

Pax Christi delegation to Palestine and Israel, 12 - 20 February 2009

Personal Diary Report, Pat Gaffney, General Secretary, Pax Christi

The focus of the visit was to make contact with teachers and those working with young people, to encounter life and occupation in the West Bank and Jerusalem and to meet with Pax Christi partners - women, teachers, peace and human rights NGOs - to learn from them and share approaches to teaching and presenting issues of conflict and violence.

Members of the Delegation: **John Harkin**, Vice-Principal, Oakgrove Integrated School, Derry, Northern Ireland, **Ann Farr**, Pax Christi Executive Committee member, Coventry, **Mary Boley**, Christian Education Centre, Tooting, London, **John Williams**, Adviser Catholic Education - secondary support team, Westminster Diocese, London, **Hilary Topp**, Peace Education Worker, Pax Christi, **Pat Gaffney**, General Secretary, Pax Christi

This was my fifth visit in ten years to Palestine and Israel and probably the most distressing. This was in large part due to the shadow of the war with Gaza which hangs over our partners and others whom we met. Paradoxically, alongside this shadow I also experienced glimpses of light and hope - in those who refuse to give up and who remain steadfast in their vision that peace and justice will one day return. We were privileged enough to experience this first hand during our first two nights in Bethlehem where we were hosted by Muslim and Christian families whose hospitality, care and friendship was a living witness to this hope.

Friday 13 February

Orientation meeting with our partners in the SUMUD/Peace House of the Arab Educational Institute, situated near the now closed Rachel's Tomb area, a short distance from the Bethlehem checkpoint. The work of the house has been growing - hosting meetings of the women's group, a focal point for the "Sharing Stories" project and for arts-related projects by the Separation Wall where the 'Wall' has become a stage. An example of this can be seen here on YouTube

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=008p_LePrg - a project called *Carried by the Wind*. Currently the house is preparing for cultural and arts-related activities on 30 April - 1 May and is looking ahead to its summer- school programme for local children and young people. These are areas where they have asked for help - seeking out people willing to offer art, drama, music, story -telling workshops (as volunteers) Contact us for details if you are interested.



Leaving the office we toured the Separation Wall and its ugly route around the house of Claire Anastas, around the Muslim Cemetery into the Aida Refugee Camp - home to around 5 thousand people, coming from 35 villages that were up-rooted or destroyed in the 1948 Nakba/Catastrophe. *Alrowwad* is a cultural and theatre training project in the camp who work with the SUMUD house. This centre, run primarily by young people, has produced DVDs, photo-exhibits and much more on life in and around the Camp through its *Images for Life* work see more here www.imagesforlifeonline.com. We met the young student who produced the moving *Bethlehem Checkpoint 4 am* video which can be viewed on the Israel Palestine page of the Pax Christi website.

In the afternoon we made our way to Beit Jala, a town to the north of Bethlehem to meet Jochen Stoll, a Pax Christi member from Germany who is working on an interfaith project as a Civil Peace Worker, read more here www.forumZFD.de/english.html. The office is deliberately situated here to allow both Israelis and Palestinians to visit and participate in meetings. This project started in 2008 with partners including Rabbis for Human Rights and the Arab Educational Institute and aims to promote religious freedom through the application of human rights and international law. Jochen spoke of the approach - using sacred texts, tradition and reality to help each religious tradition to 'see the other' - and of the sensitivities that exist in groups making public their attempt to engage in dialogue and encounter with 'the other'. I was particularly taken by Jochen's acceptance of the long-term nature of this work - he has committed himself to the project for three years.

14th February

We transferred to the Grand Hotel in the Centre of Bethlehem - our base for the coming days - giving us an opportunity to experience daily life at its different times and on different religious holy days. We heard from the staff at the Hotel that several pilgrimage bookings for January and February had been cancelled as a result of the war in Gaza. This particular Hotel receives groups from Poland, Ireland and India.

A short walk around town gave our 'first time' members a chance to become oriented before we headed off to a meeting of the AEI Teachers' group. Saturday is a school day in Palestine - Friday being a holiday for the Muslim Community and Sunday for the Christian Community. We were very aware that the head teachers who came to the meeting had started their day at 7.30 am and would not finish with us until after 6.00pm! We heard from Abdullah Shakanah, Director of Education in Bethlehem about the development of the Palestine school

curriculum and met teachers from private schools (Catholic and Lutheran) from Palestinian state schools and from United Nations Works and Refugee Agency schools - all articulating slightly different realities and problems. Common threads in the conversations had to do with how to teach 'ideals' e.g. tolerance, unity, peace, etc against a backdrop of the Gaza war and the children's experience of occupation. Since January several reported children being absent minded in the classroom and noted that academic achievement had fallen since the war. Some said their students challenged them with questions such as 'where is peace now?' and how they had to maintain their courage in continuing to talk about peace for the future. These tremendous people did show great

courage, creativity and a huge commitment to their students, helping them to find peace within themselves; trying to relieve the burden of violence by offering extra curricular activities, diary-writing and drama projects; creating an enthusiasm for life and 'normalising' the school environment as much as possible.

Candles for Peace

A number of the teachers joined members of the AEI women's group and others for the peace vigil held at dusk in front of the Separation Wall near Rachel's Tomb. This came about from a plea from Manal Timraz, a friend of Ann Farr. A Palestinian Muslim from Gaza, Manal lost 12 members of her family in Gaza. While she was trying to gain access to Gaza we in Bethlehem and others around the world, held vigils for peace on this 'friendship day', using prayers and readings from Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures. We later heard that Manal had been prevented from entering Gaza but had managed to get to Hebron and later to us in Bethlehem.

15 February

The first shock to our system was getting up at 4.00am. The second was what we found at 4.45 am at the Palestinian side of the Bethlehem Checkpoint. Guided by friends from the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Israel and Palestine (EAPPI) who regularly monitor the checkpoint, we waited in the cold and dark as hundreds of men queued inside a 30/40 meter wire tunnel for the checkpoint to open at 5.00 am. We were told that some started their wait at 2.00 am, sleeping on cardboard along the road. These were men attempting to get through to Jerusalem to do a days work. We learnt that it is only men over 35 who are married and have families who are granted passes - which they pay for. Three and four abreast they were kept waiting in this inhumane tunnel. At 5.00 am some of those who had not yet joined the queue stepped aside to pray. Others bought coffee and bread at makeshift stalls, part of the 'checkpoint' enterprise.

At 5.00 am some of those who had not yet joined the queue stepped aside to pray. Others bought coffee and bread at makeshift stalls that have developed as 'checkpoint' enterprises. As we waited we were told that parallel 'channel', for



women, 'humanitarian purposes' and tourists had opened for the first time in several weeks. As we joined this queue several young Muslim women came along - it turned out they were trainee nurses trying to get through to their hospital in East Jerusalem. I wondered at their stamina - leaving home at this early hour to face a long day and being treated so badly!

Once through the 'tunnel' we entered a huge hanger-like building to meet Martin, a German EAPPI. Here everyone has to pass through several turnstiles and an air-port like scanner. We simply showed our passports and were through. All of the Palestinians had to show passes, have their hand-prints taken, remove their shoes and belts and maybe pass through the scanner three or four times - depending on the whim of the young soldier on duty. This seemed particularly cruel for the young and old women who passed through that morning - being treated with such contempt. By 6.30 the hundreds of who had been queuing had passed through. I think we were all subdued after this and decided to walk back up to the centre of town - in the beautiful early morning sunshine.



Some of us went to Mass at St Catherine's where we met Brother Louis - a Dutch Franciscan whom I had met before in Bethlehem and London. In our conversation Louis described the atmosphere following the war with Gaza thus: "Today is better than tomorrow". Louis keeps his ear to the ground and supports young people wherever he can. His new project - trying to find encouragement for a young Palestinian rapper! Using a musical allusion to give a sense of life under occupation he referred to the Queen lyrics, "Is this the real world? Is this just fantasy?" A question that was certainly haunting me after our morning experience.

We decided to visit Jerusalem in the afternoon - taking public transport, passing again through the checkpoint - to the buses on the other side that take local people to the city. We got off at Jaffa Gate and before entering shared some prayer together - thinking of ourselves as pilgrims following in the footsteps of Christ and praying that we would be open to all we saw and heard. We walked through the Old City to the Jewish quarter to visit the Western Wall. It was a quiet time and it did not take long to get through the security - more turnstiles and scanners. We divided, men and women, going to our respective parts of the wall for reflection. The area immediately by the wall is quiet, some sitting, others standing in prayer or reading scriptures while others placed their slips of paper carrying prayers and petitions into the wall itself. Moving back to the busier public area we noted a large group of young soldiers - men and women - who seemed to be on some kind of training or orientation programme (we had encountered them having an open-air talk while walking to the Wall). I had very mixed feeling - being in a sacred and holy place and seeing these young people all carrying weapons. I also others with rifles slung over their shoulders alongside their cameras. Another, "Is this the real world?" moment.

We just managed to get to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre before it closed in time to hear what I think was Vespers led by the Greek Church community. Thankfully, no weapons this time, but a different kind of surrealism as we encountered the different traditions all doing their own thing in their own way. Diversity is good but...!

16 February

The programme was with Angela Godfrey-Goldstein of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions. ICAHD describes itself as a non-violent, direct-action group originally established to oppose and resist Israeli demolition of Palestinian houses in the Occupied Territories. As our activists gained direct knowledge of the brutalities of the Occupation, we expanded our resistance activities to other areas - land expropriation, settlement expansion, by-pass road construction, policies of "closure" and "separation," the wholesale uprooting of fruit and olive trees and more. Their work, campaigns and analysis of the situation can be found at their website <http://www.icahd.org>. Unfortunately I was not well enough to go with the group but knew they would have an excellent exposure to what is happening in East Jerusalem. The tour took the group to areas where the wall is being expanded - around Bethany /al Azariyya, eating into large areas of Palestinian land and to view the development of various settlements, Ma'ale Adummin, home to 40,000 settlers, covering an area of 53 sq km and Nof Zion.

In the evening we met with Toine van Tefelen who is the development worker at the Sumud House. Toine has worked with educators in the Netherlands and Palestine to develop the *Sharing Stories* project between young

people in Holland and Palestine. This has now been worked into valuable resource books - for teachers and students, outlining the role of story in transmitting what is important about life and culture. We will look for ways to promote this approach and learn from it.

17 February



We split into two groups for the day - John, Hilary and John visiting the Bethlehem Government School for Girls with their head Elham Hamad and the UNWRA School in Bethelam and its head, Isma'il Muqbil - both members of the AEI teacher group. Mary Ann and I went to Bethany to visit the Comboni Sisters community and their kindergarten school. I had made contact on the last visit and this time wanted to visit the school.

There are around 60 pupils in two classes 3-4 years and 4-5 years, and all of the children are Muslim. We were treated to a wonderful concert of music, dance and song as the children ran through a programme they are planning for their mothers - all prepared with

great care by Sr Germell (who is Egyptian) and two Muslim women teachers. Their love and care for the children was very evident - even to what they had managed to do in the play area. Tragically, the wall passes right along the school and convent - and may in the near future actually cut the school from the village. Where the wall creates one side of the play area, one of the Sisters and a priest from the neighbouring Passionist community had painted beautiful animals and flowers - turning the ugly wall into a beautiful landscape for the children.

An unexpected element of our visit was our meeting with Sr Alicia, a young Spanish sister who is a nurse. She had just returned from a harrowing visit to Gaza where she had joined a delegation of Physicians for Human Rights - monitoring the aftermath of the war and gathering forensic evidence. She told of their hours of waiting at the Gaza border, the mis-treatment of one of their number, a South African doctor who happened to be Muslim who was strip searched and cross examined for six hours before being allowed in. Alicia affirmed the devastation caused by the war - and especially the damage to the infrastructure which will exacerbate health care and post-war work for a long time to come. She explained how difficult it was to gather evidence. Gaza had been closed during the war and for almost a week after so some evidence would be contaminated. She confirmed that phosphorus had been used, describing internal burning wounds that could only be from phosphorus. She explained how they had been working to determine other types of weaponry used by the Israeli Defence Forces - visiting trauma cases and clinics order to well document their report which will be released soon. Here are two useful websites that relate to human rights abuses during and after the war in Gaza, <http://gazaeng.blogspot.com/> and Israeli Physicians for Human Rights www.phr.org.il. An extremely impressive young women who had obviously seen and heard the most terrible things during her visit and who is calmly and thoroughly trying to relate this to the outside world.



Returning to Jerusalem via a walk down the Mount of Olives we were able to take some time to absorb all we had heard and seen. Stopping at the Church of Dominus Fleuit (where tradition has it Jesus stopped and wept over Jerusalem) we happened upon a group of German pilgrims. I felt as though we were meant to be there as they began to sing Dona Nobis Pacem - and we were able to join in and tell them that we were from Pax Christi! On entering Jerusalem we called in at St Anne's Church (run by the Missionaries of Africa or White Fathers) and met Fr Michele who told us he had read about our 'delegation' and the Candles for Peace on a website. Affirming to note the publicity sometimes works!

18 February

First part of the morning at the SUMUD house was with Raneen Al-Arja, the PR person for the AEI's cultural tourism programme. A new venture, Raneen explained how the project aims to give Palestinians the possibility of sharing their cultural heritage with visitors and how they plan to offer a range of 'tours' to suite the needs of visitors drawing on the historical and cultural stories of the people - as well as the daily reality of occupation.

You can find out more about this at

www.spiritofsumud.ps.



Later we met with around 45 members of the AEI Women's Group - Christians and Muslims. We began with a simple go around which really got us all going... finding a word, using the first letter of our first name, to describe ourselves. (I was moved at the end of the gathering when one woman Jala, from a host family, said she would always remember her word, Joy). As well as hearing of the year-round work of the group - ranging from French language courses to involvement in the Human Clock project for the 60th anniversary of the Nakba to an inter-religious retreat on the birth of Christ, we heard harrowing personal stories. Stories of Israeli incursions into homes, maltreatment at checkpoints, the pain of supporting children to be well educated and then living with the fear of their leaving the country for

a more stable and secure life. They related the economic hardships - several of their families had run business that supported 25 or 30 other families, but the occupation and the Wall in particular have created unemployment and economic crisis as factories, shops and businesses close. They told us that SUMUD - Steadfastness is part of their life. As women they have to communicate things, deal with things in the family. One woman said that it is pain that gives them power to overcome obstacles! It was evident, from the laughter and story-telling that this is an enormously important group and that it offers support and encouragement to its members.

That evening we invited our 'host' families and the staff of the AEI to a meal at our Hotel. We were nervous to ensure that we did the 'right thing' in terms of hospitality but need not have worried as our families relaxed and the evening turned to song. And what a range! From mournful Passiontide songs to folk tunes and a rendition of Frank Sinatra's 'Strangers in the Night'!

19 February

To Hebron, 30 km south of Jerusalem, and a day with the EAPPI team there. Our driver dropped us at the entrance to the Old City and we were met by Shari, an English woman working with the team since early February. She quickly explained the 'division' of the city - H1 area under Palestinian Control - with around 40 thousand Palestinians and H2 under Israeli control, with around 1500 soldiers protecting the 600 settlers who have moved into the city since 1967. We were taken through Checkpoint 56 - one monitored by the EAPPI team, to visit the Cordoba Girls School. The school is on the 'wrong side' of the divide but still up and running, wonderfully led by their head Reem Alsharif. Every day the EAPPI team make sure that on their way too and from school the pupils and teachers are protected from the Beit Hadassah settlement opposite the school. It turned out to be a special day with young people from the Palestinian Red Crescent offering entertainment and workshops to the children in the school playground. We were told that this was to help lift the depression caused by the war in Gaza. I had an amazing conversation, in English, with three 15 year-old girls who are working on a project Schools Across Borders with Ireland. They explained how a group of them were being 'prepared' for a potential visit in 2010 - only three will go - and how they are



learning about the situation in Northern Ireland. I wondered how many 15 year-olds in the UK could hold a conversation about Northern Ireland politics!

After the school, Shari took us to visit Hasham al 'Aza and his family. We took a circuitous route, across stones and waste ground, at one point climbing over razor wire, to reach his home which no longer has road access because of the settlers. His home is overlooked by a settlement which has been there since 1986. Rubbish is thrown down on to their garden, their vines have been destroyed by settlers and their home invaded. But Hasham and his brother are determined to stay and have become advocates for their cause - hosting trade

union groups, political representatives, Israeli peace groups and others to explain and document what living under occupation and siege is like in Hebron. The Israeli Human Rights group B'Tselem have a camera distribution project - samples of video material gathered by local residents can be found on the Hebron page of their website.

www.btselem.org

Later we went further into the Old City - almost but not quite deserted - to the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee and their exuberant Public Relations person, Walid. A creative and important programme - a little like a Grand Designs project - it works to preserve and revive the Old City of Hebron. He explained that there are 101 'closures' and checkpoints within 1 sq KM of Hebron and that 850 shops have been closed by military order. We walked through the bazaar to see examples of where buildings have been

restored, new pavements laid - all in keeping with the traditional materials and styles of this ancient city. Restoration work also included the Ibrahimi Mosque which we were able to visit - after passing through more Israeli security scanners! This building contains the tombs of Abraham & Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca and Jacob and Leah, so is of importance to Jews, Christians and Muslims. Walking through we came to a partition where we could hear prayers being recited on the other side. Walid explained how this division had been imposed after the massacre in 1994 when an Israeli extremist settler killed 29 Muslims at prayer in the Mosque. Again, it felt strange being in a 'sacred place' that has seen such violence, which is divided in order to 'protect' people and which is guarded with armed soldiers. It was good to know of the work of the Rehabilitation project, and of people like Walid, a young man from Hebron who chose to return after completing his engineering degree and share his skills and vision with this important project. To read more about the work go to

www.hebronrc.org

Our EAPPI friends returned us safely to our mini-bus and we drove back to Bethlehem for our last night - reeling with yet more stories, images, sounds and experiences.

20 February

Before setting off for the airport we had a final meeting with Fuad Giacaman, Director of the AEI and Toine to share with them our plans for reporting and follow-up to our visit.

Among other things we committed ourselves to sharing our stories in our respective networks and places of work, producing a report, exploring school links and developing school resources, maintaining links with the Women's Group and promoting the Culture Tourism programme.



Useful contacts and websites not listed elsewhere

- Arab Educational Institute (affiliated to Pax Christi International) www.aeicenter.org
- Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) www.eappi.org
- UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) <http://www.ochaopt.org/>
- This Week in Palestine: www.thisweekinpalestine.com

Resources Available from Pax Christi

- Pax Christi in solidarity with peacemakers in Palestine & Israel (brochure free for mass distribution)
- Prayer leaflet for June 2009 Week of Prayer for Palestine and Israel. Available free from the office
- Olive Wood goods from Bethlehem. We have a range of Olive Wood Stars - single £1.00, set of 5 £5.00 or Plain live Wood Crosses - single £1.50, set of 5 £7.50 and Mother of Pearl Dove Brooches at £2.50 each.
- Challenging the Wall - a series of essays on the themes of peacemaking and steadfastness. Price £6.00
- Voices for Peace: Changing perspectives on the Israel-Palestine conflict. Produced by group of European Catholic Development agencies. Price £2.00
- The Children of the Nakba. A 28 minute DVD of stories recounting events of 1947 and 1949. Study guide included. Produced by the Mennonite Central Committee. Can be borrowed from Pax Christi, handling charge £10.00

Photographs

1. Entrance to Aida Refugee Camp. *Pat Gaffney*
2. Ann Farr and Fuad Giacaman of the AEI, at Candle for Peace gathering. *John Williams*
3. Mary Boley and Hilary Topp inside Bethlehem checkpoint. *Pat Gaffney*
4. Pat Gaffney, Mary Boley and John Harkin with Brother Louis. *John Williams*
5. Elham Hamad with students from her school. *John Williams*
6. Kindergarten band: Comboni school. *Pat Gaffney*
7. With some of the AEI women at the Wall. *John Williams*
8. Painting workshop at Cordoba School, Hebron. *Pat Gaffney*
9. Checkpoint/road closure in Hebron Old City. *Pat Gaffney*
10. Cooperation or Conflict: on wall in Bethlehem. *Pat Gaffney*
11. Jesus Wept for Jerusalem - in the 'tunnel' of the Bethlehem Checkpoint. *John Williams*



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