



## CONFERENCE ON WORLD MISSION AND EVANGELISM

*COME HOLY SPIRIT - HEAL AND RECONCILE*

Called in Christ to be reconciling and healing communities

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### "A CLOUD OF WITNESSES"

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#### **Introduction**

I have been asked to share in this Conference, on the eve of Pentecost, some experiences and reflections of a participant in the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) of the World Council of Churches.

I will do this with regards to:

1. Whether and how our current discourse on and quest for reconciliation in many societies around the world can be related to the situation in Palestine-Israel. As well as an interpretation of the ministry of the EAPPI in the light of concerns for reconciliation.
2. A search for a definition or formulation of a ministry and role of the church in situations where one party in a conflict may be seen as a victim.

#### **The Accompaniment Programme**

The programme comes in the context of the WCC's "Decade to Overcome Violence". It specifically came into being, we are told, as a response to a request from the Church Leaders in Jerusalem. The WCC was invited to send a physical presence of the church from the rest of the world. The church was urged to go beyond just issuing resolutions, and back her words with practical action. We now have a veritable "cloud of witnesses".

The focal point of the programme is the Ending of the Occupation of Palestinian Territories by Israel. The present writer was a member of the second lot of four South Africans that came to Palestine/Israel from September to November/December 2004. South African participation was and still continues to be made possible by the generous financial support from Sweden through an agency called SIDA. This lot was, in turn, part of the ninth group of twenty eight Accompaniers, from seven countries. Teams ranging from two to four each were placed in eight centres.

Up to now 198 Ecumenical Accompaniers (Eas) have come to Jerusalem from more than 30 churches and ecumenical partners in 12 countries: Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Aotearoa-New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

The first official group of EAs arrived in the country in August 2002 after a pilot project group of Christian accompaniers had been sent by Danchurchaid and Icelandic Church Aid.

South Africa only came onto the scene in 2004. I, together with a Danish Baptist minister and a Lutheran pastor from Berlin, were based in Bethlehem.

### **Activities included:**

1. Joining in worship services and witnessing to hope in a just peace with believers. Besides worshipping regularly with identified congregations, in Bethlehem we joined religious sisters in reciting the rosary along the Separation Wall at a half past five on Friday evenings.
2. Meeting groups and people; Palestinian and Israeli, Christian and Moslem, who believe in peace and are peace activists involved in programmes towards a just and peaceful resolution to the conflict.
3. Making public presentations on the ministry of the Programme, and sharing comparative insights and perspectives from our respective national and regional contexts, where appropriate. The story of the Berlin Wall and its eventual demise as well the South African experience during and after institutionalised racial discrimination did find some resonance with the majority, if not all, of the Palestinians we met.
4. Being physically present and mediating peace in situations where there is a potential for violence. These include monitoring checkpoints, assisting in the harvesting of olives where farmers and landowners are fearful of the intimidation of settler communities.
5. Recording of incidents of violations of human rights.
6. Exploring with believers, lay and clerical, possible theological responses to the situation of conflict.
7. Learning from and working in collaboration with local leadership of communities living in stressful conditions.

### **A few observations**

#### *1. Demographics*

Adherents of the Christian Faith are in the minority in the Occupied Territories, whereas Islam commands considerable following. There is a high degree of resentment with what is perceived as paucity of interest, on the part of the rest of the Christian world, in the plight of Christians in Palestine. Those Palestinians who can afford it choose to emigrate because of lack of hope that the Occupation is to end in the near future. Yet the game of numbers is a significant feature in the conflict. Debate around entitlement to the land is often related to the ratio of the numerical strength between Palestinian and

Israeli communities. Continued presence and positive influence of internationals, including accompaniers, is valued as a practical demonstration of care.

## *2. The Israeli State machinery*

This reminds one so much of the Apartheid regime which boasted what, at the time, was reputed to be the second most powerful military force in Africa after that of Egypt. The pervading presence of the security system gives one the impression that this is intended to be, and is in fact, the major legitimising factor for continued existence; checkpoints, fixed and “flying”, the intermittent drone of military aircraft over the skies, the “Separation Wall” that limits movement from and into the Palestinian territories, thus severely undermining the ability of Palestinians to find employment opportunities within the state of Israel. Palestinians have to carry identity documents for inspection at checkpoints and random searches inside Israel. What also baffles the mind is that the borders of the “State of Israel” are yet to be defined; which fact tends to lend credence to allegations of expansionist tendencies. There is fear among Palestinians that when, if ever final settlement will be arrived at, prospects of a viable statehood for them will have diminished to insignificant levels. Any authority that is dependent on fear is burdensome to itself spiritually, financially and arguably, not sustainable in the long term. It is also, in my view, in the interest of both the Israelis and Palestinians that a solution be found such that it shall be owned and respected by either party.

## *3. The International Community*

In spite of numerous resolutions of the United Nations, an opinion of the International Court of Justice, there seems to be less enthusiasm on the part of member states to take practical steps to “persuade” Israel to conform to international law. One of the undertakings made by accompaniers was to take the issues of the occupation to their own peoples and governments. South African EAs held a number of meetings with personnel both of the Embassy in Tel Aviv and the Representative in Ramallah. Meetings have been held with the National Council of Churches, plans and strategies are being devised towards engaging the government in a concerted and well thought out manner.

## **Some personal reflections**

### *1. Two identities of one entity*

Aboard the El Al flight from Johannesburg to Tel Aviv I was struck by a strong impression, in me; of the absence of “Palestine” in the in-flight magazine of the airline. One is reminded that in apartheid South Africa road signage to designated residential areas of native people was minimal. People, coming from outside the country, who showed interest in the oppressed majority were warned of the danger posed by visiting in these areas. This had the effect of hiding the reality of the existence of these communities, both from the white population and the rest of the world. It is also the case that visitors to the holy land are warned by the Israelis that it is not safe to visit Palestinian areas. When our group visited Nablus/Shechem for Sunday worship a soldier at the checkpoint asked our coordinator from Jerusalem whether we needed protection. As I thought about this I realised that I felt much safer any time of day and night in Bethlehem, a Palestinian area, than I did in a checkpoint and, in fact, in West Jerusalem as well.

Another related observation is that maps of the area produced from the Palestinian side give different place names from those of the Israelis. This then strikes me as one significant aspect of the nature of the conflict. There exists, in my opinion, also in other aspects of life in Palestine-Israel, two “perceptions” “realities” “truths” about one and the same entity.

## 2. *A perspective from the South African experience*

It is in this context that, I would propose that issues around reconciliation may well be explored. Since just before and well after the inception of the new political dispensation in South Africa the combined notion of truth and reconciliation has continued to feature heavily in public discourse. There broadly exist two understandings of the concept “reconciliation” in my country.

For one section, small if vocal and influential, of the citizenry of European extraction reconciliation was achieved with the inauguration of the current democratic dispensation in 1994. These persons are particularly strong in their opposition to government policies that seek to redress the imbalances that are the legacy of both the colonial and apartheid regimes. On the other hand a majority of the native population ascribes to the notion that, reconciliation should be understood as a process whereat the areas that were the cause of “disease” are identified and resolved for the wellbeing of either party.

The point I would argue here is that perhaps for Palestine-Israel there is a need for first considering a reconciliation of the parties with regard to their respective perceptions of reality.

### **The Church and Reconciliation**

The church has a biblical mandate to be involved in this ministry.

<sup>16a</sup>Consequently, from now on we regard no one according to the flesh; ... <sup>18</sup>And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, <sup>19a</sup>namely God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, ... and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20a</sup>So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God was appealing through us.

*II Cor. 5: 16<sup>a</sup>, 18 -19<sup>a</sup>, 20<sup>a</sup>*

In a majority of Pauline writings, the issue is of reconciliation between humanity and God. We do, however also have references where reconciliation is to take place between human beings. It also appears that the Accompaniment Programme is on course in attempting to achieve reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis. We may draw inspiration from St Paul’s words to the Ephesians:<sup>13</sup>

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup>... he is our peace, he who made both (Gentiles & community of Israel) one and broke down the wall of enmity, through his flesh, <sup>15</sup>..., that he might create in himself one new person in place of the two, thus establishing peace, <sup>16</sup>and might reconcile both with God, in one body, through the cross, putting that enmity to death by it. <sup>17</sup>He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.

*Eph. 2: 13-17*

If reconciliation can be achieved for communities in the Middle East, I believe a new and redeeming paradigm can be gained for the world. Jerusalem, the city of peace, is a religious site of no little significance for three of the world’s major faiths; Christianity, Islam and the Jewish Faith. The point of departure for Christians in this venture must be different from others. It does not seek subjugation of one by the other. It does not seek political interest for itself. Again St Paul warns us not to be tempted and swept into the politics of hate and vilification that tends to dominate the news today. Our motivation derives from acting on God’s mandate. The God, who made us all, from Bush to Bin Laden, from Abu Mazen to Sharon, from Castro to Putin, from Mugabe to Blair, in God’s own image, reminds

us through the words of the Bible not to conform to the dominant ideologies of vilification, but to transform them.

For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens. <sup>14</sup>So stand fast with your loins girded in truth, clothed with righteousness as a breastplate, <sup>15</sup>and your feet shod in readiness for the gospel of peace.

*Eph. 6: 12, 14 –15*

In presentations to both Palestinians and Israelis accompaniers constantly made the point and argued for the pursuit of a non-violent but active struggle to end the occupation. This requires courage and commitment as we know from experience that those opposed to a just peace may not be restrained from visiting violence on those engaged in non-violent struggles.

We, in South Africa, bear testimony to the impact of those people who do not just stop at making pronouncements on matters of conscience where communities in stressful situations are concerned. We draw inspiration from those who act out their social concerns. If the world had not stood up, often in the face of opposition and pressure from powerful political and economic forces, we would still be on 'ground zero', if not worse in South Africa. International alliances, often of ordinary people, created a powerful and irresistible surge of pressure on the Nationalist Government of South Africa in the 1980's. The Christian community's involvement in our struggle is still cherished in our land. Upon returning from Palestine-Israel I was interviewed by a journalist of Challenge Magazine, a Christian publication in the country.

This is how he phrased the introduction to his questions:

The EAPPI is modelled on the Ecumenical Monitoring Programme in South Africa (EMPSA), which was active between 1990 and 1994 and was responsible for bringing over 400 volunteers to the anti-apartheid movement.

If Christians of the world had just gone on to mind their own business, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and other peace loving luminaries from the 'dark continent' would only remain possibilities in the minds of those who knew them. The African National Congress, now ruling in South Africa, and other liberation formations had been banished and officially designated as terrorist organisations. It was criminal to associate with them and to advance any of their aims.

I have seen a similar marginalisation of the communities in the West Bank. The amount of goodwill towards Israelis, in spite of the prevailing conditions, is so reminiscent of our own desire to embrace our compatriots of European descent, while their own government made every effort to cut all ties of communication between us.

What is needed by communities living in stress is, as has been demonstrated before, 'a cloud of witnesses' to the hope in and of Jesus which needs to be made evident to be believed. The ministry of reconciliation, in my opinion falls in the category of deeds which St Peter describes as good and about which he has this to say:

<sup>13</sup>Now who is going to harm you if you are enthusiastic for what is good? <sup>14</sup>But even if you should suffer because of righteousness, blessed are you. Do not be afraid or terrified with fear of them, <sup>15</sup>but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your

conscience clear, so that when you are maligned, those who defame your good conduct in Christ may themselves be put to shame “and perhaps repentance” (own parenthesis).<sup>17</sup> For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that be the will of God, than for doing evil.

*IPet. 3: 13 - 17*