warning should be taken seriously, and we must stand firm against any form of slavery; not only for us but equally for every one of our brothers and sisters who have fallen victim to oppression and domination.

By the Grace of God, Palestinian Liberation Theology emerged. Its advocates should speak the truth to people in power and must prophetically proclaim the good news of liberation for all those who are oppressed. This is the mandate that we have received from Christ our liberator.

"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery"

The Rev. Ateek is the Director of Sabeel

PLT: The Beginnings

by Naim Ateek

Three factors contributed to the development of a Palestinian theology of liberation.

First, was the 1987 Palestinian intifada: This intifada was the response of the Palestinian community against the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestine. It started 20 years after the occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The objective was to end the occupation and find a resolution to the conflict over Palestine based on international law. During the previous 20 years, many international attempts to arrive at a political solution were of no avail. Israel was militarily strong and was not interested in peace. There was even an escalation in Israeli state violence as well as in Palestinian resistance against the continued occupation, the confiscation of Palestinian land, and the building and expansion of the illegal Israeli settlements.

The time came when the Palestinian people were fed up with waiting for the international community to resolve the conflict. Consequently, Palestinians rose up to shake off the shackles of oppression; hence, the intifada started. It was a largely peaceful uprising against an obstinate and stubborn occupation. Young Palestinians broke the barrier of fear and shattered the myth of Israeli army invincibility.

Second, was the response of the Christian community of faith in Jerusalem. The sudden eruption of

the intifada elicited a spontaneous response among the Palestinian people throughout the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Indeed, it was in Jerusalem 2,000 years before when the followers of Jesus Christ proclaimed his resurrection and by the power of the Holy Spirit started the Christian movement. Now again in Jerusalem, a group of Palestinian Christians meeting regularly to worship God were wrestling with the right response vis-à-vis the intifada. The result was the initial sprouting of the movement for a Palestinian theology of liberation.

Every Sunday after church Palestinian Christians met and discussed their faith response. Several things were accomplished as a result of these meetings. They were a therapy time where people shared their stories and frustrations and evaluated the political

and social situation of the past week. They were a Bible lesson where the Bible was invoked and consulted. They were a theological lesson where people reflected on their Christian response to the Israeli army violence. They were empowering sessions where people's faith and resolve were strengthened and deepened. Christians discussed the violence and nonviolence of the intifada, the justice and injustice of the situation, the need for resistance, and the meaning of love of enemy in situations of conflict. It was there in the parish hall at St. George's Cathedral where Palestinian liberation theology saw the light of day as the Christian community of faith reflected on its relationship with Christ and its responsibility for others.

Third, was the publication of *Justice and Only Justice, a Palestinian Theology of Liberation* in 1989. The manuscript of my book was already at Orbis Books in New York when the intifada started in the occupied Palestinian territories. I remember vividly that I had to rush in a



The Rev. Ateek, Jean Zaru, Cedar Duaybis, Samia Khoury and Nora Carmi

few added pages to cover the intifada so that the book would not be dated even before it was published. The book was launched at St. George's Cathedral soon after it was published; and it became a basis for the fledgling PLT movement. By the Grace of God the movement slowly spread inside the country as well as abroad.

Some theological anchors:

One of the most stimulating ideas that affected the Palestinian Christians was the discovery that Jesus himself was a Palestinian who lived and died under the Roman occupation. Such a discovery connected 20th century Palestinian Christians with their first century ancestors. It made Jesus accessible to them in his humanity and his relationship to the land, people, and the powers. Jesus was a tangible person and his ideas and teachings began to unfold to Palestinian Christians in greater clarity. Such relevance produced two important outcomes. First, Jesus began to be seen as a paradigm of faith. Christians could look to him and model their lives after him. Jesus experienced the harshness of life under an oppressive occupation similar to the way our people were experiencing oppression. Second, Jesus Christ became a criterion for measuring, judging, testing, and evaluating people's actions today. Jesus Christ inspired us to action; and like him, many of our people were ready to use his nonviolent methods. Jesus became people's hermeneutic for interpreting the Bible, especially the Old Testament's difficult texts.

A further anchor was the priority of justice and the recognition that a lasting peace can only be built on justice. Justice was the business of the church and church leaders needed to dare to take a stand for truth and justice. The time had to come when the government of Israel had to admit the wrongs and injustices it had

committed against the Palestinians and to accept to share the land of Palestine with them. The Palestinians, with their variety of religious backgrounds, were the true indigenous people of the land.

Further reflections:

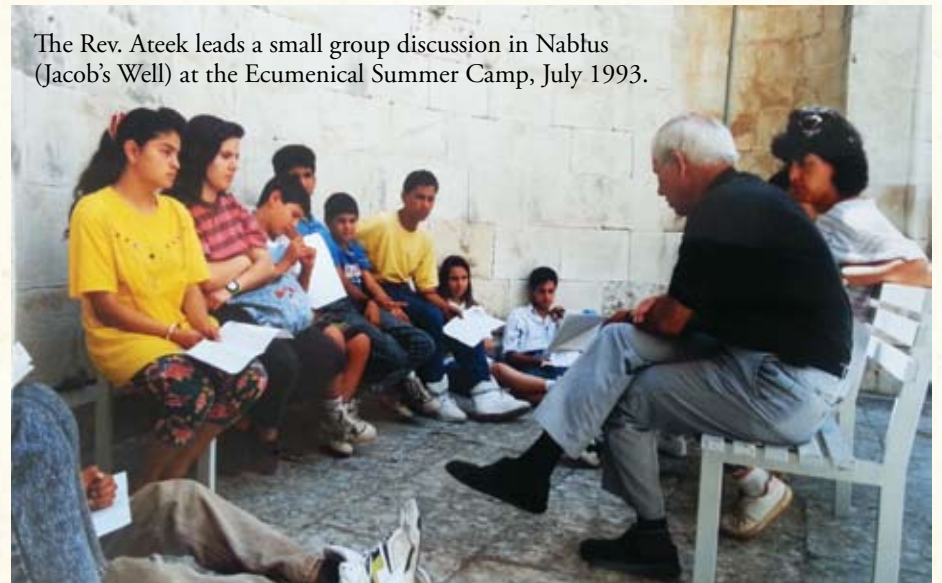
Looking back at the journey of the last 25 years it is true to say that whenever we proclaim the gospel we are in essence proclaiming liberation. In a sense, I see liberation as the essence of our Christian faith. Liberation is a comprehensive word. In both original Hebrew and Greek, the meaning includes salvation, deliverance, rescue, as well as well-being and healing. In fact, the concept of a theology of liberation emerged from a context of oppression and injustice. Wherever oppression, domination, and injustice are found, it is natural for human beings to seek freedom and liberation. From this perspective, Jesus Christ is our liberator.

In the context of Palestine and Israel, liberation theology developed formally more than 40 years after the Nakba; yet its roots were probably unconsciously hidden in an earlier time as it was ripening and maturing in one's soul and mind. Furthermore, I am sure that some clergy as well as laity were practicing some form of liberation theology without naming it. Indeed, all along many people were engaged in the resistance struggle. Many chose the

armed struggle; others chose peaceful and nonviolent means. Many were imprisoned and deported, while some lost their lives. It is possible to say that the flame of truth and justice was never extinguished. People were aware of the military might of Israel as well as the ability of its security forces to apprehend any suspect and neutralize those who were perceived as a threat. In spite of all of this, people resisted through various nonviolent methods.

At the same time, due to the conflict over Palestine, many people's faith was shaken. For those who continued to cling to faith, their theology reflected a sense of despair and resignation. It was a passive waiting on God. PLT, therefore, was the spark that lit the fire that started doing two things. First it burned the chains of the oppressive theology that shackled many of us; and second, PLT was the light that lit our way to fathom a deeper understanding of God in Christ and discover the wonderful message of the Bible about a loving God who loves all people equally and wills justice, peace, and liberation for all.

Finally, from the very beginning, PLT was committed to nonviolence and emphasized three essential gradational points: justice, peace, and reconciliation. Justice must be done first. It is justice that can produce peace, and peace is what can open the door for reconciliation. ■



The Rev. Ateek leads a small group discussion in Nablus (Jacob's Well) at the Ecumenical Summer Camp, July 1993.

PLT: A Rewarding Way

by Samia Khoury

I still recall that day when Rev. Naim Ateek called to invite me to join a group to look into the possibility of starting a Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT) movement. The Christians in the Galilee faced a new reality overnight after the 1948 Nakba, and had many burning questions. Can this be God's will? Rev. Ateek tried to find answers. His book *Justice and Only Justice*, which was based on his dissertation for his degree in theology, was the inception of Palestinian Liberation Theology 25 years ago.

I felt so honored to be one of this small group of clergy and lay people, men and women, who were at the doorstep of a new vision for theology. We were three women: Cedar Duaybis, Jean Zaru and I; one layman, advocate Jonathan Kuttub; and three clergymen: Rev. Ateek, Father Elias Chacour (who became Archbishop of the Melkite Church in the Northern Galilee), and Rev. Riah Abu el-Assal, who became the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem. I had known both Father Chacour and Rev. Abu el-Assal from when they used to speak to our YWCA groups during their visits to the Galilee. But it was not long after those early years of PLT that these two became too busy in their new responsibilities.

In the meantime, our small group had called on other lay people to join. Theology always interested me and I was always close to the church. However,

this was something completely different. It was liberation theology and being under occupation, we needed liberation theology just as much as political liberation because as Christian Palestinians, we all felt that many of the Biblical texts had been used to justify our dispossession and oppression.

Our work began in the parish office of Rev. Ateek, with Cedar as part time staff. It did not take long for me to be completely immersed in this new venture. I was already involved with the YWCA and Rawdat El-Zuhur Elementary School but somehow I managed this venture without even feeling it was a burden. Our group's meetings and programs, which were

ecumenical right from the beginning, took place in the parish hall of St. George's Cathedral. They included Bible study and book readings.

I still remember how much I was affected and influenced by one of the first books that we read: *Upside-Down Kingdom* by Donald Kraybill, who was a Mennonite. Of course we started with basics of liberation theology by the founder of liberation theology in Latin American, Gustavo Gutierrez, who was a Peruvian. There weren't enough copies of either book, so we used to photocopy a chapter at a time and we took turns leading the discussion on each chapter. Another book was about the experience of South Africa with liberation theology titled, *The Hope of the People who Struggle* by Carlos Mesters. It was very



Sabeel co-founders Samia Khoury and now Archbishop Elias Chacour speak at the 1996 conference.



A Bible study session at St. George's Parish Hall in 1991

meaningful to see how each liberation theology movement had emanated from the context of its own country. These meetings and discussions were very refreshing; they lifted our spirits and helped us all read the scriptures with Palestinian eyes. We really felt there was a revolution in our thinking, which made our faith very relevant to our situation.

We also all felt the religious education curriculum in the schools, whether Christian or Muslim, was not playing a positive role in understanding each other. So we attempted to suggest a curriculum for ethics for the lower classes as a first stage, whereby there would be no need to separate Christians from Muslims in the same class. Dr. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, the head of the committee for the new Palestinian school curricula, was very cooperative and receptive to our concern. But unfortunately, he realized that nothing could be done at that time.

The first Sabeel international conference, held at Tantur Ecumenical Institute in 1990, was meant to test whether the concept of a conference was viable. The positive feedback on the conference was beyond our expectation.

I had the honor then to welcome the participants at the beginning of the conference and that is when I remarked that in our troubled land, liberation and theology were coming together for the first time on the same platform.

The movement started growing much quicker than we had planned for, or dreamed of, so there was need for more room and more staff. That is when we all thought that we also needed a name to link to this movement other than PLT. It was also necessary to consider starting a branch in Nazareth, as the problems in the Galilee differed quite a bit from our problems in Jerusalem and the West Bank.

It was on one of our trips back from a meeting in Nazareth that we started thrashing out possible names until there was a unanimous agreement. We chose Sabeel, meaning the “way,” and also a source of water. Now that I am retired from the Sabeel board, I can say it has been a long Way, a fruitful and rewarding Way – and definitely a source for quenching the thirst of our faith.

Samia Khoury is a Sabeel co-founder and former Sabeel board member. She currently volunteers at Sabeel.

Longtime Fri

“In 1982, I became the first Christian Aid Coordinator to visit Palestine-Israel. As for so many people, the Holy Land had previously largely conjured up for me a vision of Biblical characters and places. I had little awareness of the wholesale displacement of the Palestinian people and the violence done to them as a result of the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948, and then Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip following the 1967 war. Since that time, I have returned many times to Palestine-Israel and witnessed at first hand the terrible suffering of the Palestinian people under their occupying power, where daily they face the demolition of their houses, their olive groves and their national identity. Wherever I have been, they have begged me to tell their story around the world, and this became a lifelong mandate for me.

In 1984, I met Canon Naim Ateek, Director of Sabeel, the Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre in Jerusalem where, in Naim’s words, “Justice is nailed to the cross daily.” In 1996, at Naim’s invitation, I became for several years, coordinator of Friends of Sabeel UK. Sabeel became a major focus for me and many others who felt compelled to spread the Palestinian story.

More recently, with Sabeel UK North West Region, we have committed wholesale support to the 2009 Kairos Palestine document, which challenges the role of empire in this tragic situation. I think daily of Maya Angelou’s wise words: “History,

ends of Sabeel

despite its wrenching pain, cannot be un-lived but, if faced with courage, need not be lived again.”

Janet Davies (FOS UK)

“Friends of Sabeel – North America (FOSNA) began after the 2nd Sabeel conference in January 1996. We joined with Canada so that we could exchange ideas and speakers. The Canadians are now independent, but we still can work together. We started out boldly raising funds to help Jerusalem and our work here, building some local chapters, collaborating with other groups with similar aims, and holding conferences around the country.

While we recognized the general lack of information about our issue within the U.S. public, I think we seriously underestimated the serious misinformation being injected into the community's views by those who had a vested interest in holding on to Palestinian land and refusing to allow Palestinian refugees to return.

In my lifetime, U.S. views have changed significantly on a number of occasions. Often it comes about through education in schools and colleges, or through the media, or through churches and other religious institutions. I want to mention our slowness in changing perceptions because I hope to help my Palestinian friends understand why it has been so slow in happening, but to also recognize that things are at last changing. With continued hard work, there is hope that Americans will see that working for justice is crucial for a lasting peace for both Palestinians and Israelis.”

Betsy Barlow (FOSNA)



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Ruins of a demolished Palestinian village

The Three-Fold Nakba

by Cedar Duaybis

The seeds of Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT) go back to the days of the Nakba, 65 years ago. About 750,000 Palestinians were driven out or fled in fright from their country in the face of the brutal onslaught of the Zionist underground militias. These militias were carrying out a premeditated plan to evacuate the country of its Palestinian Arab citizens.

When I look back today, I can discern a three-fold Nakba. It was a human Nakba of enormous magnitude. It was an identity Nakba that made us strangers in our own land, and it was a theological Nakba that pulled the ground from under our feet and added to our feeling of being utterly lost. Our lives were like a ship whose anchor had broken loose and was drifting aimlessly. For the next 18 years, we were placed under very strict military rule that

controlled every aspect of our lives.

When eventually the curfews were eased and we were able once again to go to church, everything was the same – the liturgy, the Bible readings, the sermon and the hymns; whereas outside, our lives had been turned upside down. The Rev. Naim Ateek, the father of PLT, who himself, together with his family, became an internal refugee in Nazareth, describes what happened in his book, *Justice and Only Justice, a Palestinian Theology of Liberation*: “The establishment of the State of Israel was a seismic tremor of enormous magnitude that has shaken the very foundations of their beliefs...The fundamental question of many Christians, whether uttered or not is: ‘How can the Old Testament be the Word of God in light of the Palestinian Christian’s experience with its use to support Zionism?’”

(pp77-78).

It is said that theology is a bridge that leads humans to God. For Palestinian Christians, this bridge had collapsed and we were caught in the crack, unable to go back to our former theological thinking while groping to find a meaningful way forward. Whether it was Western feelings of guilt or the theology of Christian literalists, or the ideology of Jewish Zionism, the Bible was used to grant approval to the tragic fate of the Palestinian people.

Israel was not established without the destruction of hundreds of Palestinian villages, the creation of some 750,000 refugees, and the destruction of the national and political life of the Palestinian people. Our faith seemed to clash with the reality of our lives.

My generation grew up under the influence of Western dominated theology, especially during the British Mandate period when many schools were run by British missionaries. Scripture was taught through their lenses and, whether consciously or unconsciously, it was done in a way that supported the policy of the British Government towards the facilitation of the establishment of the “Jewish homeland” in Palestine.

At the beginning of Naim Ateek’s ministry in the Anglican Church, he was determined to find answers to the many theological questions that distanced people from their faith at a time when they most needed consolation, hope, encouragement and direction in their lives. He took time off to read the Bible with Palestinian eyes and reflect

theologically on the tragic experience of the Palestinian people through the eyes of faith. Our faith crises had intensified after the six-day war when the rest of historic Palestine – the West Bank, East-Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip – fell under Israeli occupation. Religious Zionism flourished and it was evident that they would hold onto the land “that God had given them.”

Naim Ateek formed a committee of concerned Christians from the different churches, who after a series of workshops organized an International Conference in order to place this Palestinian reading of the Bible in the context of liberation theologies around the world.

After the conference, the founding members decided to start a ministry among Palestinian Christians to help them come to terms with their faith in light of their experience, and to draw on

their faith to work for justice, peace and reconciliation. I was asked to be part-time staff to explore the possibilities of this important ministry.

Bible study was the mainstay of this new ecumenical ministry. We tried to discern what God was saying to us here and now, and to “develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, nonviolence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities,” (Purpose Statement of Sabeel). The first youth conference was organized for some 50 teenagers from the villages around Ramallah to try and help them deal with life under occupation and realize the power of non-violence in resisting injustice.

We held a number of workshops, prominent among which was one that dealt with “The Just War Theory” that was used to justify the war against Iraq. Marc Ellis’s public lecture after

the publishing of his book, *Beyond Innocence and Redemption*, was extremely well attended. From the beginning we realized the importance of speaking to visiting groups, and we organized a comprehensive speakers’ training course for 25 young men and women who volunteered to meet with those groups and tell the story of the Palestinian people.

Right from the beginning, PLT stressed that there can be no liberation for one side with the enslavement of the other, and that the well-being of one side was bound to the well-being of the other side. A way has to be found for sharing the land in order to turn the present curse into a blessing for all.

Cedar Duaybis is a Sabeel co-founder, former Sabeel board member and a co-author of the Kairos Palestine document. She currently volunteers at Sabeel.



Participants of the first Speaker’s Training Course enjoy a closing party, 1992.



Sabeel’s second youth conference, 1992



© Mondoweiss

Palestinian children look at the Wall and a neighboring illegal Jewish settlement.

PLT's Critical Contribution

by Rosemary Radford Ruether

The journey of Dr. Naim Ateek in the creation and development of a Palestinian liberation theology has been very important in the shaping of my vision of what redemption means, for me and for many others who have been drawn to the Palestinian story of oppression. I have followed the development of Dr. Ateek's thought since I first encountered his work in Palestine in 1987. I have attended most of the Sabeel conferences since its founding in 1990. I have also taught courses on the conflict in theological seminaries for over 21 years and have taken students and faculty on trips to Israel-Palestine. Dr. Ateek's Palestinian liberation theology has been a key guide in those courses.

I had been involved in critique of

Christian anti-Semitism in the 1960's and published a book about it in 1974: *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*. But in the late 1970's I became aware of how the critique of anti-Semitism was being used to justify Israeli domination. In 1980 I participated in a trip to Israel-Palestine sponsored by a Jewish women's group interested in dialogue between Christians, Jews and Muslims. I spent some time in Jerusalem and Ramallah encountering the Palestinian perspective. This experience deepened my concern to see this issue in its Palestinian context.

My husband, Herman J. Ruether (a scholar of Islam), and I decided to pursue this question by spending some months in 1987 at the Tantur

Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem. One day there I overheard some staff at Tantur discussing the thesis written by Dr. Ateek on the Episcopal Church in Palestine. This church was founded by British imperialists in the mid-19th century, inspired by a vision of Christian Zionism. Hoping that Jews would convert to Christianity (the Anglican Church), thereby ushering in world redemption through the British Empire, they appointed a converted Jew, the Rev. Michael Solomon Alexander, as the first Anglican bishop in Jerusalem, to represent this hope. Ateek's thesis, written for his doctoral degree at Berkeley, California, discussed the irony of these roots of the Episcopal Church in Palestine for Palestinian Anglicans such as himself.

Fascinated by this story, I checked out Dr. Ateek's thesis at the Tantur library, and decided to go over to St. George's cathedral in Jerusalem to meet him. I was able to encounter him in his office there, and we quickly engaged in a conversation. He shared his concern to develop a Palestinian liberation theology. I was immediately inspired by this vision and have been in contact with Dr. Ateek and his developing thought ever since.

In the spring of 1987 I taught a course at Tantur on Christian Zionism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while my husband taught a course on Islam. Through these lectures we developed a plan to write a book together on how Western Christian relations to Jews and Judaism were being reshaped by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This was published in 1989, titled *The Wrath of Jonah: The Crisis of Religious Nationalism in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*.

Meanwhile, Dr. Ateek was developing his thought on Palestinian liberation theology and published his first book on this theme in the same year, 1989: *Justice and Only Justice, a Palestinian Theology of Liberation*. This book is foundational to the movement for a Palestinian theology and the development of Sabeel movements worldwide. Dr. Ateek very kindly asked me to write the foreword for this book.

In this foreword I discussed the challenge raised by Palestinian liberation theology to the use of exodus and promised land motifs in other liberation theologies. "A Palestinian liberation theology reveals the dangerous shadow side of these images of liberation from former oppression. Palestinians are victims of a Zionist liberation theology and ideology. The Jewish exodus from

oppression in Europe is the rationale for their conquest. The Jewish claim to the promised land is their dispossession from their land of Palestine. Jewish peoplehood excludes the existence of Palestinians as a people. Jewish redemption is Palestinian oppression." ... "the critical issue for every liberation theology, every liberation movement, is not simply to throw off oppression and empower the formerly victimized, but how to do so in a way that does not make former slaves into new slave masters."

The critical contribution of a Palestinian liberation theology is the struggle to answer this question. Only such a theology "can save us from repeating the cycle of violence, from empowering one oppressed people only by making them oppressors of another people." Only when we understand, "as Father Ateek affirms, that the earth belongs finally to God and not to us as private property," can we learn to live together in peace, by sharing it with one another, "as sisters and brothers, children of one God who created us and chooses us all."

Rosemary Radford Ruether is a leading feminist theologian and Visiting Professor at Claremont Graduate University. She also specializes in liberation theology.

»» " '...the critical issue for every liberation theology, every liberation movement, is not simply to throw off oppression and empower the formerly victimized, but how to do so in a way that does not make former slaves into new slave masters.' The critical contribution of a Palestinian liberation theology is the struggle to answer this question."



Sabeel Nazareth

by *Violette Khoury*

Al Sabeel, the Arabic word for the “way” or the “path” has been my path for more than 20 years. Living in Nazareth, the headquarters of the so called “Arabs of Israel” or the “Arabs of 48,” we are indeed the “Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel” with pluralistic religious belonging. As a long time forgotten faithful, we share the same destiny: a lost identity, suppression of our existence, and cancellation of our memory, culture and history.

Our identity as Arab Palestinian Israeli Christians (and the denomination) is a confusing one. Our daily life is directly and deeply affected by political measures where the churches are totally absent. The dilemma became critical after the first intifada, which cut us off from the Palestinians in the West Bank – another rupture from our roots. Our language was being lost. At that stage it became easy to divide and subdivide the community, and reduce it to groups of enemies: the best way to wipe the community out.

I myself have suffered from the induced and internal fanatic riots and violence, which broke out in Nazareth from 1997-1999, provoked by the idea of building a Mosque in a public square in front of the basilica. The pharmacy I owned in the area was robbed and vandalized. The damage was serious and the loss was great for no other reason than being a Christian. I found myself alone with no support from anywhere. Many were concerned about building or not building a Mosque but no one cared about the living people.

The message was clear: As grassroots, we have to stand up and take responsibility, develop awareness, and work towards reconciliation and unity to avoid self-destruction. Our challenge includes internal and external factors. Sabeel has been my way to react. Through Sabeel I can work so it will not happen again to others.

I was involved with the PLT since the beginning. In 1993, Sabeel started a

branch in Nazareth as an ecumenical movement with members from all the different denominations – with no room, no table, no chair and no telephone. Moved by our conviction, our trust, our vision, and our feelings for the needs of the community, we started our mission. I had a dynamic and dedicated committee, and each member was active in his/her church. So we brought all the churches of Nazareth together to Sabeel.

Our first activities and priorities were regular Bible studies, ecumenical prayer meetings, and reflections. We started with 400 people attending. It was a blessing for all, and we realized the importance of Sabeel; but it was not enough. We organized visits to the Biblical sites to discover our Christian roots in our land, meeting different Christians in their churches. The reactions were encouraging but this was still not enough. We made a relationship with the Palestinian Christians in the West Bank: visiting them, praying together, and sharing their Sunday services. There was a great need for both sides; but yet this was still not enough.

We organized study days, guided tours, and visits to the religious, historical and political sites. For decades we have been kept away from our history and our geography, so we tried to revive those memories. It was stimulating; but





Women gather for a meeting in Haifa in 2003.

again, not enough. The vision became clear: Sabeel's work has no limits, and the path is long and deep.

For Christian Palestinians ecumenism is not an idea, it is a way of life. Living together as Christians and Muslims is a major issue to maintain our social harmony and our social structure.

At Sabeel Nazareth we cooperate with other local organizations, and this is empowering and enriching. We also speak to the international pilgrim groups, and this is the only way to let them discover the truth. In addition, this is very useful to recruit people for justice and peace. Contacts with Jewish peace movements are necessary for the justice we seek. We have to reach all the community – all ages, all categories, all educational levels, all social statuses. The expectations are high.

We work with different age groups locally, with regular meetings and various activities. We also have regular ecumenical prayer services and retreats. Our artistic events, and our spiritual, social and political presentations by our youth group are much appreciated.

Our community programs include Muslims and Christians seeking understanding and unity, and are more in demand. We have more than 140 events during the year and also speak to a large number of international pilgrims. Our contacts with Jewish peace movements are fruitful. Extending the work of Sabeel in all the Galilee is needed. After 25 years I can say: God Bless Sabeel.

Violette Khoury is Coordinator and Manager of Sabeel Nazareth

»» “For decades we have been kept away from our history and our geography, so we tried to revive those memories. It was stimulating; but again, not enough. The vision became clear: Sabeel's work has no limits, and the path is long and deep.”

A Ramadan Tale:

Why I Starve

(a slang poem)

I starve because of how full I am, full of these blessings that I'm blessed with. I starve because of how blind we are, see although we can see very far it's what's put in front of our eyes that we're blind to. See you and I we live the good life, we don't have to struggle to survive and we don't have to do much to feel alive...but what's inside, what's inside is where the problem lies, no not what's inside your stomach at the moment but what's inside your heart and your mind...

(to read the rest, see Sabeel's website: www.sabeel.org)

by Kareem Sawalmeh,
8th grade, Friends Boys
School, Ramallah

Glimpses of Our Activities



Volunteer recruitment meeting in Bethlehem for the Global Young Adult Festival



Launching of the film, "The Stones Cry Out" at the Notre Dame Center in Jerusalem



Glimpses of Our Activities



Clergy wives meeting in Beit Sahour



Launching of the film, "The Stones Cry Out" in Nazareth



Sabeel Study Circle with Rev. George Shand in Jerusalem



An ecumenical prayer for the beginning of Lent and the Feast of the Annunciation in Nazareth



Clergy wives meeting in Beit Sahour



Easter program with artwork made by Sabeel Nazareth youth



© Tomorrow's Youth Organization

A Palestinian child plays at a kindergarten in Tulkarm

The Pilgrim Road of Humanity

by Jean Zaru

Friends, one of the best things that happened in my life was attending the Nairobi Assembly in 1975 of the World Council of Churches. This led to a great involvement in the ecumenical movement. As I look back, I feel there is something happening on the pilgrim road of humanity. The Spirit of God is moving many of the Christian churches who are together in the World Council towards being a People's Movement. In many of their gatherings, I experienced a cross-section of humanity, of every race and culture and Christian spiritual experience, of every background and

profession. And yet, I felt all of us, willingly or unwillingly, were moving towards being a vast people's movement of humanity.

As a member of this movement, I could feel the internal pressure from the Christian faith, and the external pressure from world history. For me, I find no duality between one and the other. Both aspects, inner and outer, are opening our eyes to see ecumenism in its true universal light, a matter not only for Christians, but also for the entire inhabited world. I feel in spite of

the pressures, there is no way back into escapism or disengagement from the whole human family or of setting up dogmatic and religious walls in order to enjoy a separate Christian existence.

I have struggled most of my adult life with issues of theology and liberation. And it has been a life experience, not a library, which has served as my source of inspiration. My life experience has taken me to all five continents where, over the years, I have been enormously enriched by contact with activists and theologians engaged in

various struggles of liberation. My life experience is equally rooted in my identity as a Palestinian Christian woman; Therefore, before I offer my contribution towards a theology of liberation, I will share some about my context.

My entire life has been affected and encompassed by Biblical teachings and interpretations. As a Christian, a Palestinian, a woman, an Arab and a Quaker, the teachings of Western Churches have affected me personally and, collectively, have affected my people in very specific ways.

The use and abuse of the Bible in reflecting on the legitimacy, policies and conduct of the State of Israel is common, especially (but by no means exclusively) among conservative North American Christians. They see a firm link between Biblical and modern Israel. The history of condoning evil in the name of Biblical justification is, of course, a long one. Discrimination, oppression and war have all been justified by references to Biblical texts, in most cases out of context. David Ben-Gurion, in fact, called the Bible the “sacrosanct title-deed to Palestine” for the Jewish people.

The International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem is the most overtly political supporter of Israel. In its publications it proclaims that God gave the land to the Jewish people. God will bless or curse nations in accordance with the treatment of the chosen people of Israel.

Accepting the invitation to be one of the founding members of Sabeel was a



great experience, to deal with many of these issues. I have been enriched and inspired to learn, share and contribute in different ways. I enjoyed every minute of my work with the board and its members, the staff, and our director Dr. Canon Naim Ateek. We were united in the spirit and we made a difference in our country and abroad. I worked on issues of land, the Exodus, the election, women (Patriarchy), and nonviolent resistance to transform structures of domination and oppression.

We had a commitment to a theology of struggle to the community of suffering and oppressed. It has become a transforming community of Sabeel. We have to transform structures of racist dominations to safeguarding the human rights of all and the humanity of all. We have to move from sexist dominations to safeguarding the human rights of all and the humanity of all. From exploitation of nature to gentle cooperation with nature, from selfishness and victimization to self-respect and resistance, from God above

and power-over to God within and power with, from death and destruction to resurrection and life. We all belong together.

The great divide is not between God, human beings, and the whole community of life. The great rift is between care and carelessness, justice and injustice, mercy and mercilessness.

May the local and international community of Sabeel be blessed; it has challenged, changed and deepened my own faith.

Jean Zaru is a Sabeel co-founder and the author of the books, A Christian Palestinian Life: Faith and Struggle; Structural Violence: Truth and Peace-Keeping in the Palestinian Experience; and, Occupied with Nonviolence: A Palestinian Woman Speaks.



“I feel in spite of the pressures, there is no way back into escapism or disengagement from the whole human family or of setting up dogmatic and religious walls in order to enjoy a separate Christian existence.”

The First PLT Conference

by Kathy Bergen

I first came to Jerusalem in September, 1982. I had just graduated with a Master of Divinity from AMBS (Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary) in Elkhart, Indiana. Four years of seminary studies had taken me into Biblical and theological studies, including feminist theology and liberation theology. I came to Jerusalem with a small group of AMBS students and our Old Testament professor, Dr. Millard Lind and his wife Miriam to study Biblical Archeology, Biblical Geology, Biblical Geography, Modern Palestine, and Modern Israel. Having studied liberation theology, I was ready and anxious to see how the different liberation theologies compared to Palestinian Liberation Theology.

After a semester of studies in Jerusalem, I was accepted as a staff person of MCC (Mennonite Central Committee), which had been based in East Jerusalem since 1949 and worked in the Palestinian community since then. Now I was really anxious to look at what liberation theology meant in the Palestinian context. As the Peace Education and Advocacy staff person of MCC, I had the opportunity to meet Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek, who had been thinking and writing about theology in a Palestinian context. In fact, Palestinian theology was the thesis of his doctoral dissertation. On one of his trips to Jerusalem, I met Dr. Marc Ellis, a Jewish liberation theologian and the

Director of the Maryknoll Peace and Justice Institute in Maryknoll, New York. I had the honor of introducing the two men to each other. Marc made it possible for Naim to spend three months at Maryknoll and turn his doctoral dissertation into a book – *Justice and Only Justice* – which was then published by Orbis Books at Maryknoll.

In 1989, Naim brought together a small group of seven Palestinian Christians from the various church communions and called it the Palestinian Theology Group (PTG). Later others were asked to join the PTG. I was seconded by MCC to work with Naim half-time for a year and we went about organizing the first Palestinian Liberation Theology conference, which took place in March, 1990 at Tantur Ecumenical Institute near Bethlehem.

As an international living in Palestine, I did not feel it was appropriate for me to do the theological thinking, but rather, I saw my role as the person who could “put legs” on the ideas of the PTG that Naim and the others initiated. I saw my role as doing the logistics for the conference – fundraising, organizing the schedule of the conference as the PTG suggested it, organizing for the meetings of the PTG, contacting the guests from outside and organizing their travel, and sending out the invitations

to Palestinians, etc. We all have some very funny stories to share as we all traveled to the Galilee for meetings in the MCC van driven by me – flat tires, flooding of the roads, etc. Organizing this conference happened before the days of e-mail, so I appreciated some much needed help from Zoughbi Zoughbi and Elaine Lindower.

The PTG decided to invite ten liberation theologians from different countries (Philippines, Costa Rica, South Africa, Zimbabwe, India, US) as guests and speakers. Locally, only Palestinian Christians were invited to attend the conference because this first conference was seen to be a dialogue between Palestinian Christians and



“In addition to the conference, all the guests were taken on tours in order to expose them to the current realities of Palestinians living under Israeli military occupation. The three-day conference was filmed and later all presentations at the conference were published in a book, *Faith and the Intifada*.”



Participants hold liberation and justice banners at the third International Sabeel Conference, 1998.

international liberation theologians.

In addition to the conference, all the guests were taken on tours in order to expose them to the current realities of Palestinians living under Israeli military occupation. The three-day conference was filmed and later all presentations at the conference were published in a book, *Faith and the Intifada*.

There was going to be a follow-up conference, but after Iraq invaded Kuwait and the US started the Gulf War, this was difficult. In the meantime, the

PTG acquired an office and it became known as Sabeel. The next Sabeel conference was held in 1996 and seven have been organized since then.

After this second conference took place, a few of us met at the home of Naim Ateek and, enthusiastic about Betsy Barlow's idea, formed FOSNA (Friends of Sabeel — North America). We saw this as a way of educating church members in North America about the situation of Palestinians living under Israeli military occupation and about Palestinian Christians in

particular. Today, many countries have established FOS groups and have made inroads into many churches around the world that would not have heard of Palestinians, Palestinian Christians, and the situation of Palestinians living under Israeli military occupation, and of those living in Israel, not as equals, but as second class citizens, with Israeli passports, but discriminated against.

Kathy Bergen is the former Program Coordinator of the Friends International Center in Ramallah.

A Relevant Faith

by Jonathan Kuttab

The practice at St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem was for Rev. Naim Ateek to hold a discussion every Sunday after the Arabic speaking service. We would start with the subject of the sermon (which in proper Anglican fashion never exceeded 11 minutes), and then proceed to issues that concerned all of us. These included: the occupation, relations with the Israelis, (and our Muslim neighbors), violence, and nonviolence, morality, ethics, the state of the church, daily struggles, angels, and the afterlife, etc. These discussions were fascinating, and attracted Christians from other denominations, as well as visiting foreigners.

Members of the Christian Peacemaking Teams (CPT) from Hebron would join us and inform us of the latest settler outrages, and visiting pilgrims would also often drop in to join in the discussion. The discussions were an attempt to do "living theology" and relate our faith to our current situation. I confess there were some Sundays when I would sleep in and miss the

church service, but I would NOT miss the discussion if I was in town.

After Canon Naim retired from St. George's, many felt the need to continue such discussions, and formalize them into an organization that fulfilled this function. In this manner, Sabeel slowly came into being as a center for "Palestinian Liberation Theology." Palestinian Christians from all denominations found that we shared similar concerns, worries, faith issues, and outlooks. We were surprised to find that as we read the Bible and prayed and discussed together, we faced similar theological issues, whether we were Catholic, Greek Orthodox, evangelical, Armenian, or something else.

We all felt the need to make our faith more relevant to our daily lives. We were all concerned about the situation in our respective churches: the gap between clerical hierarchies and the laity, the lack of unity between churches, and the failure all too often of our respective churches to address our daily concerns.

»» "Living under occupation, we were acutely concerned with issues of peace and justice; of violence and nonviolence; of resistance; and of reconciliation. We believed the message of the gospel, as sometimes preached abroad, was hardly good news for us Palestinians, nor was it good for our Jewish oppressors for that matter."



Jonathan Kuttab speaks at a Sabeel event.

We noticed how the young particularly found church and their faith to be irrelevant to their lives.

Living under occupation, we were acutely concerned with issues of peace and justice; of violence and nonviolence; of resistance; and of reconciliation. We believed the message of the gospel, as sometimes preached abroad, was hardly good news for us Palestinians, nor was it good for our Jewish oppressors for that matter. We were all too aware of

how many televangelists interpreted scriptures to justify Zionism and the continued oppression of our people; yet we knew that the program of political Zionism was hardly God's will for the people of the Middle East today.

We felt the need to both relate our faith to our current situation, and to explain our reality to our brothers and sisters, particularly those in the West who were subjected to these false interpretations. As Christians, we felt the need to repudiate these views not only because they were hurting our cause, but also because they were false and portrayed a wrong view to Christians in the West and Muslims as well. As Naim Ateek once put it, we felt we needed to defend God himself and the Bible from those who insisted on portraying him as a racist, violent, unjust God.

But our task was two-fold. First, we needed to challenge Christian Zionism theologically and reconcile our faith and our reading of scripture with our political reality. Second, and perhaps more importantly, we needed to relate our faith to our daily lives and concerns.

Both tasks were fundamentally spiritual, though they had clear political implications.

Foreign visitors and groups were often aware of the political message and implication of the work of Sabeel. Less obvious to them was the work we were doing in the Palestinian community itself, among women, youth, and clergy. Our efforts were to bring Palestinian Christians together and make our faith a living reality, rather than a set of dogmas and rituals practiced every Sunday. As more and more groups became aware of Sabeel, Rev. Ateek, Cedar Duaybis, Nora Carmi, and myself were inundated with requests to speak to groups locally and abroad. In the end we decided to train others to assist in this task of "interpretation." A training course for young Christians, who were already proficient in English, was started to help with this task.

In a way, the work of Sabeel is really the work of all Christians. In every age and place, Christians are called upon to understand and live their faith in a manner that is responsive and relevant

to their particular reality. It was a privilege and a joy for me personally to work with others in this effort.

Jonathan Kuttub is a Sabeel co-founder and leading Palestinian human rights attorney in Palestine and Israel. He is also a co-founder of Al Haq and Palestinian Center for the Study of Nonviolence.

»» "In a way, the work of Sabeel is really the work of all Christians. In every age and place, Christians are called upon to understand and live their faith in a manner that is responsive and relevant to their particular reality."

The Stones Cry Out

The story of the Palestinian Christians

a film by Yasmine Perni



For more information about this new documentary, contact us at Sabeel: cornerstone@sabeel.org

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*Join Sabeel
in celebrating the 25th
Anniversary of Palestinian
Liberation Theology*

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Theological Landscape
where local and International Theologians reflect on**

The Bible and the Palestine-Israel Conflict

Cost: 1000 USD per person for double room | 1450 USD for single room

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Registration Deadline October 1st 2013

Notre Dame Center, Jerusalem • 19 – 25 November 2013

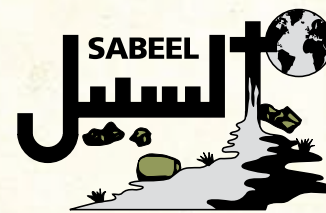
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PURPOSE STATEMENT *f* SABEL

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

Sabeel also works to promote a more accurate international awareness regarding the identity, presence, and witness of Palestinian Christians as well as their contemporary concerns. It encourages individuals and groups from around the world to work for a just, comprehensive, and enduring peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action.

For more information on Friends of Sabeel groups in your area please contact our international representatives or the Sabeel Center in Jerusalem.