

## “Just Tell Them What You’ve Seen”: A report from Palestine

Jeff Wright, Short-term Mission Volunteer, Global Ministries, March, 2010

[Over the past twelve years, Jeff and his wife Janet have served as short-term Board of Global Ministries mission volunteers to Palestine ([www.globalministries.org](http://www.globalministries.org)). Janet is a licensed clinical social worker and a volunteer with the Humanitarian Assistance Program for EMDR International ([www.emdrhap.org](http://www.emdrhap.org)). Jeff is lead pastor at Heart of the Rockies Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Fort Collins, Colorado. EMDR (Eye Movement, Desensitization and Reprocessing) is a particularly effective mental health treatment for PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). Funded by Week of Compassion ([www.weekofcompassion.org](http://www.weekofcompassion.org)), Janet and colleagues from the US and the UK are training Muslim and Christian mental health therapists at the East Jerusalem YMCA Rehabilitation Program, a Global Ministries mission partner in Beit Sahour outside of Bethlehem ([www.shepherdsfieldymca.org](http://www.shepherdsfieldymca.org)). The goal, soon to be realized, is to create the first all-Arab EMDR training team.]

In January and February, Janet and I hosted two back-to-back tours to Israel and Palestine. We organized the first for pastor/author/ activist Brian McLaren and a group of his colleagues and friends. The second group was comprised primarily of Disciples and UCC lay and clergy. Both tours were designed to visit the holy sites and meet with Christians, Muslims and Jews, with an emphasis on experiencing Palestinian perspectives on the conflict.



Every time I return to Israel and Palestine, I see historical sites I hadn’t visited, learn new things and discover deeper complexities. After describing some of the visits we made, I will briefly elaborate on six impressions I gathered on this trip.

1. The impact of international resistance to the Israeli apartheid system is growing.
2. The most effective resistance will express criticism and shape bold action for peace that is “anti-Israeli *policy*” in the occupied territories and pro-people—pro-Israel and pro-Palestine, pro-Jewish and pro-Arab (Christian and Muslim).
3. Those of us in the main-line churches who work and pray for a just peace between Palestinians and Israeli Jews will find effective partners among those labeled Evangelicals. I say “those labeled”, because I consider myself an evangelical and don’t want to limit the use of this beautiful descriptor to a particular part of the church.
4. Mainline, Catholic and evangelical wings of the American church are obligated to respond to the plea from an unprecedented gathering of churches in Palestine—*A Moment of Truth: Kairos Palestine* ([www.kairospalestine.ps/?q=node/13](http://www.kairospalestine.ps/?q=node/13)).
5. If we’re not working to ground our reading of the New Testament in the first-century world of Jesus’ life and ministry, we’re missing far too much of the Bible’s meaning.
6. Through the Board of Global Ministries, funding from Week of Compassion (the Disciples’ emergency relief and long-term self-help development ministry), and

the United Church of Christ's Genesis Fund ([www.ucc.org/wcm/genesis-fund.html](http://www.ucc.org/wcm/genesis-fund.html)), Disciples and UCCs are making a significant impact in the area.

### *Highlights of the Two Tours*

The first day we arrived in Palestine, the McLaren group met with Mitri Raheb, pastor of the Bethlehem Christmas Lutheran Church, affiliated with the ELCA. Mitri, whom many of you know, bluntly described the current state of Israeli/Palestinian relations in this way:

*Too many peace processes; too little peace.*

*Too much politics; too little care for the polis.*

*Too much religion; too little spirituality.*

*Too much humanitarian aid; too little development.*

*Too much pessimism; too little hope.*

Mitri reminded us, mostly church folk, that *hope* is what we *do*, not what we see. It is the work of the church to plant seeds of hope in concrete and practical ways in the midst of conflict wherever we find it and in the lives of suffering and marginalized people.

*Just tell people what you have seen.*  
Mitri Raheb

“Actions speak louder than words.” After briefly describing what he calls “the most sophisticated apartheid system in history,” Mitri asked us—as did nearly *every* leader we spoke with—not to pick sides in the conflict but to tell of what we have seen and heard on the tour. He said, “Witness to and work in the world for the values you cherish as Americans: justice, liberty, self-determination, free access, the right to own property....” He said, “You don’t have to be an expert on peace and all things Israeli and Palestinian. Just tell people what you have seen during your visit.”

Both groups met with the Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem ([www.arij.org](http://www.arij.org)), located in Bethlehem. We were given an overview of Israel’s illegal confiscation of Palestinian land, water and other natural resources through settlement growth and Israel’s grabbing of an increasing number of Palestinian areas, labeling them as “[Israeli] national heritage sites.” Tour participants were impressed with the quality of ARIJ’s research, its GPS mapping and detailed monitoring of infrastructural and legal changes on the ground. This visit brought to mind two descriptions of the conflict that I find helpful:

- As attempts at diplomacy continue to stall, Israel’s occupation continues to claim more land. It’s like two people arguing over how to split a pizza while one of them continues to eat the pizza.
- As the Israeli government continues to build settlements, confiscate land and construct its Israeli-only roads in the West Bank, resulting maps look like Swiss cheese. Israel gets the cheese and Palestinians are left with the holes.

The second group met with Nobel Peace Prize-nominated Elias Chacour, Archbishop of the Galilee for the Greek Melkite Catholic Church, author of *Blood Brothers* and *We Belong to the Land*. For nearly two hours, Abuna Chacour listened, taught, preached and called us to a deeper trust and fuller participation in what God’s up to in the world. His exegesis of the Beatitudes helped us understand that, in the Aramaic that Jesus used, the word *blessed*—referring to the poor, humble, mourning and those working for peace—describes those who “get up and get going” to make a difference in

their circumstances and in the world. The following are three additional highlights from Fr. Chacour's sharing:

- "I was not born an Arab. I was not born a Palestinian. I was not born a Christian. No, I was born a baby. We have this in common, every human being: we are all born as babies, created in the image and likeness of God."
- "We human beings reduce time to hours, minutes, seconds. But it is said in our Book that in the sight of the Lord a thousand years is but a single day. I take this to mean that Jesus came to our land the day before yesterday."
- "My ancestors"—then with a twinkle in his eye Chacour said—"you call them the twelve disciples, they were promised something by Jesus. You remember what they were promised?" One of us said, "The Spirit, the Holy Spirit?" Fr. Chacour said, "That's right. After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the disciples were waiting in Jerusalem for God's wind, his strong wind. God sent them his storm."



Fr. Chacour spoke with clarity about the complexity of suicide bombings, neither condoning nor excusing violence but pointing to the hopelessness that leads some to commit such a horrible crime against self, God and humanity. The story he shared about a specific suicide bomber brought his insights to life for us. Describing the effects of the sixty-plus years of Israeli dominance, he challenged us to "get up, get going" to work for peace. Fr. Chacour sent us away with this word: "If you've come to side with us, the Palestinians, go home in peace, don't leave us in pieces. But if you will listen to and care for all people in this land—Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druze and unbelievers alike—you are welcome."

Other meetings included:

- the Christian Peacemaker Team and the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee in Hebron;
- an Israeli in the Ephrat settlement south of Bethlehem;
- leaders of the Dehisha Refugee Camp, professors at Bethlehem University, therapists at the Y, representatives of the Palestinian Center for Rapprochement Between People—all in Bethlehem;
- Jean Zaru at the Friends Meeting House ([www.afsc.org/ht/d/ContentDetails/i/3591](http://www.afsc.org/ht/d/ContentDetails/i/3591)) and the Said National Music Conservancy in Ramallah;
- Naim Ateek and our Global Ministries missionary Ian Alexander at the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Center ([www.sabeel.org](http://www.sabeel.org));
- Peretz Kidron, a leader in the Israeli Refusenik movement ([www.seruv.org.il/English/default.asp](http://www.seruv.org.il/English/default.asp));
  - When one of the participants asked, "What can we do when we return to the States," Kidron responded, "Tell your President to quit smiling." He was expressing his hope that President Obama will play a much stronger role in bringing both sides to the table to work out their differences.

- A recent example of this “smile” diplomacy was recorded in the press the day after Vice President Joe Biden arrived in Israel to revive peace talks (March 10, 2010). On the day of Biden’s arrival, Israel announced plans to build another 1600 housing units in occupied East Jerusalem, a move designed to rebuke the American administration and certain to anger Palestinians. The American response? It was actually reported that, in response to such a toxic move on the part of Israel, Vice President Biden purposely arrived ninety minutes late for a scheduled dinner in the home of Prime Minister Netanyahu. It was not reported—I’m only guessing—that Biden then cordially smiled his way through dinner.
- the staff and students at Rawdat El Zuhur (Garden of Flowers) School ([www.rawdat.org](http://www.rawdat.org)), a Global Ministries partner;
- staff of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions in West Jerusalem ([www.icahd.org](http://www.icahd.org));
- members of EAPPI (Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine, a Global Ministries partner; [www.eappi.org](http://www.eappi.org));
- and a Jewish member of *Ta’ayoush: Arab-Jewish Partnership* (Israelis and Palestinians striving together to end the Israeli occupation and to achieve full civil equality through daily non-violent direct-action) who led us through Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial.

In Bethlehem, pilgrims overnighted just fifty yards from the Byzantine entrance to the Nativity Church and visited Solomon’s pools, shepherds’ fields and other sites. In Jerusalem, time on Mount of Olives and in the Old City walking the Via Dolorosa and praying in the Church of the Resurrection stirred the spirit and brought the Scriptures to life. One of the most re-energizing, re-centering experiences for the first group came in a visit with Fr. Raed Abusahlia at the Latin (Roman Catholic) Church in Taybeh ([www.taybeh.info/en/olivebranch.php](http://www.taybeh.info/en/olivebranch.php)). Fr. Raed’s heart is as big as the wonderful mosaic that adorns the front of the church he serves. The mosaic pictures Jesus arriving in Taybeh before he went on from there to face the authorities in Jerusalem. Fr. Raed spoke about the Holy Land as the spiritual home for Christians: “Tell your friends that we want them to come meet their family here, that we want them to come home.”

Touring the Jordan Valley to the south (Jericho, Qumran and the Dead Sea) and



Becca Hardin-Nieri connecting with a Bedouin youth in the Judean desert

Nazareth, Cana, Capernaum and the Sea of Galilee in the north—accompanied by times for reflection, prayer and worship—are essential to the experience of an alternative pilgrimage. Because most Americans “don’t get it”—the terrible disparity between Israeli wealth and power and Palestinian poverty and suffering—until they are able to experience the realities of the conflict on the ground in the land where our Creator visited Planet Earth in Jesus. Often, first-time visitors to the Holy Land are put off by what they experience.

Expecting a quiet return to the place of Jesus’ life and ministry, first-time pilgrims—especially if they’ve come as tourists—are disheartened to see soldiers carrying weapons,

tourists rushing from here to there, street folk hawking Holy Land trinkets, and guides talking about the “presumed sites” of this and that event. It is helpful to be reminded that Palestine was under cruel occupation in the days of Jesus too. Pilgrims from distant places would have been exploring the holy sites: David’s wells and the burial site of their mother Rachel in Bethlehem; Hezekiah’s tunnel and the Temple in Jerusalem—to which the Torah commands that Jewish men return annually. In Jesus’ day, as in ours, locals seeking to eek out a living could be expected to have taken advantage of the opportunity. The realization is sobering: *twenty-first century pilgrims share in many first century realities.*

### *Elaborations on the Six Impressions*

#### *1. The impact of international resistance to the Israeli apartheid system is growing.*

Ordinary folks are becoming increasingly aware of the conflict, its historical



roots and its competing narratives through the work of NGOs, faith-based groups and antiwar movements; increased media coverage of Israeli and Palestinian peace groups; columnists exposing the more nuanced realities of the conflict; and a growing number of Israeli activist groups (J-Street is one of the newest; [www.jstreet.org](http://www.jstreet.org)). Increasingly, the Israeli narrative is being challenged as *the* comprehensive account of “the way things are” in the Middle East. Persons are gaining a more balanced appreciation of the concerns of both

Israelis and Palestinians. Many—Jews as well as Christians—understand that the current situation is not just oppressing Palestinians. It is also threatening the long-term viability of Israel itself. While many question the wisdom and practicality of the Boycott, Sanctions and Divestment movement ([www.bdsmovement.net](http://www.bdsmovement.net)), the movement continues to seek a foothold as one more way to bring to the world’s attention the need for more intentional progress toward a just and lasting peace.

Even some policy makers are losing patience and beginning to see that unconditional support of Israel is detrimental to their nation’s foreign policy. The following actions of Israel contribute to their frustration and help make their argument: The Israeli government’s 2008 invasion of Gaza and its demonization of the Goldstone Report; its recent decision to refuse work visas to international staff members of NGOs whose offices are located in East Jerusalem; continued house demolitions in East Jerusalem, settlement building and other land confiscations in East Jerusalem and the West Bank; recent decisions of the Israeli Supreme Court to move the separation wall closer to the Green Line; and Israel’s continued strangling of Gaza through its limiting of access and egress.

Many will recall that, after Israel pulled settlers out of Gaza, the Israeli Prime Minister said, “Now let’s see if the Palestinians can build a viable economy and government.” What often goes unacknowledged are the facts that Israel continues

to unilaterally control the entrances into and out of Gaza; that Gaza, situated on the Mediterranean Sea, is not allowed to export or import product and its fishers must remain close to shore; that Israel has destroyed Gaza's infrastructure including power and water sanitation facilities and has not allowed NGOs and U.N. bodies to bring in the supplies necessary to rebuild; and that Gaza's airspace is Israeli controlled (no arrivals or departures are allowed). In short, Gaza was never given the chance to rebuild its economy.



To the left are pictures I took of thousands of blankets produced for Gaza following Operation Iron Fist—ordered from and created by a Palestinian company and paid for by the UN—sitting in a warehouse in Bethlehem. The company had shipped them through Israel to a checkpoint into Gaza. There Israeli soldiers refused to allow the blankets to pass into Gaza. Examples like these, where the pretense of security is shattered by the absurdity of its prohibitions, are drawing more people to the struggle against Israeli occupation.

*2. The most effective resistance will express criticism and shape actions for peace that are “anti-Israeli policy” in the occupied territories and pro-people in proposed solutions: pro-Israel and pro-Palestine, pro-Jewish and pro-Arab (Christian and Muslim).*

When we critique the actions of the Israeli government—especially its illegal occupation of Palestine and its creation of an ethnic state—we can expect some Jews and Christians to express outrage and others to charge us with being uninformed, naïve and anti-Semitic. Truth is, some of our critiques have been uninformed and naïve—perhaps unwittingly anti-Semitic too! On occasion, the harshness of the realities many of us have witnessed has found expression in our own voices and actions; the temptation to condemn rather than discern and confront has led to mistakes in accuracy and an embrace of half-truths.

Our criticism and advocacy should be marked by humility and repentance. We share in the world's brokenness. We must work to be respectful, fair and discerning in our beliefs and convictions. This is not to say that we must mute our criticism or refrain from speaking frankly from our experience and perspectives. It is to say, we must speak “our truth” in love.

*3. Those of us in main-line churches who work and pray for a just peace between Palestinians and Israeli Jews will find effective partners among the Evangelicals.*

Having traveled to the Middle East with Brian McLaren, Shane Claiborne, Dave Gibbons and other evangelical church leaders—among those who are increasingly addressing issues of justice, ecology, economics and the

marginalized—I am convinced that they are uniquely positioned to reach the population that is more inclined to be attracted to the theology of Christian Zionism. I'm not referring to Christians who have already bought into the theology—Christian Zionists. I'm referring to vast numbers of Western Christians (including Catholics, Disciples, Presbyterians, Methodists and other “mainline Christians”) who, because of how we were taught the Old Testament in Sunday school and how we were raised to care for the Jews, might be inclined to support a Zionist theology and its political implications without even realizing it, without being aware of the skewed hermeneutic, its effect on our Arab brothers and sisters (Christian and Muslim alike), its not-so-subtle disregard for Israelis and, worse, its geo-political dangers.

Already many connections are being forged. For example, Christian Churches Together (led by former Disciples General Minister and President Dick Hamm; [www.christianchurchestogether.org](http://www.christianchurchestogether.org)) is comprised of a number of Christian communions and organizations across a broad theological spectrum. And leaders in the National Council of Churches of Christ work to keep communications open with more conservative parts of the Body of Christ. I encourage those of us whose ministries are more locally focused to find ways to partner with neighboring Evangelicals and Jews who are responding to the Bible's call to a just and lasting peace in the world.

4. *Mainline, Catholic and Evangelical wings of the American church are obligated to respond to the plea from an unprecedented gathering of churches in Palestine—A Moment of Truth: Kairos Palestine* ([www.kairospalestine.ps/?q=node/13](http://www.kairospalestine.ps/?q=node/13)).

In 1985, Christians in Africa released the *South Africa Kairos* document which proved to be an effective tool in the struggle for freedom and wholeness in South Africa. Following that example, *Kairos Palestine*—the Palestinian Church's cry for justice—is grounded in the scriptures, rooted in a theology shaped by the experience of the Palestinian church that has existed in the Holy Land since the time of Christ Jesus, and insistent that the love of Christ empowers a resistance to evil and wrong-doing that responds to the enemy with love and is radically nonviolent.



Our Christian sisters and brothers in Palestine have issued a plea to Christians throughout the world: “stand against injustice and apartheid... work for a just peace in our region [and] revisit theologies that justify crimes perpetrated against our people and the dispossession of the land” (from *A Moment of Truth*).

How will we respond?

5. *If we're not working to ground our reading of the New Testament in the first-century world of Jesus' life and ministry, we're missing far too much of the Bible's meaning.*

Over the past fifty years or so (relatively recently as far as church history goes), there has been a renewed interest in discovering the first-century context in which Jesus lived and ministered: its social, political and economic realities; the Biblical narratives and theologies that shaped Second-Temple Judaism as well as its Jewish critics; and the day-to-day concerns and hopes of ordinary people living in Palestine. While the task of uncovering this context is daunting, historians are not left without a wide variety of written and archeological resources. N.T. Wright and other scholars have been exploring these roots. Their studies have changed the way many read the New Testament and understand the life and work of Jesus, especially as they impact the theologies we have embraced.

In his newest book, *A New Kind of Christianity*, Brian McLaren suggests that our “reading” of Jesus has been “backwards.” Largely, he writes, we have been taught to understand Jesus through the lenses of Calvin and Luther, then *back* from them through church scholars in the Middle Ages, and back before them through early church leaders (Aquinas, Aristotle), and back further through Greco-Roman influences that made their way into the church, and back finally to Jesus. McLaren instead suggests that we try reading the life of Jesus “forward”—meaning that instead of working backwards through history and the church’s accumulated theology to understand Jesus, we begin instead by working *forward* through history from the earliest stories of the Bible (the stories that informed Jesus’ life and ministry): beginning with the Jewish narrative(s) expressed in Genesis and Exodus, on to the accounts of the Babylonian Exile and the prophets who spoke before, during and after the Exile, to the latter prophets and the periods just before and during which Jesus ministered. In this way, we are given to view Jesus through the lenses of the stories and history that shaped Jesus’ life, rather than through the lenses that have shaped our theology and soteriology. McLaren and many others invite us back into the texts to reflect upon and challenge our modern assumptions and narratives about what it means to be faithful.

I believe that humbly seeking to understand Jesus as he spoke and ministered in the midst of, and to, first-century realities will have a powerful and positive impact on the way the church lives out its calling in the twenty-first century.

6. *Through the Board of Global Ministries, funding from Week of Compassion (the Disciples' emergency relief and long-term self-help development ministry), and the United Church of Christ's Genesis Fund, Disciples and UCCs are making significant impact in the area.*

After our participants had gone home, Janet and I accompanied Mona Zagrou, senior supervisor at the East Jerusalem YMCA in Beit Sahour, on a field trip to Hebron and surrounding villages. We visited with four client families who

had experienced EMDR administered by the Y's therapists. What a joy to see the ongoing effects of the work of Week of Compassion and Global Ministries. Janet also spent a day in EMDR consultation with the Y's supervisors who'd come to Beit Sahour from other Y centers in the West Bank: Ramalla, East Jerusalem, Nablus, Jenin, Hebron and Tulkarum.

Recently, Mona and a colleague helped facilitate a Level I EMDR training in Amman, Jordan, where therapists from Iraq flew in to receive the training. The Iraqi therapists left saying, "Finally, a therapy that will work for our people." Level II training for the Iraqi therapists will be held in April of this year. Mona and colleagues are also initiating trainings in Lebanon.

**I've reported on only one of hundreds of Week of Compassion projects and Global Ministries' missions.** Multiply our many stories of transformation by tens of thousands around the globe. Then join us in giving thanks—and dollars—for work shared with persons of all faiths and those of good will around the planet.



*It should interest you to learn that...*

...all of the above sprang from a little seed planted by Marla Schrader, one of our Global Ministries missionaries who has served in Palestine. In 1998, in preparation for a sabbatical, I wrote to Marla and asked if she would have any use for me if I came to Palestine. She responded immediately and simply, "Come, I'll find something for you to do." That seed is yielding thirty and sixty and a hundred-fold—not unlike the one you have it in you to plant.

*Finally...*

Brian McLaren is an author, speaker, pastor, and networker among innovative Christian leaders, thinkers, and activists. Check out his blogs about our recent trip to Israel and Palestine: [www.brianmclaren.net](http://www.brianmclaren.net). Links at his site will take you to other participants and their reflections.

Gratefully,  
Jeff Wright  
Heart of the Rockies Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
970/223-1230  
[www.heartoftherockies.org](http://www.heartoftherockies.org)