Anabaptist Witness

A Global Anabaptist and Mennonite Dialogue on Key Issues Facing the Church in Mission

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Editorial

In the wake of World War I, the Mennonite Church's Mennonite Relief Commission for War Sufferers sent money and volunteers to support the work of the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (now known as the Near East Foundation). Although hopes for a semi-independent Mennonite mission in the region failed to materialize, between 1919 and 1921 several Mennonites contributed to relief efforts in lands formerly under the rule of the Ottoman Empire.[1]

Among those Mennonites was Orie O. Miller, future Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) worker and director. Miller assisted the director of relief in the "Syrian" area, which covered most of present-day Syria, Lebanon, Palestine-Israel, and the Sinai Peninsula. Another Mennonite volunteer, B. F. Stoltzfus, helped run an orphanage in Jerusalem. Although Mennonite attention would soon shift elsewhere, these years mark the beginning of Anabaptist witness in Palestine.

The essays in this issue of *Anabaptist Witness* pick up the story from 1948, after which Mennonites began to assist Palestinian refugees displaced during the First Arab-Israeli War. Mennonite presence in the region has been consistent since 1950 and has largely taken shape through various partnerships with Palestinians and Israelis. Meanwhile, Palestinians and the State of Israel have been locked in a devastating and asymmetric cycle of conflict that continues to unfold. Mennonites and their partners have repeatedly but vainly called for peace.

In the summer of 1993, when I was thirteen years old, I obtained a copy of Palestinian Christian Elias Chacour's memoir, *Blood Brothers*.[2] That book describes in vivid detail the 1948 destruction of Palestinian communities and the author's peacemaking work in the years since. Not long after reading *Blood Brothers* I was at dinner with a friend from church and his father. My friend's father made some remarks about US policy toward Israel that shocked me in their lack of concern for Palestinians. Surely as a Christian he would care about the fate of fellow Christians! This was my introduction to the vexed world of Christian Zionism.

In school the previous year my class had read the diary of Anne Frank.[3] As we discussed the book, a Jewish classmate burst into tears and shared about the

1 For this and the following paragraph see the *Global Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* articles on "Israel," "Israel Mennonite Mission, "Mennonite Relief Commission for War Sufferers (Mennonite Church)," and "Relief Work," all at https://gameo.org/. See also Near East Foundation, "Our History," https://neareast.org/our-history/.

2 Elias Chacour, *Blood Brothers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen, 1984).

3 Anne Frank, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (New York: Bantam, 1993).

impact of the Holocaust on her family and the Jewish people more broadly. Her tears and story helped me understand that the migration of families like hers to the Americas, Israel, and elsewhere after World War II was a response to a horror of world-historic proportions.

Reading *Blood Brothers* gave me important additional context relevant to understanding the outcome of that response, especially concerning the machinations of British colonial authorities in the Middle East and the impact of the establishment of the State of Israel on indigenous Palestinians.

In September 1993, a photo of two men shaking hands—Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Liberation Organization—embraced by US President Bill Clinton, appeared on the cover of my hometown newspaper, the *Austin American-Statesmen*. I distinctly remember the hope I felt upon seeing the photograph and reading about the Oslo Accords, with their promise of Palestinian self-governance and peace. However, the alternating acts of terrorism that followed, including the 1995 assassination of Rabin by a right-wing Israeli opposed to the Accords, quickly made hope untenable.

The current phase of the conflict was initiated by a horrific attack on Israeli soldiers and civilians led by Hamas from Gaza on October 7, 2023. That attack killed approximately 1,200 Israelis, mostly civilians.[4] Around 250 Israelis were taken hostage by Hamas. The Israeli military response has killed over 40,000 Palestinians, most of them women and children. Much of Gaza has been leveled by Israeli bombs—many of which were given to the Israeli military by the United States government. The University Network for Human Rights has led a legal review of Israel's actions since October 7 and concluded that they violate the Genocide Convention of 1948.[5]

Since October 7, Israeli violence against Palestinians in the West Bank has escalated. Hamas's ally Hezbollah has launched a missile campaign from Lebanon leading to the displacement of over 60,000 Israelis from northern Israel.[6] Israel has retaliated by invading southern Lebanon and bombing the Lebanese capital, Beirut. Many observers fear an escalation into a full-scale regional war involving Iran—Hamas's and Hezbollah's primary backer.

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4 For statistics see Emma Farge and Nidal Al-Mughrabi, "Gaza Death Toll: How Many Palestinians Has Israel's Campaign Killed?," *Reuters*, October 1, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/gaza-death-toll-how-many-palestinians-has-israels-campaign-killed-2024-07-25/.

5 University Network for Human Rights, "Genocide in Gaza: Analysis of International Law and Its Applications to Israel's Military Actions Since October 7, 2023, https://www.humanrightsnetwork.org/publications/genocide-in-gaza.

6 Jaroslav Lukiv, "Israel Sets New Goal of Returning Residents to the North," *BBC*, September 17, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cglkkrj94ldo.

The first article in this issue of *Anabaptist Witness* is a sermonic reflection from Amy Yoder McGloughlin of Community Peacemaker Teams (CPT). The author narrates her harrowing departure after October 7 with a CPT delegation from the West Bank. As Palestinian friends were their "waymakers" out of danger, she hopes Mennonite allies will collaborate with Palestinians to help them find a way out of oppression.

Some Mennonites in the United States have responded to recent events by creating Mennonite Action, an organization that seeks to mobilize Mennonite churches and individuals to demand a ceasefire and an end to the occupation of Palestine. Mennonite Action steering committee member and chair of the Mennonite Palestine Israel Network (MennoPIN) Robert Lee Aitchison discusses his participation in various attempts to convince US policymakers to bring about a ceasefire. Jonathan Smucker, Tim Nafziger, and Sarah Augustine place Mennonite Action's work in light of calls since the 1960s for Mennonites to shed their historic "quiet in the land" posture and agitate for political transformation. From this perspective, the work of Mennonite Action can be seen as complementary to that of related organizations such as the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, led by Augustine. A sermon from Tim Seidel connects the prophet Isaiah's vision of peace to the reality of Gaza and the work of Mennonite Action.

Seidel's commitments emerged in part from his time serving with MCC in Palestine and Israel. Alain Epp Weaver, who also served there with MCC, provides considerable background on the organization's work with Palestinians as he considers the necessarily slow and "fragmentary" character of Mennonite witness in the region. Examples of that witness take center place in the next set of articles.

David Lapp-Jost recalls surprising dimensions of the legacy of his missionary aunts, Ada and Ida Stoltzfus, who ran an orphanage in Hebron from the 1950s. He includes the story of one of their students who became a prominent translator for the US military during the Iraq War. Loren Lybarger shares stories and poetry related to his MCC stint in the West Bank and Gaza in the 1980s and 1990s. Biblical scholar and professor Dorothy Jean Weaver reflects on regular teaching and research trips to Palestine, Israel, and Lebanon that began in the 1990s—trips from which she "has never recovered." Wayne Speigel provides an overview of the work of Nazareth Hospital, which Mennonites have been involved with since 1950, and associated ministries such as Nazareth Village.

Byron Rempel-Burkholder then asks what Anabaptists can learn from Palestinian liberation theology and experience. He concludes that Palestinians challenge Anabaptists to follow Jesus in solidarity with those "under the thumb of Empire." A poem by Hannah Redekop amplifies a core theme of Rempel-Burkholder's essay: Loving in the way of Jesus means liberation for both Palestinians and Israelis—and indeed for us all.

The final two articles of the issue discuss one attempt to outline such a broad Mennonite approach to liberating love—the 2017 document "Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine: A Resolution for Mennonite Church USA."[7] Resolution co-author André Gingerich Stoner narrates the resolution's genesis, aims, and ongoing relevance to peacemaking in Palestine and Israel. John Kampen offers a dissenting voice. He is not convinced that the resolution or the process surrounding it adequately took the concerns of Jews into account, especially with regard to the ongoing challenges of antisemitism and the importance of the State of Israel. Kampen suggests that peacemaking strategies that fail to accept the validity of these concerns are unlikely to gain much purchase.

Several of the authors in this issue agree on the need to grapple both with legacies of antisemitism and the dispossession and now genocide of Palestinians. Mennonite witness in Palestine and Israel, and in the United States and other countries bound up with that region, will have to continue to discern how best to grapple with these intertwined legacies. We will have to respond empathetically to the tears, to the needs and aspirations, of all the inhabitants of Palestine and Israel, even as we seek to take a clear look at the region's history and present reality—and act for justice. May this collection of articles contribute to a form of Mennonite witness that is empathetic, clear-sighted, and bold.

—Jamie Pitts, Editor

7 The text of the resolution is available at Mennonite Church USA, "Israel/Palestine Initiatives," accessed October 30, 2024, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/ministry/peacebuilding/israel-palestine-initiatives/.

Waymaker, Miracle Worker

Amy Yoder McGloughlin

On October 7, 2023, the day that Hamas launched its attack on Israel and that Israel began its disproportionate retaliation, I was leading a delegation with Community Peacemaker Teams (CPT)[1] in the West Bank city of Hebron.

Hebron is the most intensely occupied city in the West Bank. Over three hundred illegal Israeli settlers live throughout the old city and are protected by three thousand soldiers. The soldiers often harass shopkeepers and local Palestinian residents of the city. They also harass children who are trying to go to school through checkpoints located all over the city and arrest and detain young men and boys just for walking to their homes in the Old City (in the center of Hebron). It is a tense place to be on a good day.

But on October 7, it was plain scary.

That day, the CPT staff rushed us out of the Old City of Hebron within the hour of learning about what was happening in and around Gaza. We all knew that the checkpoints around the city would be closing soon—because that's just what happens—and that our best chance to get out of the city was to leave immediately. And we knew that soldiers would be scared about what they saw happening in Gaza and that their fear could impact how they treated us.

When we got to the edge of the Old City, closer to the more modern part of Hebron, soldiers stopped us. They screamed at us to turn back as they pointed automatic weapons our way, their fingers hovering over their gun triggers. But the Palestinian CPT members didn't flinch. Instead they negotiated. They said, "We have Americans here. They have to get out of the city." The soldiers screamed at us again—"You can't go this way." A tense back and forth ensued until finally the CPT coordinator suggested calmly, "We can't go down the main street, but can we go through back alleys?"

Amy Yoder McGloughlin is Conference Minister for Allegheny Mennonite Conference. She serves on the Mennonite Action Steering Committee and Pastoral Team and frequently visits Palestine with Community Peacemaker Teams.

1 Started by Mennonites and other Christian communities over thirty-five years ago, CPT places teams at the invitation of local peacemaking communities that are confronting situations of lethal conflict. These teams support and amplify the voices of local peacemakers who risk injury and death by waging nonviolent direct action to confront systems of violence and oppression.

The soldiers relented, and we wove our way through the back streets of the city, heading to the buses that I hoped would take us to Jerusalem, just twenty miles north of Hebron. I was anxious to get my small group there because in Jerusalem we'd be on the other side of the checkpoints, on the other side of the wall that separated the West Bank from Israel. I knew these checkpoints would be closing soon and that if we didn't get through them, we'd be stuck in the West Bank for who knows how long.

Making our way to the center of the city to find a bus, we discovered that none were scheduled for Jerusalem. Fortunately, however, there was a bus to Bethlehem, the next best thing. So we said goodbye to the CPT team and hopped on the bus.

When we arrived at the station in Bethlehem, we immediately began looking for the bus to Jerusalem. But we were too late. The checkpoints between Bethlehem and Jerusalem were closed, and we were stuck in the West Bank.

In moments like this I am grateful for a network of friends in Palestine. After a meal and taking some time to think through next steps with my delegation, we headed over to the House of Peace, a little hostel run by a Palestinian Christian family, the Al Aqlehs.

At their door, I sheepishly asked, "Is there any room in the inn?" Laughing at my little Bible joke, they greeted us warmly.

That night we listened to Israeli fighter jets flying low over Bethlehem on their way to Gaza. It was impossible to sleep. No amount of music piped in through earbuds was going to cover up the terrible sounds.

The first night in Bethlehem was difficult, but it was the second night that really wrecked me and my fellow travelers. We were invited by the Al Aqleh family to watch Al Jazeera English news with them. Sitting in their living room, we watched on the big screen as Israel bombed Gaza—live.

All of a sudden, this story, which already felt terrible, became extremely close and personal, and very scary.

That night we heard the fighter jets fly low again. This time there were more of them. This time it felt louder. This time, I cried as I imagined how terrifying it must be to be in Gaza.

Between the lack of sleep and the unbearable news we were hearing coming out of Gaza, I was not doing well. I needed some time alone. So I headed up to the Milk Grotto the next morning.

The Milk Grotto is a church built in honor of Mary's breast milk. It is also one of the most underappreciated and beautiful churches in Bethlehem. Because there were no tourists at the time, I was the only person in the church that morning, besides a nun who was loyally praying her hour in front of the icon in honor of Mary's breast milk. There I felt free to weep—for myself and for the group I was with, and especially for all the people of Gaza.

On my way out of the church, I noticed the statue of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Mary, with eyes full of intensity and love, sat on a donkey, holding the infant Jesus

in her arms. Joseph walked alongside Mary and Jesus, looking up at them with eyes full of fear and worry. For the first time, I understood what it must've been like for this family as they left Bethlehem for Egypt to escape Herod's slaughter of male children under the age of two.

On my way back to the rest of my group, I met so many shopkeepers in Bethlehem, their shops open for the faint hope of a tourist. When they saw the anguish on my face, they offered me help and encouragement. One gave me his card and told me to call him if I needed food. Another handed me a bottle of water.

In this city where Jesus was born, this city that housed Jesus's family in the first weeks of his life, I too was experiencing powerful hospitality on the exact soil where Jesus and his family walked thousands of years ago.

Arriving back at the hostel that morning, our host family told us, "It's time to get you out of Bethlehem, and we have a plan." Boulos, the son of our host family, is a tour guide, and he knew there was a bus full of tourists getting out of the city that day. So he told us to pack up, and within ten minutes we were saying goodbye to Boulos's mother—who kissed all of our faces and prayed a blessing on us—and we jumped into the family's van and headed to the bus.

But the plan didn't work. The bus driver did not want to risk allowing more passengers on the bus than he had promised the military coordinator who had agreed to let these tourists exit. Boulos, fully committed to getting us out of Bethlehem, put us all back in his van and said, "We're going to the checkpoints. I think I can get you out."

Our first checkpoint—the main one, Checkpoint 300—was locked. I banged on the metal doors, hoping a soldier would come so I could plead with them to let us through. But no one responded.

So we drove to the next checkpoint. As we headed through the streets of Bethlehem, I saw that Boulos had less than a quarter tank of gas. I also noticed the long lines at the gas stations and people rushing around to buy supplies. I worried for Boulos and his family.

About that time, Boulos turned on the music in his car and out came a song I knew from Mennonite Church USA's recent convention—the contemporary Christian song "Waymaker, Miracle Worker, Promise Keeper, Light in the darkness, my God, that is who you are."[2]

As I glanced at my traveling companions, we all started to giggle. This song felt a little on the nose, a little too perfect for the moment. And then I started to cry again, praying as I sang with the rest of the van. *God, please be a waymaker and a miracle worker. Get us home to safety.* By the end of the song, all of us in the van were laughing and crying.

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2 Michael W. Smith, vocalist, "Waymaker," by Osinachi Sinach (2015), featuring Vanessa Campagna and Madelyn Berry, track 4 on *Awaken: The Surrounded Experience*, Rocketown Records/The Fuel Music, 2019.

And then we pulled up to the second checkpoint, known as a flying checkpoint. It was literally a four-foot-tall pile of rubble spread across a residential street. Behind it I glimpsed the tops of guns and the roof of a military jeep.

"Forget it," Boulos said. "There are soldiers here. I thought this one might be empty. I can check one more checkpoint." But I told him to pull the car over. By now, I was fully committed to getting through this checkpoint. And I had a bit of encouragement from the song.

I stepped out of the van, grabbed a colleague who could handle the task, and the two of us made our way over to the checkpoint.

"What's the plan?" she asked me.

"We're going to hold up our passports and demand to be let out of here."

She laughed, but the look on my face let her know I was not joking.

We strode ahead with our passports held up, explained who we were, and demanded to be let through the border.

And the soldiers disinterestedly let us out.

On the other side of the checkpoint, Boulos had arranged for a taxi to pick us up and bring us to Jerusalem. Our little group, who had just scrambled over a pile of rubble with all our luggage, climbed in another taxi and quietly reflected on the people who had made a way for us, for all those people who had worked miracles to get us to safety.

It was a bittersweet recognition that our passport had given us the privilege to transgress the boundaries of a military checkpoint and demand to be let out. And that God had sent us waymakers and miracle workers to get us here—the CPT team, who brought us to the bus to Bethlehem; the Al Aqleh family, who hosted us; the shopkeepers, who offered help; and Boulos, who would not give up until we were on our way to Jerusalem. Those waymakers and miracle workers were left behind on the other side of the checkpoint, where there would be no work for them, food would become more limited, soldiers more harsh, fuel and water more difficult to find.

While passport privilege made a way for me and the group I was leading, my Palestinian friend's situation would not be changing any time soon, though I had no idea the military action against Gaza would drag on for months, and no one could have imagined that the bombing of Gaza would become a genocide.

Four months later, it still feels difficult to be home, when others I love so dearly are not safe. My best friend in Palestine has two brothers who have been arrested and imprisoned for months. Other friends are unable to leave their homes because they live too close to a military checkpoint. The CPT team is having a hard time getting into the Old City of Hebron because security is so tight.

And Gaza is breaking all of our hearts. So many dead, most of them women and children. Nearly 1.7 million displaced in the area.[3]

I've been wondering—where is their waymaker, miracle worker? And every time I start to ask that question, I see the faces of everyone who helped me and I remember that God sent them to help me and that God has sent me to be a waymaker and a miracle worker for someone else.

I was given a room at the inn, a space to stay in the middle of war. Jesus's parents were given that same hospitality in Bethlehem, and Jesus's birth story is full of waymakers and miracle workers.

In my story, my Palestinian friends were some of the waymakers and miracle workers for my team of North Americans in those days following October 7, and now I feel compelled to return that gift to them. All of those beloveds in the West Bank are the reason that I call legislators even though I hate making those calls, that I march for peace even while I wonder if it makes a difference, and that I speak about Palestine even when my voice shakes. Combining my efforts with other Mennonites, other Christians, and other people of faith means that, even though I am not physically with my friends in Palestine, I am still seeking a way for their liberation.

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3 UNRWA, "Situation Report #82 on the situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem," *Reliefweb*, February 25, 2024, https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/unrwa-situation-report-82-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem-all-information-22-24-february-2024-valid-24-february-2024-2230-enar.

A Mennonite Response to Gaza

Robert Lee Atchison

Last January, I was arrested by Capitol police in Washington, DC, along with 135 other Mennonites who ranged in age from 18 to 83. We had gathered in the rotunda of the Cannon House Office Building for an unannounced hymn sing and to demand a permanent ceasefire in Gaza.

The event was organized by Mennonite Action, a grassroots movement bonded by a common belief that Mennonites must be public about our peace values. Singing is an important part of our Anabaptist tradition, as is our understanding of Jesus's teaching to love our enemies. We knew ours was an act of civil disobedience, and I am grateful to live in a country with a constitution that offers First Amendment rights when we disagree with our leadership.

As a historic peace church, Mennonites oppose violence in all its varied forms. We condemn the brutal October 7, 2023, attack by Hamas that took the lives of over twelve hundred Israelis. We grieve for the families whose loved ones are still being held hostage. We grieve for the destruction of Gaza and for the estimated thirty-five thousand deaths, a majority of them women and children.

In my more than twenty-five years of working on peace and justice issues related to Israel-Palestine, my experience has been that the conflict in this region, like so many other conflicts, leads many people to immediately take sides. For that reason, it is important to be clear that I love both Palestinians and Israelis. I pray for their reconciliation, and I am frustrated by the lack of leadership demonstrated by the powers that be to help make that happen.

Since visiting the West Bank in 1998, I have engaged in a variety of Israel-Palestine peace and justice activities in my home town of Manhattan, Kansas. On one occasion, I hosted a peace march that started at our local Islamic Center and included sharing meals as part of an interfaith small group. Manhattan Mennonite Church also hosted a (contentious) event with both Jewish and Arab neighbors that featured a well-known Palestinian international human rights lawyer, Jonathan Kuttab. These efforts have not always been as successful as I would have hoped and sometimes alienated people. Even so, I continue to work toward healthy dialogue and relationships.

Robert Lee Atchison is a member of Manhattan (Kansas) Mennonite Church. He serves as chair of the Mennonite Palestine Israel Network and the Western District Conference Task Force on Israel-Palestine, He also serves on the Steering Committee for Mennonite Action.

I currently chair the Mennonite Palestine Israel Network (MennoPIN), a national grassroots organization that advocates for peace and justice in Palestine and Israel. I am also a member of the Mennonite Jewish Relations group, which endeavors to address antisemitism and seeks relationships with mainline Jewish communities. Our country and my church, and many people have some type of reparation work to do associated with the Holocaust or antisemitic behavior. I believe our collective guilt is one of many reasons peace and justice in Israel-Palestine has been so elusive.

For the past four years, MennoPIN's Gaza Twinning program has connected Manhattan Mennonite Church with the Youth Vision Society in Gaza, a non-profit associated with the Edward Said Library that provides badly needed resources to the women and children of Gaza and especially the Beach/Al Shati refugee camp. Bi-monthly Zoom meetings have helped create relationships and understanding of the humanitarian issues facing the people of Gaza.

Through this work I became friends with Tareq Abuhalima, a student who came to the United States last year to complete a master's degree in business administration at Bluffton (Ohio) University. Tareq also co-directs The Lion and Lamb Peace Arts Center at Bluffton. Since October 7 last year, three of Tareq's sisters have been killed in Gaza. Two by Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) snipers as the sisters were looking for their lost children following the carpet bombing of the UNRWA facility where they were staying after their own homes were destroyed. Tareq's remaining family now lives in tents in southern Gaza.

The brutal killings by Hamas have been described by some as unprovoked. Yet, for decades the people of Palestine have been oppressed by the violence and occupation of Israel's form of apartheid that includes home demolitions; child detentions; separation walls; settler colonialism and violence; seizures of land; and controls over water and food supplies, a form of aggression that often goes unreported. Since Hamas was elected in 2007, Gaza has become an open-air prison, where Israel controls how much water, electricity, and food is available to Gazans. Extreme measures taken by the Netanyahu government have made life increasingly hostile for Palestinians. The practice of the United States' one-sided, national-interest-driven-diplomacy and the country's unwillingness to address the apartheid system have contributed deeply to the violence both sides are now experiencing.

The US State Department defines "terrorism" as an activity that involves a violent act or an act dangerous to human life, property, or infrastructure and appears to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion, or to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, kidnapping, or hostage-taking. For years now, there has been a lack of diplomacy and action because Hamas is recognized as a "terrorist" organization. In my opinion, however, the actions of the leaders on both sides of this war meet our country's definition of terrorism

and bear responsibility for the deaths of the innocent. For years, we have looked for a two-state solution through Camp David, the Oslo Accords, and the Road Map for Peace only to see Israeli settlements increase in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, upheld and supported by an ever-expanding apartheid system. Some estimates suggest there are more than seven hundred thousand Israeli settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. It is doubtful that the State of Israel has the will or capacity to remove them.

As difficult as it is to imagine, Jonathan Kuttab, an international Palestinian human rights lawyer, has suggested a new vision for a one-state solution in his book *Beyond the Two-State Solution*.[1] Whatever the path forward, it must include a different approach than a two-state solution that serves as a guise for Israel to settle the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Each year, the United States provides billions of dollars of support to Israel. Some of our Senators and Representatives suggest we are supporting a democracy. Perhaps, but it is a democracy without a constitution that has occupied and militarily ruled the Palestinian people in East Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank for fifty-seven years while land continues to be confiscated and the people's quality of life deteriorates. Lack of leadership to address the reason for the violence has contributed to the carnage we are now experiencing.

South Africa, a country that has experienced apartheid, understands the Palestinians and their oppression and has accused Israel of committing genocide against the Palestinian people. While the UN's International Court of Justice did not clearly rule that Israel is guilty, it did find South Africa's claims plausible that Gazans are in need of protection from genocide, as reflected in an overwhelming fifteen to two decision.

But do we really need to name genocide before we call for an end to the killing of children? One of the songs we sang in the Cannon House rotunda before our arrests was Michael Mahler's "How Can We Be Silent?" "when we know our God is near bringing light to those in shadows, to the worthless, endless worth?"[2]

In a continued call for a permanent ceasefire, Mennonite Action headed back to Washington, DC, this summer with a march from Harrisonburg, Virginia, that culminated July 28–30 in a multiracial, interfaith coalition gathering. The coalition promoted a theology of liberation and peace—in contrast to a theology of domination, hatred, and violence promoted at the Christians United for Israel Summit that occurred simultaneously. Coalition partners included Christians for a Free Palestine, IfNotNow, Jewish Voice for Peace–DC, Faith for Black Lives, Rabbis for Ceasefire, Hindus for Human Rights, and others. Activities throughout the weekend included interfaith services, civil disobedience, nonviolence training, a lobby day, and an all-inclusive rally.

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1 Jonathan Kuttab, *Beyond the Two-State Solution* (Washington, DC: Nonviolence International, 2021).

2 Michael Mahler, "How Can We Be Silent," (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2003).

Train No More for War

Nick Schuurman

Give Us the Courage to Enter the Song

Reckoning with Mennonite History and Theology through Public Action

Jonathan Smucker, Tim Nafziger, and Sarah Augustine

> *What is our peace witness when we live as citizens of the nations that make peaceful revolution impossible?*
>
> —Vincent Harding

It's a cold January morning in Washington, DC. One hundred thirty-five Mennonites are walking through the Cannon House Office Building, part of the United States Capitol complex. Those gathered are here to call for a ceasefire in Gaza and demand that the United States stop its unconditional supply of weapons and military aid to Israel. On a pre-arranged signal, they all sit down. They display large, colorful banners styled to look like Mennonite quilts, and they begin singing hymns in four-part harmony, until they are arrested by Capitol police.

"How can we be silent," they sing together, "when we are the voice of Christ, speaking justice to the nations, breathing love to all the earth?"[1]

Over the past year, a vibrant new grassroots movement called Mennonite Action has gained remarkable momentum in mobilizing Mennonites in the wake

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Note: Emily Hershberger, Pete Dula, and Sheri Hostetler also contributed to this essay.

1 Michael Mahler, "How Can We Be Silent," verse 1 (Chicago, IL: GIA, 2003).

of Hamas's brutal October 7 attacks against Israel last year, and Israel's horrific and ongoing attacks on Gaza. Thousands of Mennonites across the United States and Canada have now participated in the novel movement—attending protests, meeting with their elected representatives, writing letters to the editor, attending skills trainings, joining committees that carry forward the work, and organizing their fellow congregants to take action.

The movement's short-term focus is an immediate ceasefire, with a long-term commitment to working for a political solution that ends Israel's illegal military occupation of Palestine and brings about a lasting peace in Palestine-Israel. To date, local Mennonite Action groups have organized upwards of one hundred protests and vigils across North America and showed up for countless more public events with allied organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace, If Not Now, and Christians for a Free Palestine. This summer, Mennonite Action organized the "All God's Children March for a Ceasefire"—an 11-day, 135-mile march from Harrisonburg, Virginia, to Washington, DC, where they joined with allies to counter the annual conference of Christians United for Israel (CUFI) and to confront US lawmakers who embrace CUFI's agenda.

The movement's call for fellow Mennonites to "take action together and *publicly as Mennonites*"[2] is provocative. By the early twentieth century, the prevailing North American Mennonite understanding of "nonresistance"[3] implied an avoidance of an active role in politics and protest. Even as US and Canadian Mennonites began engaging more with the wider world mid-century, we tended to focus our energies and resources on service work, humanitarian relief, and mutual aid—and to shy away from direct engagement in political fights and protest.[4]

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2 Mennonite Action, "How Can Mennonites Be Public Peacemakers in This Moment?" MennoniteAction.org, accessed October 30, 2024, https://www.mennonite-action.org/call-to-action.

3 "Nonresistance" is a nineteenth-century English term that has its roots in earlier Anabaptist theological ideas. For a deeper history, see Guy F. Hershberger, Ernst Crous, and John R. Burkholder, "Nonresistance," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1989, https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Nonresistance&oldid=166097.

4 Throughout this essay, we use Jonathan Smucker's encompassing definition of politics as "any contest between competing interests. . . . To be *political* is not merely to hold or to express opinions about issues, but to be engaged with the terrain of power, with an orientation towards changing the broader society and its structures." Here politics and political action includes but extends beyond elections and voting, and beyond the conflicts and maneuvers of official political actors. We see challenger social movements and "outsider" protest tactics as belonging to this larger terrain, even if these challengers typically enter this terrain as underdogs. For these reasons, we prefer the term "political action" over the contemporary term "activism," and "collective actors" over "activists," finding political

In the 1960s when Vincent Harding, a Black Mennonite pastor, exhorted his fellow Mennonites to play a more active and vocal role in the Civil Rights Movement, the foot-dragging and pushback he encountered often came wrapped in the theological language of Mennonite nonresistance. Harding's deep and continual frustrations eventually led him to part ways with the Mennonite church (even as he maintained many important relationships with Mennonites for the rest of his life) and focus his work for social justice mostly in non-Mennonite institutions.[5]

But looking back on the decades that followed, we can see a slow and uneven shift toward Harding's vision of a publicly engaged Mennonite church that seeks to be, in Harding's words, a "front light"—instead of a "rear light"—in the social justice struggles of our time.[6]

Indeed, Mennonite Action stands on the shoulders of other Anabaptist-rooted organizations and collective efforts—like Pink Menno, Community Peacemaker Teams, and On Earth Peace—that, especially over the past three decades, have gone beyond conscientious objection to work actively for justice and peace. Mennonite Action also builds upon and seeks to complement a long history of Mennonite work related to Palestine-Israel, including the work of Mennonite Central Committee, MennoPIN, and Mennonite Church USA. The work of the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, in its call for accountability from the Christian church for complicity in genocide against Indigenous peoples and seeking repair, has also been key in laying the groundwork for Mennonite Action. We'll look more closely at this connection later in this piece.

In our view, the new wave of explicitly Mennonite protests focused on Gaza marks both a continuation of a long "transformationist stream"[7] of Anabaptism

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terminology more precise and instructive. See Jonathan M. Smucker, *Hegemony How-To: A Roadmap for Radicals* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 257, 266.

5 Joanna Shenk, *The Movement Makes Us Human: An Interview with Dr. Vincent Harding on Mennonites, Vietnam, and MLK* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 48.

6 Board of Christian Service, *The Church Facing the Race Crisis* (Newton, KS: December 4, 1963), AMC, CESR papers I-3-7, Box 5, Folder 168.

7 We see Mennonite Action, along with the movements and organizations mentioned above, as part of what Rodney Sawatsky called the "transformationist" stream of Anabaptism. Sawatsky elaborated a model of four streams of Anabaptism: (1) the "separationist" stream emphasizing social and cultural nonconformity; (2) the "establishment" stream emphasizing biblical nonresistance and personal holiness; (3) the "reformist" stream emphasizing discipleship and service to the world; and (4) the "transformationist" stream emphasizing political and ideological nonconformity to the political powers. For purposes of this essay, we will not dive into the distinctions between the establishment, separationist, and reformist streams other than to point out that they are more comfortable co-existing with the dominant political and economic culture than the transformationist stream is. We see a dynamic tension between the transformationist stream of Anabaptism and the

and an important next phase, further shifting the public and self-perceived relationship of Mennonites to collective political action.[8] Thousands of Mennonites across the United States and Canada are finding our full-throated protest voice, bringing elements of our Christian faith and Mennonite traditions into the public sphere, and seeking along the way to reconcile who we are—our values and our ways—to the times we are living in and the suffering we are witnessing in a broken world.

As so many Mennonites across the United States and Canada are now joining in public protests, we have an opportunity to deepen our understanding. To understand the longer-term context of this shift, we want to look at decades of grassroots organizing among Mennonites that have laid an important foundation. We will also take an honest look at the consequences of what we call Mennonite "quietism" on political matters, especially concerning social, economic, and political structures that Mennonites have benefitted from throughout our history—complicity in colonization and genocide, for example—while also celebrating those Mennonites who refused to be passive and silent.

Elaborating Quietism

By "quietism," we mean the tendency to keep quiet and stay out of the way when it comes to political issues and world affairs—essentially, to abstain from politics.[9] Mennonite quietism is complicated, full of contradictions, and quite uneven over time and geography. We (the authors of this article) have, nonetheless, each experienced it as a *real thing*—a still lingering *force* that impacts Mennonite life, culture, and actions to this day.

To elaborate on what we mean by the term quietism, we want to first construct an intentionally oversimplified and exaggerated picture of it—what sociologists

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other three streams, which we see as having significantly obscured the transformationist for most of the past three centuries in North America. An earlier draft of this article centered on Sawatsky's framework, but we opted ultimately to use other language to make our argument for Mennonite and Anabaptist political engagement that takes responsibility for the social, economic, and political structures that we are embedded within, as opposed to the pattern of quietism that we elaborate in the next section. See Rodney J. Sawatsky, "The One and the Many: The Recovery of Mennonite Pluralism," *Anabaptism Revisited* (1992): 141–54.

8 We are building on Janna Hunter-Bowman's work on third-wave peace theology, which connects reckoning with the past with attention to questions of power and organizing for liberatory, justice-oriented peace action.

9 For a deeper historical look at "Old" Mennonite Church and General Conference shifts from quietism toward active nonviolence over the past century, see Perry Bush, *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonite Pacifism in Modern America* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1998); and Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1994).

call an "ideal type"—in order to identify its features. In our ideal type, a committed "quietist" believes that Christians should be "in the world, not of the world,"[10] concerning themselves with the things of God's kingdom, not the kingdom of this world. Following the Apostle Paul's admonition in Romans 13, they acquiesce to state authority in most matters, *except* if the state compels them to violate core tenets of their faith, specifically military conscription. Jesus's words "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's," (Matt 22:21, RSV) are interpreted to mean that people should pay their taxes without protest. Along with refusing military service, quietists also eschew public office and likely even abstain from voting. Protest and lobbying are unfamiliar to them, part of the kingdom of this world. Rather than demanding that the state act to uplift (or stop oppressing) others, they directly serve others and pray for them.

Each of the authors of this article has personal experience with fellow Mennonites who fit this ideal type to a T. We want to be clear, however, that we are not suggesting this ideal type of a quietist is an accurate general description of all Mennonites. Instead, it represents a pole at one end of a complex spectrum of Mennonite political engagement (and lack thereof). Historically, different lineages of Mennonites and Anabaptists had very different relationships to politics and the state. Eighteenth-century Dutch Mennonites, for example, actively participated in a revolutionary movement and held public office. In terms of contradictions, Mennonites in the United States who ostensibly eschewed worldly engagement regularly found themselves (or their leaders) advocating for their own interests vis-a-vis the state (e.g., for the right of conscientious objection).

This is important to parse in our understanding of historical Mennonite quietism: The rhetoric did not match the reality. Indeed, this hypocrisy was at the heart of Harding's frustration about Mennonites sitting on the sidelines of the black freedom struggle. Mennonite leaders argued that active involvement in the nonviolent, but assertive and confrontational, Civil Rights movement did not fit with Mennonite nonresistance theology. Harding saw clearly that Mennonites had been politically engaged in all sorts of ways but that their engagement was typically limited to asserting Mennonite interests. This pattern extended back to the first North American Mennonite settlers, who mostly turned a blind eye to the genocide that effectively awarded them the fertile lands upon which they could keep quiet.

Our critique of Mennonite quietism follows Harding's: We want Mennonites to take political responsibility for the social, economic, and political systems we are part of and that we benefit from. While we want to be careful to not overgeneralize about quietism, we have seen firsthand how it permeates Mennonite self-understandings in our churches. Many fellow Mennonites we talk to are

10 Derived from John 17.

impatient with their own churches, which they see as having been "quiet in the land" for too long. We want to explore together what it means to be Mennonite while also being citizens of first-world nations (and, in the case of the United States, a global military superpower), or to be white Mennonites who live in a white supremacist social system.

Our purpose here is not to litigate the past or harshly judge our ancestors—or to adopt a "relentlessly triumphalist" progress narrative[11]—but rather to evaluate together what our political engagement might look like today, as well as how we understand that engagement in relation to our history and theology. We are focusing our reflections primarily on Mennonite Church USA and related communities, where all three of us are situated. We hope this essay will serve as one small contribution in that conversation.

The Radicals: Early Anabaptists

Early Anabaptists were anything but quiet. They lived, breathed, and actively engaged in an extraordinary historical epoch. In the sixteenth century, the Radical Reformation era saw peasant revolts and the gradual crumbling of the feudal order across Europe. The relatively recent invention of the printing press led to dissent spreading much more quickly than before. This was compounded by the European "discovery" of the Western Hemisphere, and rapid expansion of global trade and economic development. This historical context profoundly shaped the early Anabaptists, informing and constraining their choices.

Many of us who were taught Mennonite theology and church history learned a somewhat decontextualized version of both in our growing up years. The story goes something like this: Reading the Bible for themselves, the early Anabaptists discovered they had been misled by church authorities. Central among their theological disputes was the issue of infant baptism, which the Anabaptists found no evidence for in scripture. So strongly did they believe in their interpretation of this specific faith ritual that thousands of them refused to back down—to the point of torture and death.

This oversimplified story misses the context of the early Anabaptists. It suggests they were motivated completely by theological concerns and that church and state authorities' brutal persecution of Anabaptists was exclusively religious,

11 Robert Charles reviews Driedger and Kraybill's history and two other histories of Mennonite peacemaking and offers important historiographical, theological, and sociological context. He critiques the way Driedger and Kraybill view less educated "rank and file" Mennonites as backwards and in the way of the doctrine of progress. Auguste Comte, who named the new discipline of sociology, explicitly saw sociology as a "mistress of the sciences." This is the same doctrine of progress ("manifest destiny" in the US) that went hand in hand with colonization and genocide. See J. Robert Charles, "The Varieties of Mennonite Peacemaking: A Review Essay," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76, no. 1 (2002): 105–20.

as opposed to political, in nature. This story can remove the early Anabaptists from their unique time and place. By reading back in their social and economic context, however, we can better understand how to relate to our own times.

While concerns about an everlasting world beyond this temporal one did animate the actions of many radical reformers, they were also very much attempting to shape *this* world. The reality is not only that early Anabaptists *did indeed pose a threat* to existing religious and state authorities but also that they *meant* to do so.

A robust chronicle of early Anabaptism's many branches and details of their subversive aims is beyond the scope of this essay, but we can briefly summarize a few major themes. First, the reason Anabaptists earned their name was subversive: State-church authorities, which frequently collaborated, saw re-baptism of adults and refusal to baptize babies as theologically heretical and politically seditious, as infant baptism was the primary ritual of religious and civic initiation in that context. Similarly, early Anabaptists' refusal of oaths threw a wrench into the political and legal gears of feudal society. The practice of local congregational autonomy and the idea of a "priesthood of all believers" was a clear affront to centralized church authority, undermining both Catholic and Protestant ecclesiastical hierarchies. The challenge to centralized power was not merely incidental to Anabaptists' new theology; movement leaders were frequently unrestrained in their scorn and derision for whole categories of authority, as well as for specific leaders.

And then there was the remarkable challenge to the feudal economic order. Many Anabaptists embraced a "community of goods," rejected private property, and sought to enact a radical redistribution of resources. Indeed, some strands of the early Anabaptist movement were deeply intertwined with the Great Peasant Revolt of 1524 to 1525.[12] The revolting peasants launched an unruly challenge to the feudal social order that spread across a large region of Central Europe. They interpreted Acts chapters 2 and 4 as an injunction for a radical egalitarian redistribution of land and wealth. The movement suffered a crushing defeat, with upwards of one hundred thousand peasants, farmers, miners, and townsfolk killed by the better trained and more heavily armed military forces employed by the aristocracy.

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12 A more accurate description than "revolt" would be a social movement inclusive of a wide range of expressions of discontent, from a few peasants roughing up the local monastery to more organized confederations. According to historian James Stayer, Anabaptism was connected to peasant movements in Switzerland, South Germany and Austria, and Central Germany. There were no peasant movements in the Netherlands or northern German territories where Anabaptism also developed. See James M. Stayer, *The German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

The radical Anabaptist movement also suffered incredible repression and persecution across much of Europe over the next two to three centuries—for roughly half of Anabaptism's entire history.

Mennonites in Early Colonial America

Early Anabaptists upended the social, religious, and political order of their day, and they paid a terrible price for their defiance and nonconformity. Persecution made it difficult, if not impossible, for Anabaptists to pursue their radical aims beyond their own (increasingly withdrawn) communities. For many, especially in Switzerland and southern Germany, relative isolation in agricultural communities became the norm. This collective survival strategy led to enclave cultures among many Anabaptists; a pattern of rural quietism arose in settings such as Prussia, the Russian Empire, and the Americas as Anabaptists sought new land and freedom from military service.

In the early 1700s, Mennonites began arriving in the British colonies in the Americas. Some of them carried fresh memories of their persecution by state authorities in Europe. In contrast to Anabaptist refusals of the 1500s, many of these settler Mennonites attempted to ingratiate themselves to the colonial government. Aware that their unwillingness to fight in wars was a problem for civil authorities, they tried to prove their worth by building a reputation as good farmers. According to historian John L. Ruth, this strategy worked so well that William Penn and his agents settled the Mennonites in prime farming land.

Penn's men pushed poor Scots-Irish immigrants off this same land and settled them closer to the frontier with the Delaware and Shaunee.[13] Because of this, the Scots-Irish bore the brunt of attacks from Delaware and Shaunee during the French and Indian War. In 1763 during this war, a mob of Scots-Irish settlers called the Paxton Boys channeled their rage at the Quaker and German political leadership in Philadelphia into two massacres of Conestoga Indians outside Conestoga, Pennsylvania. This completed the ethnic cleansing of the last intact community of Indigenous people in Lancaster County, as Mennonite prosperity and land ownership grew.[14]

Colonial Pennsylvania was not the only place Mennonite settlers farmed land where Indigenous people were recently removed, while turning a blind eye to the colonial violence they benefited from. This pattern played out over and over again, including, for example, Mennonite settlement of the Ukraine under Catherine

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13 John L. Ruth, *The Earth Is the Lord's: A Narrative History of the Lancaster Mennonite Conference* (Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History), (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2001), 197–98.

14 Tim Nafziger, "Mennonites and the Conestoga Massacre of 1763," The Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, February 3, 2016, https://dismantlediscovery.org/2016/02/03/mennonites-and-the-conestoga-massacre-of-1763/.

the Great in the 1700s when Mennonites settled land taken from Cossacks and others,[15] and in Mennonite settlement of Saskatchewan that displaced Cree people in the late 1800s and early 1900s.[16] This pattern has continued among some Mennonites even up to the present: As recently as 2023 in Mexico, old colony Mennonites are threatening the life ways of Mayan peoples.[17] In all of these examples, Mennonites bought into the settler story that they were making land "productive" that Indigenous people were not adequately exploiting. Generations of Mennonite wealth is built on agricultural land taken from Indigenous peoples.

Mennonites' relationship with slavery was arguably more complicated. In 1688 the first written protest against slavery in the new world was signed by four individuals in a home in Germantown, Pennsylvania. While the document was written by Quakers and for a Quaker audience, three of the four signers had a Mennonite affiliation.[18] There is also documentation of Mennonite individuals aiding the Underground Railroad. We can celebrate those Mennonites who opposed, defied, or worked to end slavery, but we should understand clearly that, by and large, Mennonites were not meaningfully active in the Abolitionist movement, especially in any institutional or group-level ways.

We could cite many reasons for Mennonite quietism in this era. Perhaps the crux of it is that the gradual cessation of active persecution, combined with new economic opportunities (especially in agriculture), led to a hand-to-the-plough mentality and an enclave culture prevailing among Mennonites in early colonial America. If early Anabaptism constituted a world-challenging intervention, the life and land in North America provided Mennonites with a relatively cloistered enclave to live their distinct theology in peace, comfortably and in private.

Again, it is important to be clear about the reality—and hypocrisy—of Mennonite quietism. Mennonite settlers did engage with the terrain of power ("politics" in our earlier definition above) in order to protect and secure the economic interests and religious freedoms of their settlements. Indeed, prior to the Revolutionary War, early Mennonite settlers were quite active in local and

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15 Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021).

16 Elaine Enns, "Facing History with Courage: Towards 'Restorative Solidarity' with Our Indigenous Neighbours," *Canadian Mennonite Magazine* 19, no. 5 (2015), https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/facing-history-courage.

17 Anika Reynar, Tina Fehr-Kehler, and Lars Åkerson, "Maya Seed Guardians Seek Well-Being in Mexico with Mennonite Colonies, *Anabaptist World*, March 20, 2024, https://anabaptistworld.org/mennonite-colonies-farm-practices-threaten-maya-ancestral-land-in-mexico/.

18 For a discussion on why the signers' Mennonite affiliation was significant, see Richard K. MacMaster, *Land, Piety, Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America, 1683–1790* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1985), 43.

regional politics, as a matter of self-interested common sense and service to the settler colony. What they did not typically do is acknowledge or engage with broader political responsibilities that accompanied their involvement in the economic and political systems they benefited from.

Mennonite Re-Emergence in the Twentieth Century

It was only in the mid-twentieth century that Mennonites began to even consider racism as a problem for the church. That consideration occurred within a larger process of Mennonite emergence onto "the political scene." In many respects, we can understand Mennonite experiences of this long century sociologically. Like other similar distinctive cultural enclaves, many Mennonites went with the flow of economic development and assimilated into mass society while struggling to hold on to cornerstone values and beliefs and maintain particular cultural practices. As Mennonites moved away from livelihoods based in agriculture and craftsmanship and began urbanizing over the course of this century, they inevitably integrated into modern society, politics included.

At first Mennonite political activity was limited to securing specific exemptions—the struggle at the beginning of World War II to win conscientious objector status for conscription-age Mennonite men and, later, the possibility of alternative service. Given the horrors of Nazism and the Holocaust, there is reason for retrospective embarrassment that US and Canadian Mennonites seemed concerned, above all else, with securing their own ability to conscientiously object to military conscription and were otherwise mostly silent about the unfolding atrocities across the Atlantic.

Add to this reality that some Mennonite enclaves were openly antisemitic and even sympathetic to Hitler and Nazism, illustrating the ethno-nationalist infection to which some Mennonites have succumbed.[19] Even if explicit Nazi sympathizers constituted a small minority of Mennonites, their unearthed existence stands as a worse indictment because of the absence of a significant Mennonite collective voice opposing antisemitism and Nazism as Hitler rose to power.[20]

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19 Tim Nafziger, "A Window into Antisemitism and Nazism among Mennonite in North America, Part 1," *Anabaptist World*, July 30, 2007, https://anabaptistworld.org/window-antisemitism-nazism-among-mennonite-north-america-part-1/.

20 One might reasonably ask—as one of our reviewers did—what "a collective voice opposing antisemitism" would have looked like, as Mennonites had not yet developed much capacity for or practice in speaking out publicly about social or political issues (at least about issues that didn't directly concern their church members). Our aim here is not to harshly judge the actions or inaction of our forebears by contemporary standards but rather to gain a clearer understanding of how, regardless of their intentions and historical limitations, they were often functionally complicit. Our purpose in this is to use the understandings, tools, and capacities now available to us for challenging and breaking from our own complicity.

However, these developments proved pivotal in the Mennonite church's long-term shift from quietism toward greater, transformation-oriented engagement. As one example, Mennonite conscientious objectors were exposed to awful conditions in mental hospitals and became advocates for patients, eventually starting their own mental health facilities that treated patients with respect and dignity.[21] More broadly, service programs for conscientious objectors and the birth of Mennonite Voluntary Service exposed young people to life outside of Mennonite enclaves (as well as to Mennonites from other communities). This period was part of a wider growth of Mennonite churches in urban areas around the United States.

Following World War II, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) began sending service workers around the world. Many of these workers saw the negative impact of US militarism and imperialism and began seeking ways to work for peace and justice more widely in the world. Many Mennonites in the United States were deeply impacted by the Civil Rights Movement and the peace movement to end the war in Vietnam. The MCC peace section was one important place for these conversations. It began as advocacy for conscientious objectors but grew into wider advocacy opposing war and promoting peace and justice in US foreign policy, including in the Middle East.[22]

From World War II into the 1960s, an emergent vision about active Mennonite engagement in world affairs gained momentum. MCC opened an office in Washington, DC, in 1968 to work on policy issues "after a decade of study and discernment concerning Mennonite witness to government."[23] A similar office opened in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada in 1974.

The 1960s saw tensions come to a head regarding competing visions about how Mennonites ought to be in the world. Vincent Harding, a collaborator of Martin Luther King, Jr., sought to move the Mennonite Church from quietism to active engagement in contemporary social justice struggles. At the Mennonite World Conference in 1967 he challenged Mennonites to listen closely to the revolutionary movements around the world: "We [Mennonites] usually have no hesitation about seeking justice for ourselves . . . what do we have to say to others

21 Louise Stoltzfus, *As Long as Grass Grows and Water Flows: The Story of Philhaven* (Mt. Gretna, PA: Philhaven, 2002).

22 Harold S. Bender and Urbane Peachey, "Mennonite Central Committee Peace Section," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1987, accessed October 30, 2024, https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Central_Committee_Peace_Section&oldid=163120.

23 See "Historical Note" at https://archives.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/resources/scpc-cdg-a-mennonite_central_committee.

who seek justice? How shall our 'peace witness' be valid if it refers only to their quest for justice and not ours?"[24]

Harding exhorted Mennonites to be a "front light"—instead of a "rear light"—on pressing social struggles like the Civil Rights Movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and global movements for liberation (against imperialism and colonialism). While finding many allies to his vision within the Mennonite church, he was repeatedly met with institutional resistance from MCC and other Mennonite institutions at the time.[25] Drawing attention to how white American Mennonites benefit from a white supremacist social order and first-world Mennonites benefit from US imperialism, Harding argued that Mennonite attempts to stay above the fray were dishonest and self-serving. What was needed, he advocated, was for us to take responsibility for our place in the world, and specifically to take action on the side of the oppressed.

Vincent Harding's conversation with Mennonite institutional leaders was a microcosm of a wider conversation between Mennonites who were increasingly asking questions about justice and those committed to an understanding of nonresistance that separated them from the world. Continually frustrated by Mennonite leadership, Harding ultimately moved away from active involvement with the Mennonite church and continued his commitment to justice through other avenues, including by working more closely with the Civil Rights Movement.[26] In 1966 he summarized black colleagues who were asking him, "Are you going to stay with those nice white Mennonites, Anabaptists, Christians? Are any of them going to join the fight, Vince? Where do they stand, Vince? Where do they stand?"[27]

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24 Vincent Harding, "The Peace Witness and Modern Revolutionary Movements," in *The Witness of the Holy Spirit: Proceedings of the Eighth Mennonite World Conference, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, July 23–30, 1967*, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite World Conference, 1967), 341–42.

25 Sarah Kehrberg, "From Fort Peachtree to Atlanta: The Mennonite Story," *Mennonite Historical Bulletin, Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee*, accessed October 30, 2024, https://web.archive.org/web/20080530214616/http://www.mcusa-archives.org/mhb/Kehrberg-Atlanta.html.

26 It may not be possible to neatly disentangle Harding's disagreements and frustrations with Mennonite leadership from his own personal struggles in accounting for the process of his break from specific Mennonite institutions. His departure from MCC coincided with, and may have also been related to his public confession of, marital infidelity. At the time, he stepped back from public roles and a heavy travel schedule in order to focus on healing his marriage. Tobin Miller Shearer gives more attention to this period of Harding's life in his forthcoming biography of Harding.

27 Tobin Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 126.

Harding wrote Dr. King's famous "Beyond Vietnam" speech.[28] He might have played an important decades-long role in leading Mennonites' emerging work for peace and justice. His departure was a huge loss for the Mennonite church, even as he continued to see his work as Anabaptist-rooted for the rest of his life.[29]

But Vincent Harding was also something of a prophet, pointing in a direction that other Mennonites would continue to follow, and to push.[30]

From 1968 to 1973, the Minority Ministries Council was a group of black and brown men who worked to explicitly challenge white supremacy in the (Old) Mennonite Church (one of the two precursor denominations to Mennonite Church USA).[31] In 1976 gay and lesbian Mennonites who had been forced out of the church founded Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT interests to advocate for inclusion within the Mennonite Church. In the 1980s, Mennonites, peace Catholics, and other peace church folks founded Community Peacemaker Teams as part of an effort to more deeply explore creative nonviolent direct action as a tool for working for peace and justice around the world. This movement was also connected to the anti-nuclear movement of that era. In 1995 Regina Shands Stoltzfus and Tobin Miller Shearer, anti-racist educators within MCC, founded Damascus Road (which later became Roots of Justice) as a program for deepening the racial justice work of Mennonites within their majority white organizations.

These and other efforts were part of a developing understanding of Mennonite practices that took into account power imbalances within our communities and institutions, and our place and responsibility to act in the wider world.

Toward a Public Political Turn

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, the stream of transformational Mennonite political engagement has continued to widen and flow more forcefully.

In 2009, a younger generation of queer Mennonites organized ahead of the Mennonite Church USA convention in Columbus, Ohio, to encourage queer

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28 Steve Chawkins, "Vincent Harding Dies at 82; Historian Wrote Controversial King Speech," *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 2014, https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-vincent-harding-20140524-story.html.

29 Shenk, *The Movement Makes Us Human*, 48.

30 Tobin Miller Shearer, "Moving Beyond Charisma in Civil Rights Scholarship: Vincent Harding's Sojourn with the Mennonites, 1958–1966," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 82, no. 2 (2008): 213–48; Tobin Miller Shearer, "A Prophet Pushed Out: Vincent Harding and the Mennonites," *Mennonite Life* 69 (2015), https://mla.bethelks.edu/ml-archive/2015/a-prophet-pushed-out-vincent-harding-and-the-menno.php.

31 Mennonite scholar Felipe Hinojosa covers the work of the council in depth in *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith and Evangelical Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

Mennonites and allies to wear pink. They used hymn sings to joyously claim their space in this Mennonite gathering and in the church.

In 2014, the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery was created by three Mennonite women: one Indigenous organizer and two Mennonite pastors. This coalition focuses on challenging laws and policies, calling congregations and Christian denominations to join Indigenous-led movements for liberation, and resourcing Christian congregations and denominations with materials designed to change popular culture.

In addition to influencing national and international policies, the coalition has built a network of congregations focused on seeking repair with Indigenous communities at the community level. Familiarity with decolonization and environmental justice at the denominational level has deepened within Mennonite Church USA congregations over the past decade as a result of the coalition. While MC USA, MCC US, MCC Canada, and Mennonite Mission Network have partnered at various times with coalition activities, the coalition has intentionally remained independent of institutional church structures. It sees itself as a messenger, sounding a clarion call to the Christian church, beginning with the Mennonite church. While the coalition was created in the Anabaptist context, over its first decade it has grown to include multiple Christian denominations and traditions, building networks within them and encouraging Episcopalians and Methodists to engage in Indigenous liberation. Harnessing denominational identity has been a key strategy of the coalition.

Through all these efforts, there has been something of a dance of movements on the edges of the church, pushing Mennonite institutions to better embody Jesus's heart for the marginalized and oppressed. Some of those doing the "pushing" have wondered where to go next. Even in sympathetic congregations, it often feels like social justice is relegated to a small peace and justice committee or the congregation's one or two "usual suspect" activists. How might we give work for justice a more central role in our congregations?

With this challenge in mind, the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery's network of Repair Congregations seeks to engage *everyone* in working for justice for Indigenous peoples in a variety of ways: accompaniment, structural change, and cultural change. The coalition engages congregational budgets as well, challenging congregations to include reparations in their financial planning. Congregational budgets are moral documents, after all, which express congregational values. This model built upon the Supportive Congregation Network organized by Brethren Mennonite Council on LGBT interests to work for same-sex marriage and LGBTQ inclusion more broadly.

This is the historical backdrop that has led up to the current moment and the new movement, Mennonite Action, which has intentionally sought to create more opportunities for Mennonites to show up together in the public sphere *as Mennonites*. Thousands of Mennonites have participated in this movement,

bringing their voices and energy into a larger movement for peace and justice in Palestine and Israel and against genocide and colonization everywhere in the world.

Mennonite Action didn't have to invent its approach from scratch. The Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery has been holding events in the public sphere for a decade, calling on Mennonites to march and caravan with Indigenous land and water protectors, engage in public vigils, and write and negotiate with legislators in groups large and small. The coalition engaged in its first national legislative campaigns in 2015, mobilizing Mennonite delegations to visit US senators, the State Department, and the US Treasury with and on behalf of the Miskitu People of Nicaragua, resulting in the Nicaraguan Human Rights and Anticorruption Act of 2018.

The coalition further organized congregations across the nation in dozens of public demonstrations to uphold the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA),[32] culminating in a delegation that was present at the court when the landmark Brackeen case was heard. ICWA was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2023, the announcement of which was celebrated in Mennonite congregations across the nation. In addition to sending Mennonite delegations to the United Nations in New York and Geneva, the G20, and other global forums, the coalition has also sent multiple Mennonite delegations to Mexico to bridge the relationship between Mennonite colonists and Indigenous communities impacted by the environmental degradation caused by Mennonite colonists' farming practices.

The urgency of the unfolding genocide in Palestine has been something of a whirlwind moment[33] that has provided an opportunity for Mennonite Action to use similar strategies and tactics to organize thousands of Mennonites in public actions very quickly. The movement stands on the shoulders of other Mennonite social justice efforts, and it seems to us that it also signals an important moment in a longer-term shift—one that is worth noticing and discussing.

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32 The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) was passed in 1978. It strengthened the legal rights of Indigenous families and children. Up to that point, adoption had played a key role in continuing cultural genocide of Indigenous children, who were often taken from their parents and placed with settler families to be raised with no knowledge of their traditional lifeways, language, or cosmology. In 2017 Chad and Jennifer Brackeen, a white evangelical couple, sued the federal government after a Navajo boy they had fostered and hoped to adopt was instead placed with a Navajo family. In 2018 a federal judge in the case ruled ICWA was unconstitutional, threatening the forty-three-year-old law. For more on efforts by the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery to stop ICWA from being overturned, see Sarah Augustine, "These Students Prove I Am Not Alone," *Anabaptist World* (June 11, 2023), https://anabaptistworld.org/these-students-prove-i-am-not-alone/.

33 Mark Engler and Paul Engler use this term "whirlwind moment" to describe moments when mass protests change "the political weather." *This Is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-First Century* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016).

The tactics of attending protests, meeting with elected representatives, and writing letters to the editor, to name a few, may not be new to many Mennonite Action participants. But the way that Mennonite Action articulates doing those things *as a Mennonite collective* feels relevant and noteworthy. Providing a way for more Mennonites to take collective action visibly and vocally alongside fellow Mennonites as an extension of their faith tradition has resulted in the activation of many new participants. For a significant portion of Mennonite Action participants, this is their first time attending any kind of protest or being involved in a social movement.

Their participation is opening up all kinds of questions—for themselves and their fellow congregants—about how we understand being Mennonite in relation to public political engagement. How do we understand our history and theology in relation to notions of social responsibility and citizenship? How do we understand our faith as challenging genocide, colonization, and injustice in our own communities? How do we understand the long streams in our history of quietism, on the one hand, and transformational political engagement on the other? And can we somehow reconcile them? Many versions of these questions have been alive in Mennonite Action trainings, meetings, events, and online message boards. We hope that this essay can contribute to forging new understandings.

To Not Be Silent, to Shape the Future

> None can stop the Spirit burning now inside us. We will shape the future. We will not be silent.[34]

There are myriad reasons why, for much of our history, Mennonites have attempted to stay on the sidelines of politics and world affairs. Here in our conclusion we wish to name and recap a few of these reasons and to respond to them.

Mennonite Quietism #1: Economics and Self-Preservation

One reason for Mennonite quietism, emphasized by Vincent Harding, boils down to economics and self-preservation: Mennonite emigrants from Europe and their descendants benefited bountifully from the colonial order in early America. In short, white Mennonites have been privileged by a white supremacist social

34 Mahler, "How Can We Be Silent," Refrain.

system.[35] Harding called this the "shield of whiteness."[36] First-world Mennonites have derived material benefit from US global dominance. In each case, it has been safer and more convenient to not meddle in a situation that was working well enough for us. And it's easy to see how the notion of "nonresistance" could be employed to lend theological justification to what was really just taking the path of least resistance (i.e., a copout).

However, it would be a mistake to reduce Mennonite quietism to a fully conscious and calculated strategy for self-preservation. Without trying to justify the complicity of our forebears, it is worth trying to understand them, their lives, and how they understood and navigated the wider world. The aforementioned hand-to-the-plough mentality was hardly an elective choice. Early Mennonites were escaping persecution and trying to survive and get by. They didn't have access to the level of information and education we have now, let alone the political agency and rights we take for granted. And this is central to our point: With the more abundant information, education, and historical hindsight we now have at our disposal, as well as with the power and privileges we now possess, comes a greater responsibility. While early Anabaptist and Mennonite theology and practice was forged in a historical context where movement participants were *political subjects*, today most of us are *citizens*. Even if this has been the case for a considerable period of time, we are still wrestling with how to "update" our theology and practice to fit our contemporary political context.

Mennonite Quietism #2: Conflict Avoidance and Enemy Avoidance

Another reason for contemporary Mennonite quietism that we want to name operates more at the dispositional, psychological, and group-culture levels—our desire to *avoid conflict*. Our culture of conflict avoidance overlaps with our desire to avoid having enemies. It's important to remember that Jesus didn't call us to not *have* enemies. He called us to *love* them. In her book *How to Have an Enemy*, Mennonite Pastor Melissa Florer Bixler points out that Mennonite calls for unity often come at the expense of the marginalized. In telling us to love our enemy, Jesus was clear about who his enemy was—the oppressive religious and political establishment who ground the poor into the dust. Florer Bixler says that "enemy love offers to tear apart broken systems and rebuild a world with an imaginative architecture that emerges from lives stayed on liberating love."[37]

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35 Vincent Harding, "The Christian and the Race Question," *Gospel Herald* 56, no. 31 (August 6, 1963): 669–71; Vincent Harding, "Reflections on a Visit to Virginia," *Mennonite Central Committee Peace Section* (Harrisonburg, VA: November 9, 1962), AMC-IX-7-12, #2 Box 6, entitled "Race Relations 1955–70."

36 Shenk, *The Movement Makes Us Human*, 48.

37 Melissa Florer-Bixler, *How to Have an Enemy: Righteous Anger and the Work of Peace* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2021), 98–99.

Conflict avoidance and enemy avoidance often pass for peacemaking, in spite of Christ's example as a disruptor. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword," Jesus said. "For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother."[38] Pleas for peace often cover an impulse to side with the powerful and the status quo. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this very well when he said, "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice." In this spirit, the Black Lives Matter track of the 2017 Hope for the Future gathering (an annual gathering of Mennonite Black, Indigenous, and People of Color leaders) laid out a new definition of a peace church:

> A peace church recognizes the *imago dei* in all humanity. It not only prays, it takes action. A peace church responds to violence inside and outside its doors. A peace church stands with Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, LGBTQ people, immigrants and against all forms of violence. A peace church empowers disenfranchised and marginalized people. It understands multi-faceted forms of violence—systemic, educational and environmental. It is more than the absence of war or the protesting of war.[39]

As authors involved in organizing both with Mennonite Action and the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, we honor the many Mennonites who have stood up for justice and the marginalized over the course of Mennonite history. We also recognize a long history of Mennonite complicity in genocide and social injustices. We believe that the path to a real reckoning with our history is forged by the action we take now.

Mennonite Quietism #3: Wait for a Better Time

With the current genocide unfolding in Gaza, there are once again voices advocating that we stay on the sidelines, while other voices urge us to wait, to show wisdom by not giving in to urgency. Taking a side in a messy conflict is fraught with potential problems and pitfalls. What right do we have to insert ourselves into "someone else's fight"? If Mennonites have been complicit with antisemitism, shouldn't we first reckon with that part of our history before criticizing Israel? Perhaps the best course of action is to organize a study group, or host a forum that features both Palestinian and Israeli perspectives?"

Similarly, white allies sometimes misinterpret the stance of Indigenous leaders who refuse to be pressured by those allies demanding immediate action without Indigenous leadership. Indigenous people who appear to be de-stressing urgency

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38 Matthew 10:34–35a, NRSVUE.

39 Tim Nafziger, "Treating the Illness of Trumpism and Ending White Silence," *Anabaptist World*, June 23, 2017, https://anabaptistworld.org/treating-illness-trumpism-ending-white-silence/.

may, in fact, be resisting white allies taking over an Indigenous-led movement. These allies then draw the conclusion that "Indigenous leaders do not give in to urgency so we, too, should wait for a better time, when all of us are ready, before taking action."

We do not wish to be dismissive about valid questions and concerns. Indeed, we believe we have not only a responsibility to engage visibly and vocally on the issues of our day but also a further responsibility to do everything we can to make sure our actions are as effective as possible, and to minimize unintended harmful impacts. However, raising genuine concerns in order to better inform, strengthen, and improve our collective action is very different from raising concerns in order to slow down or stop action. As Dr. King urges us, justice deferred is justice denied.

Compelled to Act: Being a Front Light

The unfolding genocide in Gaza is not the same as the genocide against Indigenous peoples across North America; these are distinct historical situations, involving different actors, oppressors, victims, and harms. But two important things they share in common are that (1) unspeakable horrors are being carried out in an asymmetrical conflict, and (2) the oppressor is acting in our name, with our tax dollars, ostensibly to protect a political order that we are embedded within and benefit from. Looking back at Mennonite inaction concerning genocide and settler colonialism on this continent, many of us feel shame, wishing our forebears had done something. How will our descendants look back on Mennonite action or inaction in this moment?

In his July 1967 address to Mennonite World Conference, Vincent Harding described Mennonites as "huddled behind the barricades of the status quo." At a second address at the same gathering he said: "We cannot escape such questions by saying that we do not believe in violence when we participate in the violence of the status quo."[40] Mennonites have wrestled with organizing for political power for a long time now. We believe it is possible to organize as Mennonites in solidarity with those most impacted by the triplets of militarism, poverty, and racism that Harding and King pointed us to in King's "Beyond Vietnam" address at Riverside Church in 1967. Working publicly for social justice is not something

40 Vincent Harding, "The Beggars Are Marching . . . Where Are the Saints?," in *The Witness of the Holy Spirit: Proceedings of the Eighth Mennonite World Conference, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, July 23–30, 1967*, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck, (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite World Conference, 1967), 128–29; Joanna L. Shenk, "Beggars & Saints: What Needs to Be Burned Away So That We Can Hear Vincent Harding's Enduring Call to Revolutionary Nonviolence?," *Anabaptist World*, February 12, 2021, https://anabaptistworld.org/beggars-saints/.

separate from our Christian faith and our Mennonite theology, traditions, and history. For us, it flows from these sources, like an ever-flowing stream.

Thus, we are compelled to act—to make the future, and to heal the past. We are compelled to stand with land and water protectors, defending Mother Earth and her sacred waters. We are compelled to challenge settler colonialism in all its manifestations, both here on this continent and around the world.

In this particular moment, we are compelled to act publicly, to add our Mennonite voice to the larger global chorus calling for an immediate ceasefire and a just peace in Palestine-Israel. There are no words to describe what we feel seeing the images—daily—of dead children and grieving mothers and fathers, and hearing the horror stories from our friends and associates in Gaza, knowing that these horrors are wrought with weapons supplied by our government and our tax dollars. We must act. To refrain from action is to side with the status quo, which is to side with the powerful—precisely the complicity that Vincent Harding prophetically warned Mennonites against.

Today we have new opportunities to take meaningful public action on the side of the oppressed and to do so visibly as Mennonites. We grasp that we cannot fix all the world's problems on our own. But, like Harding before us, we want the church to show up for the struggle, to be a front light.

Prayer and Song, Worship and Struggle for Gaza

Timothy Seidel

God have mercy.

1. Prayer and Song, Worship and Struggle in Bethlehem

In Isaiah chapter 58, the prophet challenges the people about their worship. He describes many ways they offer worship to God, such as fasting. But then, looking at their actions, he asks, "Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?" The prophet goes on, pointing out, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" (Isa 58:5–6, NRSV).

This Isaiah text is tough one. The prophet's challenge to think again about our worship practices—like praying, singing, and fasting—has me asking: What does "true worship," worship acceptable to God, look like? If Isaiah were alive today watching what is happening in Gaza, what would he say, what would he do?

This got me thinking about *prayer and song*, and my mind went back to a special moment I remember from my time living in Palestine. It was September 2005 in Bethlehem, meeting at a Christian monastery threatened by the construction of Israel's Apartheid Wall. Palestinians from several local organizations had gathered. Thoughts and prayers were shared, speeches and encouraging words given, and songs sung that bore witness to a living hope in the midst of death and despair.

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Following our meeting, we all gathered for a prayer vigil. We left the monastery grounds and proceeded toward the Wall towering about thirty feet above us. Some of the most valuable land in this "little town" of Bethlehem has been expropriated by the state of Israel to make room for this monstrosity of concrete—a wall that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the Hague ruled illegal back in 2004. Palestinian livelihoods continue to be devastated as they are denied access to land that has been taken for the construction of this 430-mile wall that has little to do with security and terrorism, built not on the "Green Line" but instead on Palestinian land, cutting deep into the occupied West Bank.

I kept coming back to these thoughts as we began walking along the path of the Wall. I looked up to see what was happening on the faces of those around me. It would have been a beautiful sight if not for the ugliness of this visually and physically imposing structure. I saw a mixture of Palestinians and internationals, joined in *solidarity and struggle* through *prayer and song*. Also beautiful was the mixture of Palestinian Christians around me—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. And the sight of Palestinian Christians and Muslims together, defying all of the dehumanizing stereotypes of "Muslim vs. Christian" used to distract from Israel's role in the suffering of these people.

At one point we stopped in front of a gate in the Wall that serves as one of Bethlehem's only entrances/exits, and somebody offered a prayer. When we began to walk again, we all started to pray, singing the words of the Christian liturgy in Arabic:

Ya Rabba ssalami amter 'alayna ssalam,	Oh Lord of peace shower us with peace,
Ya Rabba ssalami amter 'alayna ssalam,	Oh Lord of peace shower us with peace,
Ya Rabba ssalami im la' qulubana ssalam.	Oh Lord of peace fill our hearts with peace.
Ya Rabba ssalami im'nah biladana ssalam.	Oh Lord of peace grant our land peace.

I had heard this liturgy so many times before, sung beautifully in the Palestinian Christian churches I attended for worship, but it carried with it so much power here, against this Wall. For here, it was a tangible, voiced protest against a tangible, concrete injustice. It was a loud "yes" to life and a resolute "no" to the death-dealing status quo of settler colonial occupation.

These images of *prayer and song* in occupied Palestine, is this what the prophet was talking about?

2. Gaza: Context

If Isaiah were alive today watching what is happening in Gaza, what would he say? What would he see?

The Gaza Strip is a small strip of land (141 square miles) that is home to 2.3 million Palestinians, over half of whom are children. The majority of Palestinians in Gaza are refugees living with food, water, and housing insecurity. It is one of the most densely populated places on the planet. Palestinians are confined to what the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem has called the world's largest open-air prison.[1] Palestinians in Gaza literally have no place to go.

At the time of this writing, it has been over eleven months since the beginning of a series of catastrophic events in Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel. After Hamas's October 7 attack last year, which killed some 1,200 Israelis and injured thousands more, Israel launched a campaign of genocidal violence on Gaza, killing over 41,000 Palestinians—over 16,500 of whom are children—and injuring over 95,000 more. Hundreds of hostages in captivity, thousands of political prisoners in captivity. Over 1.9 million (90 percent) of the Palestinians are displaced in Gaza right now. And over 10,000 more are missing, believed to be trapped or dead under the rubble.[2] Last fall, one Israeli scholar of genocide called Israel's attack on Gaza a "textbook case of genocide."[3] Earlier this year, the ICJ ruled that Israel's violence in Gaza is probable genocide.[4] The United Nations (UN) special rapporteur on human rights in the occupied Palestinian territories has also accused Israel of committing acts of genocide in Gaza.[5]

It is important to note that the story did not begin on October 7 but must be understood within a larger historical-political context of settler colonial domination of Palestinian life and land. Palestinians have been under attack, suffering

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1 "One Big Prison: Freedom of Movement to and from the Gaza Strip on the Eve of the Disengagement Plan," B'Tselem joint report with HaMoked: Center for the Defence of the Individual, March 2005, https://www.btselem.org/publications/summaries/200503_gaza_prison.

2 These figures are taken from Gaza's Ministry of Health and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; unfortunately, horribly, these numbers are increasing by the hour.

3 Raz Segal, "A Textbook Case of Genocide: Israel Has Been Explicit about What It's Carrying Out in Gaza. Why Isn't the World Listening?," *Jewish Currents*, October 13, 2023, https://jewishcurrents.org/a-textbook-case-of-genocide.

4 Amanda Taub, "The Meaning of the First I.C.J. Ruling in the Genocide Case Against Israel: And Why Alliances Will Determine What Comes Next," *New York Times*, January 26, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/26/world/middleeast/the-meaning-of-the-first-icj-ruling-in-the-genocide-case-against-israel.html.

5 Imogen Foulkes, "Gaza War: UN Rights Expert Accuses Israel of Acts of Genocide," *BBC News*, March 26, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68667556.

dispossession and dehumanization for decades. It has been seventy-six years since the *Nakba* or catastrophe of 1948, fifty-seven years of brutal military occupation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and seventeen years since the suffocating military blockade of Gaza began.[6]

Israel controls the flow of goods and resources into Gaza. Since last October, Israel has limited or denied Palestinians access to water, food, fuel, medical aid, and electricity in Gaza, at times cutting off all of those things entirely—actions amounting to collective punishment in violation of international humanitarian law. Israel's intentional and targeted starvation campaign against Palestinians has led UN experts to say that famine has spread throughout Gaza: 2.15 million Palestinians (96 percent of Gazans) are facing crisis-level food insecurity or worse and extreme hunger. Most residents in Gaza no longer have access to clean drinking water. Health facilities are overwhelmed and, in most places, have collapsed—literally. Israel has damaged or destroyed over half of Gaza's housing. Israel's bombing of Gaza's wastewater treatment systems has created a sanitation crisis spreading deadly disease.[7]

In the midst of all this, education has come to a halt.[8] Six hundred twenty-five thousand students—that is, all students in Gaza—have no access to education right now. Israel has killed more than 10,000 students and 500 teachers and educational staff. According to one UN report, Israel has damaged or destroyed more than 80 percent of schools in Gaza. Additionally, Israel has destroyed every university in Gaza. "These attacks are not isolated incidents," the UN report states. "They present a systematic pattern of violence aimed at dismantling the very foundation of Palestinian society." Israel's efforts to comprehensively destroy the Palestinian education system is being called "scholasticide."[9]

Schools, hospitals, mosques, and churches that have not been destroyed have become overcrowded shelters for Palestinians seeking safety from Israeli airstrikes. The few available bathrooms have to be shared among hundreds or thousands of people who sometimes wait in line for hours to use them. Israel's bombardment of Gaza and ground offensive have increasingly pushed Palestinians south into

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6 See Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017* (New York: Metropolitan, 2020).

7 Raja Abdulrahim, "Sanitation Crisis in Gaza Spreads Disease," *New York Times*, February 24, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/24/world/middleeast/gaza-sanitation-crisis.html.

8 "How Israel Has Destroyed Gaza's Schools and Universities," *Al Jazeera*, January 24, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/24/how-israel-has-destroyed-gazas-schools-and-universities.

9 "UN Experts Deeply Concerned Over 'Scholasticide' in Gaza," *UN Press Release*, April 18, 2024, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/un-experts-deeply-concerned-over-scholasticide-gaza.

overcrowded places like al-Mawasi near Khan Younis and Rafah and forced them to erect makeshift tents.

In June, Save the Children reported that up to 21,000 Palestinian children are missing in Gaza. This does not include the over 16,500 Palestinian children killed by Israel, or children forcibly disappeared by Israeli forces, including those "detained and forcibly transferred out of Gaza [with] their whereabouts unknown to their families amidst reports of ill-treatment and torture." Israel's genocidal war on Gaza is a literally a war against children.[10]

In July, *The Lancet* published a report estimating that the death toll of the Gaza genocide is 186,000 people or more, nearly 8 percent of Gaza's population.[11] This is a systematic effort to exterminate the Palestinian people—armed, funded, and supported by the US.

The situation is horrific. Since ruling that Israel's violence in Gaza is probable genocide, the ICJ also ruled that Israel's "occupation, settlement and annexation" of Palestinian territories violates international law.[12] South Africa, who brought charges against Israel to the ICJ, likened Israel's treatment of the Palestinians to an "extreme form of apartheid." The United States once again came to Israel's defense, imploring the court not to issue a ruling that Israel must withdraw from occupied Palestine. America's was a lonely voice, with only Britain offering a similar argument.[13]

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10 "Gaza's Missing Children: Over 20,000 Children Estimated to Be Lost, Disappeared, Detained, Buried Under the Rubble or in Mass Graves," *ReliefWeb*, June 24, 2024, https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/gazas-missing-children-over-20000-children-estimated-be-lost-disappeared-detained-buried-under-rubble-or-mass-graves-0.

11 Rasha Khatib, Martin McKee, and Salim Yusuf, "Counting the Dead in Gaza: Difficult but Essential," *The Lancet*, July 5, 2024, https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(24)01169-3/fulltext.

12 "Global Court Says Israel's Occupation of Territories Violates International Law," *New York Times*, July 19, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/live/2024/07/19/world/israel-gaza-war-hamas#icj-israel-palestinian-territories-occupation.

13 Mark Landler, "As Gaza Death Toll Mounts amidst This Ongoing violence, Israel's Isolation Grows," *New York Times*, February 22, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/22/world/middleeast/gaza-death-toll-israel.html; Patrick Kingsley and Thomas Fuller, "Netanyahu Issues First Plan for Postwar Gaza," *New York Times*, February 23, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/23/world/middleeast/netanyahu-postwar-plan-gaza-palestinians-reject.html. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's plan to build more settlements in the West Bank has nothing to do with meeting people's housing needs but is part of Israel's larger settler-colonial effort to take more Palestinian land in response to the Palestinian's Indigenous struggle against Israeli settlers. For more on this, see Timothy Seidel and Federica Stagni, "Settler Colonial Violence and Indigenous Struggle: Land, Resistance, and Refusal in Masafer Yatta" in *Resisting Domination in Palestine:*

The United States has enabled this genocide. The US supplies the most military aid to Israel, $3–4 billion a year, which accounts for about two-thirds of Israel's arms imports (the largest recipient of US aid). An additional 26 billion was part of a package approved by the House in April of this year. It also maintains large weapons stockpiles in Israel, which the United States has allowed the Israeli military to draw from. The US has vetoed several UN Security Council resolutions calling for a ceasefire, though abstaining from the most recent resolution.

3. One State, Two states: Not a Solution but a Struggle

This all makes talk of a political solution really difficult right now. Unfortunately, Israel's Apartheid Wall, settlement expansion, and genocide in Gaza are chapters in a long history of Palestinian displacement and dispossession. The Wall has become the de facto border of a Palestinian quasi-state composed of several isolated islands of land on roughly 40–50 percent of the West Bank. Under this "two-state solution," Palestinians are confined to what some call "reservations"—or, evoking South Africa under apartheid, "Bantustans"—partially connected by a network of roads and tunnels controlled by the Israeli military. Industrial zones may be established at the edges of these areas so that businesses can take advantage of a cheap, imprisoned labor pool. Absent a viable, contiguous Palestinian state, what remains is a "reservation" life for Palestinians parallel to the experience of many Indigenous Peoples in the United States.

One point for us to consider might be to move beyond the conceptual bind of "statehood"—whether Palestinian or Israeli. As Mennonite Christians, we might argue that our action and advocacy for a just and lasting peace should not ultimately be focused on whether or not a Palestinian state comes into being, because statehood, from a Christian perspective, is not an end in itself. Rather, what is a good in and of itself is the well-being of all who inhabit historic Palestine—that is, present-day Israel, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. If current realities have indeed rendered a two-state solution unfeasible, then those who care about the well-being and security for all must imagine new ways to live side by side in justice, freedom, and equality—including for Palestinian refugees who have been denied their right to return home.

An alternative to consider is one state. The struggle here is against Israel's settler-colonial regime that has produced an apartheid reality in occupied Palestine and, in this moment, a genocide in Gaza. It would be a struggle for equal citizenship for all—in which Palestinians and Israelis are equal citizens before the law—in all of historic Palestine.

Mechanisms and Techniques of Control, Coloniality and Settler Colonialism, eds. Alaa Tartir, Timothy Seidel, and Tariq Dana (London: I. B. Taurus/Bloomsbury, 2024), 161–78.

However one chooses to confront these challenging questions, recognizing that statehood is not an end in itself begins with the confession that from a Christian perspective we are called first and foremost to practice and witness for a politics of jubilee, one which brings liberty to the oppressed and a secure existence in the land (Luke 4; Lev 25) and to work for the day when each will sit under vine and fig tree without fear (Mic 4:4) —a vision that cannot be confined to any notions of "one state" or "two states."

It is a vision where we might shift our thinking from solution to struggle, steadfastness, and solidarity. We have seen this over the past eleven months, when hundreds of thousands of protestors all around the world have taken to the streets in struggle and solidarity—including in our own city of Harrisonburg, Virginia—calling for a ceasefire and an end to Israel's genocide of the Palestinian people.

We can think of solidarity as those ties that bind people together as one, expressed through collective action based on recognition of shared interests. Astra Taylor and Leah Hunt-Hendrix point out that solidarity "weaves us into a larger and more resilient 'we' through the precious and powerful sense that even though we are different, our lives and our fates are connected."[14]

It is a vision I also hear and see in the work of Palestinian artist Sliman Mansour. He writes about solidarity in this moment: "The global protests advocating for the freedom of Palestinians aren't just acts of solidarity; they are expressions of shared humanity, where individuals, regardless of nationality, race, or creed, unite in spirit with the Palestinian cause." He goes on, "It's a reminder that one doesn't need to be born in Palestine to understand the urgency and justice of its struggle. Standing up for the rights of Palestinians is a universal duty, a testament of empathy and commitment to a world where every individual can live free from oppression and fear."[15]

This past spring, the largest campus protests this country has seen since the late 1960s emerged. One compelling story that stood out to me took place at Columbia University (New York City) in April. Like at many universities, students at Columbia staged peaceful protests including setting up Gaza solidarity encampments on campus, calling for their university to disclose and divest any funds connected to Israel's military occupation. In the face of the outrageous response of their university president to call the police, and in the face of that police violence and arrest, how did students respond? Not by resisting arrest, not by responding in kind. *But by singing.* They sang as they were arrested, and then

14 Astra Taylor and Leah Hunt-Hendrix, "The One Idea That Could Save American Democracy," *New York Times*, March 21, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/21/opinion/democracy-solidarity-trump.html.

15 Sliman Mansour, "New Surrounding (محيط جديد)," *Instagram*, April 29, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/sliman.mansour/p/C6WdPZwN0vC/.

kept singing as they were being transported to jail.[16] This is what we did in January when over 130 Mennonites were arrested in the Cannon House Office Building. We were singing, and we kept singing as we were detained in the rotunda, in the hallways, on the buses as we were transported.[17]

4. Prayer and Song, Worship and Struggle with Mennonite Action

I have been working with folks in Harrisonburg and Rockingham County to find ways to respond to the horrific catastrophe in Gaza. In the midst of the sadness, grief, and anger, a lot of collective energy and action has emerged, with folks working together to coordinate and amplify our efforts. This is one of the reasons I got involved with an initiative called Mennonite Action.

Mennonite Action is a movement of Mennonites and friends across the United States and Canada sharing a common belief that we have a responsibility to use our voices as powerfully as possible for the cause of peace and justice. Since December 2023, we have been mobilizing to use creative nonviolent actions to demand a ceasefire, an end to the genocide, and an end to US aid funding Israel's occupation of Palestine, so that a lasting peace can be built.

Organizing and mobilizing for collective public action has taken the form of prayer, hymn-singing, marching, carrying quilts and banners, and even peaceful civil disobedience—moving from witness to *solidarity and struggle* through *prayer and song*, like those of us who gathered in protest against the Wall in Bethlehem. And like then, we might also view this solidarity through public action as worship. Actions like the one in the Cannon House Office Rotunda are sacramental acts through which God's love and grace enter the world. There is an invitation to bring our full selves to this witness and solidarity, as integrated, not dis-integrated, people and with a claim that God is already there with us. We can pray, we can sing, we can cry, we can confess, we can declare that love has already had the final word. And that this solidarity and public action is bearing witness to this confession.

This is really important to me. I lived and worked in Palestine-Israel with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). I also served with MCC in the US as director for Peace and Justice Ministries, learning a lot about the connections between

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16 Hadas Thier, "The Student Encampments Aren't a Danger to Jews. But the Crackdown Is," *The Nation*, May 3, 2024, https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/campus-encampment-police-crackdown-antisemitism-brutality/.

17 Justin Wm. Moyer, "Around 130 Mennonites, Calling for Gaza Cease-fire, Arrested on Capitol Hill," *Washington Post*, January 16, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2024/01/16/gaza-protest-cannon-building-mennonite-action/; Tim Huber, "Activists Call for Peace in Washington as Mennonite Action Expands," *Anabaptist World*, January 19, 2024, https://anabaptistworld.org/activists-call-for-peace-in-washington-as-mennonite-action-expands/.

structures of violence and domination in Palestine and structures of violence and domination here in the US. Take, for example, the ways that walls and border regimes produce violence in occupied Palestine and in the US-Mexico borderlands, in some cases using the same technologies provided by the same corporations.[18]

For the past twenty years, I have been organizing and leading learning delegations from the US to Palestine-Israel, most recently this past summer when I co-led an Eastern Mennonite University intercultural program with twenty-one students. It was intense. We learned about settler colonialism—there in Palestine but also here in the Shenandoah Valley. We learned about the *Nakba*—or catastrophe—of 1948, Israel's military occupation of Palestinian land, and its sixteen-year military blockade of Gaza. We also learned about Palestinian struggle and steadfastness, or *sumud* in Arabic, and the transnational solidarities that emerge when people organize together with creativity, courage, and love.

I did not grow up Mennonite. In fact, I often tell folks that I first learned what it meant to be Mennonite from my Palestinian friends and neighbors (MCC has been in Palestine since 1949, first arriving to provide relief to refugees following the *Nakba*). It was about community, the coupling of meeting human needs with struggling against oppressive structures that produce those oppressive material conditions. And a commitment to nonviolence and the life-giving love we know through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

It is where I first learned about *sumud* as a kind of political theology of steadfastness against political theologies of elimination and replacement such as Christian Zionism, or, closer to home, the Doctrine of Discovery. The Doctrine of Discovery is a philosophical and legal framework that has legitimized the theft of Indigenous lands and domination of Indigenous Peoples. Christian Zionism works the same way in Palestine, legitimizing the theft of Palestinian lands and the domination of Palestinians.[19]

In addition to the accompaniment and partnerships in Palestine-Israel, an important part of that work was, and still is, challenging those political theologies that dehumanize Palestinians and Indigenous Peoples. It informs a peace witness that embraces public engagement aimed at challenging imperialism and white supremacy. It impressed upon me the critical importance of a pacifist ethic and political theology that is not selective in its condemnation of violence—settler violence there and here.[20]

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18 Timothy Seidel, "'Emigrantes, Palestinos, Estamos Unidos': Anticolonial Connectivity and Resistance Along the 'Palestine-Mexico' Border," *Postcolonial Studies* 26, no. 1 (2023): 94–111.

19 Timothy Seidel, "Not a Solution but a Struggle: Anticolonial Connectivity and Steadfastness Against Replacement," *International Politics* 61, no. 2 (2024): 399–406.

20 And as bell hooks reminds us, our efforts to challenge settler colonialism and militarism must be at the same time efforts to challenge racial capitalism, white supremacy,

I continue to be deeply distressed by Israel's assault on Gaza. Israel's violence against the Palestinian people has been extreme in its disproportionality (and media coverage in the West obscures)—one of the most powerful armies on the planet, supported by my government, using its full might against 2.3 million besieged, poor people, half of whom are children, most of whom are refugees, in one of the world's most densely populated places.

I have dear friends in Palestine-Israel living through this ongoing catastrophe. It is truly a difficult and heart-wrenching time. Such grief. Calling for an immediate ceasefire and an end to the genocide, for humanitarian action right now. That is the immediate need. There is no military solution. For a lasting peace born of justice, Israel's siege of Gaza must be lifted and its settler-colonial domination of Palestinian life and land must end. As the Israeli organization Zochrot wrote, "Our safety and wellbeing are dependent on each other's. No one is safe until everyone is safe."[21]

As a Mennonite Christian, I understand this work—*sumud*, solidarity, and struggle through prayer and song—as a kind of worship. It is why I have continued to show up at church on Sunday mornings. I am eager to be in a space where other folks are looking to not only respond to this current moment but also organize for long-term change as a witness to our belief in a God of life and life-giving love who is present still, as Palestinian pastor Rev. Munther Isaac reminds us, under the rubble in Gaza.[22] It is also a reminder that this is not a spectacle to be consumed but a work to be shared, collectively.

This is what groups like Mennonite Action are trying to do. So many folks are activated to work to make change, but we cannot do this work alone as individuals. We need to mobilize and organize for collective action, public action, across our communities.

I wonder if this gets at what the prophet spoke about—witness and solidarity that manifests in prayer and song. It is a worship and a struggle that we are all invited into.

May God have mercy and give us the strength and courage to be steadfast.

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and hetero-patriarchy. See bell hooks and George Yancy, "bell hooks: Buddhism, the Beats and Loving Blackness," *New York Times*, December 10, 2015, https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/10/bell-hooks-buddhism-the-beats-and-loving-blackness/.

21 Zochrot, "No One Is Safe Until Everyone Is Safe," *Instagram*, October 18, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CyjTk8mNyeE/?img_index=5.

22 Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac, "God Is Under the Rubble in Gaza," *Sojourners*, October 30, 2023, https://sojo.net/articles/god-under-rubble-gaza.

Witness amid Catastrophe

Fragmented Reflections on Mennonite Work in Palestine-Israel

Alain Epp Weaver

How to witness to God's love amid catastrophe and a society's devastation? Contemporary (as in post-World War II) Mennonite work in Palestine-Israel began in the wake of what Palestinians came to call the *nakba*, or catastrophe, of 1948, in which the founding of the State of Israel went hand-in-hand with the expulsion of more than seven hundred thousand Palestinians—over two-thirds of the Palestinian population between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea at the time.[1] Subsequent Palestinian history can be narrated as an ongoing *nakba*, with continuing dispossession of Palestinians inside Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, both at gunpoint and by labyrinthine bureaucracies that seek to maintain the deceptive sheen of legality.

The catastrophe has intensified unimaginably since October 7, 2023, with Israel's unrelenting military assault on the Gaza Strip in response to attacks by Hamas militants from Gaza on Israeli communities and military bases.[2] I have

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1 Throughout these reflections, I will generally refer to Palestine-Israel, naming both the modern State of Israel established in 1948 and the occupied Palestinian territories of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. Reference to Palestine-Israel underscores how Palestinian and Israeli lives are intertwined with one another, how Israeli sovereign control extends from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, and how the State of Israel both includes a significant percentage of Palestinian Arab citizens and is the remembered homeland of Palestinian refugees. Reference to Palestine-Israel also points to a hoped-for future for the seven million Palestinians and seven million Israeli Jews in the land between the river and the sea, in which both people might live in equality, justice, and peace, be that in two neighboring states or in some type of binational configuration.

2 The Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, which included taking Israelis and others hostage inside Gaza, did not emerge within a vacuum but came after fifteen-plus years of a crippling economic siege on the Gaza Strip coupled with periodic bombardments, with

struggled to wrap my heart and mind around this bleak devastation, let alone articulate what a Mennonite witness for peace might look like within these realities. A peace in which Palestinians and Israelis alike might, in line with the vision granted to the prophet Micah, sit under vine and fig tree, with no one to make them afraid (Mi 4:4). The best I can muster are fragmented reflections on what witness to God's love looks like amid catastrophe.[3]

I. The Miraculous Movement of God's Spirit

"We are so tired. Believe me, we are so tired." Multiple friends in Gaza have texted me variations of this message this spring, expressing the soul-crushing exhaustion from nine months (as of this writing) of unrelenting Israeli attacks across the Gaza Strip. Exhaustion from the daily desperate search for clean water and food, with the specter of famine and even starvation never far away. Exhaustion from the life-upending disruption of needing to flee to temporary (and uncertain) shelter in the face of Israeli assaults (even in areas declared "safe" by the Israeli military), with painful calculations of what to carry and what to leave behind. Exhaustion from the inability to properly mourn the death of loved ones—and, in many cases, not even having bodies to bury, as they are either unrecovered under mounds of concrete and rebar or torn apart and rendered unrecognizable by Israeli bombs. Exhaustion from fruitless searching for medicines and medical care, with Gaza's hospitals on life support. Exhaustion from not being able to send children to school, with schools having been either destroyed or turned into crowded shelters. Exhaustion from the constant buzzing of quadcopter drones overhead. Exhaustion that cries out for a respite, for some moments, days, or weeks to begin to piece together one's life.

These friends were my gracious hosts when I lived with my family in the Gaza Strip for two years in the late 1990s while coordinating Mennonite Central Committee's (MCC's) humanitarian relief, development, and peace programs. They invited us to the beach, showed off Gaza's architectural jewels, introduced us to Gaza's spicy dishes, brought us with them to worship at Gaza's Catholic and Baptist churches, and generously welcomed us to their cinderblock homes in Gaza's densely populated refugee camps. Their lives were constrained by living in what Palestinian and Israeli human rights organizations would, over the years,

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tight controls on the movement of people and goods into and out of the Gaza Strip. Adding to the intensity of the current situation is Israel's accelerated land grabs and ethnic cleansing across the West Bank.

3 For two additional sets of fragmented reflections, see Alain Epp Weaver, "Hope Buried in Gaza?," *Macrina Magazine* (November 18, 2023), https://www.macrinamagazine.com/posts/hope-buried-in-gaza; and "The Church's Worship in Gaza," *Macrina Magazine* (March 15, 2024), https://www.macrinamagazine.com/posts/the-churchs-worship-in-gaza.

increasingly refer to as the world's largest open-air prison, as the Israeli military and economic siege on Gaza progressively tightened from the beginning of the Oslo peace process in the early 1990s onward. Yet despite these constraints, these friends were animated by possibility, driven by a commitment to support and mobilize their neighbors.

The Near East Council of Churches operated a vocational training center in Al-Qarara village in the southern Gaza Strip, where young men learned electrical engineering skills. Al-Najd Developmental Forum supported low-income families to start initiatives in Gaza city to improve family food security through breeding rabbits for sale and consumption. The Culture and Free Thought Association in Khan Younis operated centers in which children and youth developed skills and confidence as community leaders. In my last visit to Gaza in January 2023, my heart was buoyed by the strength, creativity, and determination of MCC's partners and the communities with which they worked, even as this hope was tempered by United Nations' warnings that conditions in the Gaza Strip—in a perpetual state of what Harvard political economist Sara Roy identified as Israeli-imposed de-development—were rapidly becoming unlivable.[4]

Since October 7, my friends working for these organizations have, like over 90 percent of Gazans, lost their homes, with most having been forced to flee multiple times for safety in the face of Israeli military attacks, some well over ten times. Yet despite having their own lives uprooted, these friends continue to mobilize their communities and to deliver humanitarian assistance in whatever ways they can. The courage and determination they and so many other Gazans show as they struggle not only to survive but also to care for neighbors and to nurture joy when it breaks forth stand for me as the miraculous movement of God's Spirit, even as the grim present and probable future within which they live tempers any temptation to romanticize or aestheticize this courage.

II. To Listen and to Learn

The seventy-five-year story of MCC's work in Palestine-Israel since 1949 is, in large measure, the story of the Palestinian and Israeli organizations MCC has accompanied as they have carried out humanitarian relief, development, and peacebuilding initiatives.[5] MCC's program from the 1950s into the mid-1980s certainly involved MCC organizing and implementing various initiatives, such

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4 Sara Roy, *The Gaza Strip: The Politics of De-development*, expanded 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2006).

5 For an examination of MCC's first fifty years of work with Palestinians and Israelis, see Sonia K. Weaver and Alain Epp Weaver, *Salt and Sign: Mennonite Central Committee in Palestine, 1949-1999* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1999). For a shorter overview of MCC's seventy-five years in Palestine-Israel, see Alain Epp Weaver, "*Nakba* Redux: Gaza, Catastrophe, and 75 Years of Mennonite Witness." *Anabaptist World* (January 9, 2024): 8-13.

MCC worker Geraldine Ebersole, left, and Palestinian refugee women in Jericho, West Bank, who received MCC newborn layettes in 1951. (MCC photo)

as distributing relief supplies to Palestinian refugees, establishing Christian schools in Hebron and then Beit Jala in the West Bank, setting up an income generation project for women to earn money by selling Palestinian needlework through MCC's nascent SELFHELP Crafts enterprise, and operating agricultural development programs that supported rural West Bank communities in seeking to protect their land from confiscation by Israeli authorities by bringing it into sustainable cultivation.[6]

By the mid-1980s, MCC's program in the West Bank had begun shifting from direct implementation to partnership with Palestinian churches and civil society organizations. This was a reflection of a broader trend toward local partnerships that began within MCC in the late 1970s, with MCC serving as a forerunner of what within the global humanitarian world in the 2010s would come to be called *localization*. In this missiological model, MCC sought to *accompany* churches and community-based organizations in realizing their visions, seconding staff and giving financial grants in support of their efforts, recognizing that successful and durable humanitarian relief, development, and peace initiatives depended on the knowledge, skills, and insights of local communities.[7]

During our first MCC orientation in 1992, before being sent to teach English at a Catholic school in the northern West Bank village of Zababdeh, my spouse, Sonia, and I received the strong message from MCC leaders that our main assignment was not to teach English but instead to drink tea and coffee with our neighbors, to join them in the daily rhythm of their lives, to be *present* with them. Implicit missiological messages from this orientation included the injunction that "you, Alain, are not at the center of God's mission. God has been at work in Zababdeh long before you arrived and will continue to move through Zababdeh's people long after you have gone. You are there to be present, to *listen* and *learn*."

However, the lure of imagining oneself at the heart of events was hard to resist. We arrived in Zababdeh when the *intifada* that had begun in 1987 was nearly five years old. Our colloquial Arabic classes had included words for "curfew" and "checkpoint." My body and spirit yearned to be part of the action. One evening

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6 While white Mennonites from Canada and the United States are the main voices featured in MCC's archival material, Palestinian Christians and Muslims were at the core of these initiatives, carrying out the bulk of the daily work in these relief, income-generation, educational, and agricultural development initiatives.

7 For a discussion of these global shifts, see Alain Epp Weaver, *Service and the Ministry of Reconciliation: A Missiological History of Mennonite Central Committee* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 2020); and Alain Epp Weaver and Emma Smith Cain, "'Outside Agencies Do Not Bring Development': Mennonite Central Committee and the Decades-Long Challenge of Decolonizing Aid," *Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy: The Journal of the Accord Network* 5, no. 1 (2023): 7–18, https://crdajournal.org/index.php/crda/article/view/569.

during our first month in Zababdeh, as we sat drinking tea with our landlord's family under their grapevines, I heard a vehicle passing by the family's property walls, with a loud voice issuing a message from a crackling loudspeaker. My body tensed with excitement, wondering if I was about to be swept into the dramatic realities of a people living under occupation. In my elementary Arabic I asked if the vehicle was a jeep from the Israeli army base a kilometer to the north of the village, and if we were being placed under curfew. My neighbors laughed heartily, explaining that a truck had just passed announcing the sale of watermelons for five shekels per kilogram.

While an ensuing decade of MCC work with Palestinians (in Zababdeh, then Gaza; Jerusalem; and Amman, Jordan) would involve plenty of encounters with the machinery and bureaucracy of Israel's military occupation,[8] this humorous incident early in my first MCC assignment made real for me the message that MCC leaders had sought to convey in orientation—namely, that God's mission in the world was not about me but about the movement of God's Spirit in the everyday lives of my neighbors, and that my job would be to listen and learn from the Palestinian communities in which I had been placed.[9]

III. Learning the Shape of Peace from Palestinian Christians

The late Palestinian-American literary critic Edward Said trenchantly analyzed the social and political forces that sought to deny Palestinians the "permission to narrate" their realities, to narrate their exile, to describe how Zionism and the founding of the State of Israel entailed their dispossession.[10] Insistence on listening to and learning from Palestinians disrupts efforts to silence them.

Mennonites have haltingly learned over time the vital importance of listening to and learning from the Palestinian churches about what witness to God's nonviolent way of love looks like under the reality of military occupation. Any account of Mennonite witness in Palestine-Israel must include the Palestinian Christians

8 These encounters usually occurred in banal, everyday ways, like waiting for hours on end at a checkpoint, though sometimes they included a heightened threat of deadly violence.

9 Organizations like Christian (now Community) Peacemaker Teams—which was set up with a mission of "getting in the way" of Israel's military occupation through nonviolent direct action—have also shifted over time to embracing a posture of "being with" communities bearing the brunt of occupation. See Alain Epp Weaver, "On Breaking Bread and Stones: A Review of the Literature of International Peace Teams in Palestine," *The Jerusalem Quarterly File* 22–23 (2005): 93–102; and "'Getting in the Way' or 'Being-With': Missiologies in Tension in the Work of Christian Peacemaker Teams," *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 19 (2011): 260–77.

10 Edward W. Said, "Permission to Narrate," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13, no. 3 (Spring 1984): 27–48.

from whom Mennonite workers have learned over the years about the embodied shape of the gospel of peace—from Naim Ateek to Cedar Duyabis, from Samia Khoury to Mitri Raheb, from Munther Isaac to Michel Sabbah.[11] In some cases, the Palestinian Christians from whom MCC learned were themselves MCC workers for some years—the lawyer and nonviolent activist, Jonathan Kuttab, and the founder of Bethlehem Bible College, Bishara Awad. Through support for organizations like Bethlehem Bible College and the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, and through learning tours that have highlighted voices from the Palestinian churches, MCC has aimed to amplify the witness of the Palestinian churches to the broader Christian *oikoumene*.

IV. Standing Against All Forms of Racism

Resistance to listening to and learning from the witness of the Palestinian church about their lived reality under Zionism is strong—and not only from churches shaped by diverse evangelical and fundamentalist forms of Christian Zionism. For example, in the early 2000s I attended a conference in Jerusalem at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute, operated by the University of Notre Dame, where the German priest and theologian Johann Baptist Metz spoke. Known for his writings about the "dangerous and liberating memory of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ" and his influence on various forms of liberation theology through his focus on the importance of the church's *praxis* for theology, he was asked by conference participants what the implication of that "dangerous memory of Jesus Christ" might be for Palestinian Christians and for a critique of Israel's military occupation.[12] Metz responded that he would remain silent, arguing that as a German Christian he had no right to speak about the State of Israel, given the legacies of German antisemitism and the Holocaust he had inherited.

Metz's stance is common within mainline Protestant and Catholic circles—namely, that grappling with and being accountable for Western Christian histories of antisemitism and anti-Jewish violence entails silence in the face of the violence perpetrated by the Israeli State and requires a tacit or full-throated

11 Among the many works of Palestinian theology that could be cited, see these recent studies: Mitri Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2023); Naim Ateek, *Call and Commitment: A Journey of Faith from Nakba to Palestinian Liberation Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2023); and Munther Isaac, *The Other Side of the Wall: A Palestinian Christian Narrative of Lament and Hope* (Lisle, IL: IVP, 2020). See also the groundbreaking Kairos Palestine document, endorsed by the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, *A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope, and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering* (2009), https://www.kairospalestine.ps/sites/default/files/English.pdf.

12 Metz's most significant work was *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1980).

affirmation of Zionism understood as a movement to establish Jewish dominance within some or all of Palestine-Israel.[13] Reckoning with the church's legacy of anti-Jewish theology and antisemitism is vital work, and the pull of Metz's position can feel strong.

Mennonites in Europe, Canada, and the United States are only starting to come to terms with histories of Mennonite antisemitism. MCC, meanwhile, has begun to grapple with its historical entanglements with National Socialism and its legacy before, during, and after the Second World War as it worked to resettle Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union. The question arises: What right do Mennonites have to critique how Zionism has been intertwined with Palestinian dispossession or to protest the violence of Israel's military occupation?[14] This question facing Mennonites is a variation of a question that churches in the West more generally have faced in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel.[15] Some Christians in the West have concluded that these

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13 Other forms of Zionism existed prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, such as the cultural Zionism of Ahad Ha'am or the Zionist binationalism promoted by the Brit Shalom circle. Yet the real-world Zionism that has been practiced is one of seeking to establish exclusive Jewish dominance within part or all of Palestine-Israel.

14 For examinations of Mennonite antisemitism and involvements with Nazism, see Benjamin W. Goossen, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2017); and Mark Janzen and John D. Thiesen, eds., *European Mennonites and the Holocaust* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021). For summaries of research by twelve historians into MCC's entanglements with National Socialism related to its resettlement of Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union, see the fall 2021 issue of MCC's quarterly publication *Intersections: MCC Theory and Practice* on "MCC and National Socialism."

15 One might wonder if MCC's entanglements with National Socialism and its legacy influenced MCC's decision to start working with Palestinian refugees. No peer-reviewed research has established a direct connection between the history of Mennonites and Nazism and MCC's work in the Middle East. MCC's archives are open to researchers seeking to investigate such potential connections. From my own broader research into MCC's history, I would identify multiple factors that influenced the start of MCC's Palestinian refugee work: The late 1940s and early 1950s were a time of rapid expansion for MCC globally, so it is unsurprising that MCC would respond to a high-profile refugee situation; MCC's decision to second Titus Lehman in 1949 to the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) in Gaza built on MCC's collaboration with AFSC in administering Civilian Public Service camps during WWII; and MCC leader Orie Miller—who had a pre-existing interest in West Asia having served in Syria and Armenia with Mennonite relief efforts after the Great War, and who also served as secretary for the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities (EMBMC)—understood the events of 1948 as profoundly significant. He pushed for both MCC and EMBMC to become involved, with MCC responding to the Palestinian refugee crisis and EMBMC sending mission workers to accompany Messianic Jewish communities in the new State of Israel.

legacies of antisemitism demand silence about or muted criticism of the catastrophes inflicted by the Israeli state on the Palestinian people. Others have concluded that complicity with injustice and oppression in the past demands renewed commitment to work for justice and peace in the present.

Mennonites—especially white Mennonites in the West—who advocate for Palestinian rights and against oppressive structures and ideologies that drive and justify ongoing Palestinian dispossession cannot do so from a position of imagined moral purity. Rather, such advocacy must be animated by a recognition of various forms of white Mennonite entanglement with legacies of antisemitism, racism, colonial expansion, and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. The purpose of this recognition is to spur an intersectional struggle for justice in the present, with commitment to combatting antisemitism forming an integral part of a commitment to stand against all forms of racism.[16]

V. Zochrot: Remembering the Nakba

On a beautiful morning in 2002, I drove westward down from Jerusalem, where I was living while serving as MCC representative, toward Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, a community established as an intentional exercise in Israeli Jewish-Palestinian Arab life together. My destination was the community's School for Peace, where I was scheduled to meet with one of the school's trainers, Eitan Bronstein. The drive took me past the ruins of 'Imwas, a Palestinian village associated with the biblical Emmaus, that was destroyed in 1967 after Israel had conquered and occupied the West Bank. These ruins had since been covered

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16 Advocates for a just, peaceful future for Palestinians and Israelis alike must also be soberly realistic about how accusations of antisemitism are weaponized to stigmatize and in some cases even outlaw advocacy for Palestinian rights, labeling nonviolent tactics such as boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS)—even divestment from companies profiting from investments in companies contributing to Israel's illegal military occupation—as antisemitic and dismissing as antisemitic attempts by scholars, human rights groups, and activists to analyze and name the nature of the catastrophe the Israeli state carries out against Palestinians (be that analysis in terms of settler-colonialism, apartheid, or genocide). The International Holocaust Remembrance Association (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism, for example, has been used by governments and other institutions in efforts to suppress advocacy for Palestinian rights and to stigmatize critiques of Zionism and Israeli state policies and practices against Palestinians (see https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antisemitism). For an alternative definition of antisemitism that does not treat critiques of Zionism and Israeli state policies and practices against Palestinians as inherently antisemitic, see the *Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism* (https://jerusalemdeclaration.org/). Mennonites advocating for a just peace for Israelis and Palestinians must both stand firmly against antisemitism and reject efforts to suppress advocacy against unjust Israeli state practices and to silence advocacy for Palestinian rights by labeling those efforts as antisemitic.

over by trees planted by the Jewish National Fund after the Israeli military had bulldozed the buildings in ʻImwas and the neighboring village of Yalu, the land now forming a get-away nature destination called Canada Park.

As Eitan and I sat down to talk, he shared about how his work at the School for Peace and the school's proximity to the ruins of ʻImwas and Yalu had convinced him that a genuine, durable peace between Israelis and Palestinians required that Israelis honestly confront the catastrophe of 1948. Specifically, that Israelis acknowledge Israel's role in the Palestinian refugee crisis and encourage Israeli-Palestinian discussions about what an Israeli recognition of the right of Palestinian refugees to return might look like in practice.

Together with friends, Eitan sought to establish an organization called *Zochrot*, a Hebrew word translated both as "remembering" and as "the ones [feminine] who remember," a name that captured the envisioned group's focus on public memory work as essential to peacebuilding, a type of memory work that challenged "masculine," nationalist forms of memorialization. Zochrot, Eitan explained, would stimulate discussion and debate within Israeli society about Palestinian refugees and their return by "remembering the *nakba* in Hebrew." By the time I left Neve Shalom, I had agreed that MCC would provide Zochrot with funding for its first public actions—return visits to the sites of destroyed Palestinian villages like ʻImwas, in which signs would be posted in Hebrew and Arabic to name what had been erased from the landscape.[17]

As optimism from the Oslo peace process began to curdle by the late 1990s and as the peace process gave way in the early 2000s to unilateral Israeli measures to fragment the occupied Palestinian territories (with the increasing enforced isolation of the Gaza Strip and the construction of walls, fences, checkpoints, Israeli-only road networks, and more), hope for a future of justice, peace, and equality for Palestinians and Israelis alike started to seem increasingly tenuous. What constantly rekindled my hope was participating in the return visits organized by Zochrot to the sites of destroyed Palestinian villages. These visits brought together Israeli Jews, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and sometimes Palestinians from the occupied West Bank or from exile in Europe, Australia, or elsewhere around the world.

As these groups gathered to remember the places and people who had been erased from the landscape and to post signs in Hebrew and Arabic to commemorate those places and people, I caught a glimpse of a possible future of reconciled life in the land. I came to understand these return visits as *liturgical actions*, with remembrance of the past through actions in the present pointing to and

17 For an account of Zochrot's founding and actions, see Eitan Bronstein Aparicio and Eléonore Merza Bronstein, *Nakba: The Struggle to Decolonize Israel* (London: Nomad, 2023). See also Noga Kadman, *Erased from Space and Consciousness: Israel and the Depopulated Villages of 1948* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015).

In November 2021, Sarah Nahar (then Thompson) (right), a participant in MCC's Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program, joined volunteers organized by Omar Haramy (left) of Sabeel, an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology center, to plant olive trees at Tent of Nations, the farm of the Nassar family, Palestinian Christians from the Bethlehem area whose land is threatened with confiscation by nearby Israeli settlements. (MCC photo/Ryan Rodrick Beiler)

tentatively embodying a coming future—and, more specifically, as *exilic vigils*, a waiting amid the devastation of exile wrought by settler-colonial nationalism for the inbreaking of alternative futures.[18]

VI. Together at Peace Under Vine and Fig Tree

On our first full day in Zababdeh in August 1992, a loud banging noise on our apartment door rousted us early in the morning. Opening the door, we found our landlord's oldest son on the other side offering us a tray of fresh, plump figs picked that morning from a glorious tree next to their home. From that moment, the prophet Micah's vision of a future in which people will live securely under vine and fig tree has stood for me as a vision of the coming future toward which all peacebuilding action and Christian witness in Palestine-Israel must point—a coming future of justice, equality, and peace for all in the land.

Tragically, the three decades-plus since the start of the Oslo peace process in 1993 have not witnessed movement toward such a future. Instead, accelerated Israeli military measures have resulted in land confiscations, home demolitions, expulsions of Palestinians from their land, and the building of walls, fences, checkpoints, roads, roadblocks, and illegal settlements to fragment the occupied Palestinian territories and thus to divide Palestinians from one another and to separate Palestinians further from Israelis. Just as the isolating Israeli siege on Gaza represented an extreme case of the ways that East Jerusalem and other West Bank cities and towns were being progressively isolated from one another, so the Israeli assault on Gaza is an extreme example of intensifying assaults by the Israeli military and Israeli settlers (increasingly indistinguishable from one another) across the West Bank.

As ministers within the current Israeli government call not only for the expulsion of Gazans but also the uprooting of West Bank communities and the repression of Palestinian citizens of Israel, the vision of a reconciled future of Palestinians and Israelis sitting at peace under vine and fig tree can seem like a delusional mirage. A one-state reality encompasses the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, a one-state reality of deep inequality and oppression built upon and driving Palestinian dispossession, a one-state reality

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18 I develop this analysis of Zochrot's return visits as *liturgical actions* and *exilic vigils* in the final chapter of my book *Mapping Exile and Return: Palestinian Dispossession and a Political Theology for a Shared Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014). For works of Jewish political theology that counter Zionism's "negation of exile" (*shelilat ha-galut*) and that articulate exilic (or, in Boyarin's case, diasporic) understandings of landedness in ways that are congruent with my analysis, see Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, *Exil et souveraineté: Judaïsme, sionisme et pensée binationale* (Paris: La fabrique, 2007); Shaul Magid, *The Necessity of Exile: Essays from a Distance* (New York: Ayin, 2023); and Daniel Boyarin, *The No-State Solution: A Jewish Manifesto* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023).

that systematically privileges the seven million Israeli Jews in Palestine-Israel while systematically disenfranchising the seven million Palestinians.[19]

Yet within this bleak reality, the prophet's vision of a transformed future continues to break forth and point toward the potential transformation of the one-state reality of oppression and dispossession into a landscape of shared life in equality and freedom. This vision shines through in the liturgy of churches across Palestine-Israel; in the return visits organized by Zochrot; in Israeli peace activists from groups like Ta'ayush, who accompany Palestinians in the south Hebron hills to protect them from Israeli soldier and settler assaults and to prevent the ethnic cleansing of their villages; and in the mobilization of Israeli Jews and Palestinian citizens of Israel through the Standing Together initiative to stand against Israeli settler attacks on humanitarian aid convoys to Gaza and on Palestinian communities in Jerusalem's Old City.

These actions can seem small, fragile, and tenuous, yet they embody hope that a transformed future is possible. At its best, Mennonite witness in Palestine-Israel has accompanied and encouraged such embodied witness and hope. May such efforts continue.

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19 For analyses of this one-state reality, see Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir, *One State Condition: Occupation and Democracy in Israel/Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Ian S. Lustick. *Paradigm Lost: From Two-State Solution to One-State Reality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); and Michael Barnett et al., eds., *The One State Reality: What Is Israel/Palestine?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023).

Ada, Ida, and Sadi

Decades of Work for Peace

David Lapp-Jost

As Mennonites reflect on many decades of engagement in Israel-Palestine in light of the current war in the region, their memories will likely include stories about the work of Ada and Ida Stoltzfus—Mennonite twin sisters from Pennsylvania who dedicated nearly thirty-eight years of their lives to running an orphanage/school in Hebron from the 1950s to the 1990s. Fewer know the story of one of their students, Sadi Othman, who became a lifelong friend of theirs—a peacemaker who worked through the US military to help soldiers and Iraqis understand each other and bring stability in a complex and violent context. Seen together, these stories paint a hopeful picture of fruitful work, despite decades of tragedies and difficult working conditions. We long for peace and justice in Israel-Palestine. As we currently face bleak and generally worsening conditions for people in the land, it is helpful to think multigenerationally and see how values and vision can be passed on and yield results that might never have been imagined.

North American Mennonites in Israel-Palestine

North American Mennonite engagement in the region today called Israel-Palestine began in 1919 and continued until 1921 as a part of a broader response to the turmoil in the Near East that accompanied the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.[1] Hundreds of years of relative stability dissolved in that period into political uncertainty and intervals of widespread violence that continues to this day in former Ottoman domains in the Caucuses, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt.[2] Through a partnership with a broader Christian aid soci-

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1 Guy F. Hershberger and Atlee Beechy, "Relief Work," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1956/1989, https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Relief_Work&oldid=177254.

2 A former MCCer in Iraq refers to MCC regional meetings—which in that time included workers from the Middle East, Balkans, and Ukraine—as "MCC-Former Ottoman Empire," an appropriate designation.

ety and with support from several Mennonite charities, Orie O. Miller—who would become an integral founder of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in the coming years—and other Mennonite aid organizers dedicated thirty-one workers to this endeavor.[3] The cost of the material aid and labor was $339,000—comparable to about $6 million in 2024 dollars—for projects in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine.[4] In scale, this was probably about a sixth as much investment as the funds dedicated to the far-better-known Mennonite efforts in Ukraine in the next few years through MCC—a very significant commitment.

During World War II, the Middle East was a minor area of work for MCC, but MCC maintained a presence in Egypt supporting Greek and Yugoslav refugees. MCC also maintained a presence in the region that would become Jordan, supporting Palestinian refugees.[5] From 1936 to 1939—quite independent of the timeline of war in Europe—Palestinians had launched an uprising against nearly two decades of British occupation, and many had been displaced as a joint force of British soldiers and Jewish militia killed, injured, jailed, or exiled as many as 10 percent of Palestinian males.[6]

The Shoah/Holocaust and the urgency of Jewish security needs in the wake of genocide in Christian Europe led, over several years, to further Jewish migration to Palestine and Jewish armed groups creating the state of Israel and expelling about 750,000 Palestinians. This was one of many and ongoing waves of ethnic cleansing of Palestinians since the 1930s. The newly created state of Israel left chaos in its wake as the entire country of Jordan, the future Palestinian enclave of Gaza, and Nazareth and significant parts of the Israeli Arab north became majority-refugee communities. The city of Hebron also became a severely afflicted community, with a huge intake of refugees from the rest of Israel-Palestine.

Ada and Ida Stoltzfus

Into this context came Ada and Ida Stoltzfus in 1952 on a mission of coordinating relief support from the US and listening and learning to identify how best to engage. Their work stretched longer and longer, becoming years and then decades. By 1953 their work took on institutional form—an orphanage and school, supported in its early years by MCC, where Ada and Ida dedicated the

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3 One of these workers, Menno Shellenberger (Kansas), died during his term abroad (Hershberger and Beechy, "Relief Work").

4 Hershberger and Beechy, "Relief Work."

5 Hershberger and Beechy, "Relief Work."

6 Rashid Khalidi, "The Palestinians and 1948: The Underlying Causes of Failure," in *The War for Palestine*, eds. Eugene Rogan and Avi Shlaim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 12–36.

bulk of their career.[7] Over the following three and a half decades, twelve hundred children lived with the Stoltzfus sisters, largely due to impoverished conditions and separated families.

Ada and Ida's life in the orphanage was complex. They worked in a fractured, traumatized, and traditional context, and it is doubtless no simple matter to assess their work. Certainly they were unique. Hebron is and was almost 100 percent Muslim with no Christian congregations, and within Palestinian Islam it is considered a bastion of conservatism. Ada and Ida and many others remarked that only as women were they able to do their work; men would have been considered too threatening and too likely to establish a truly competing religious community. The sisters balanced their own Christian perspective with the local regulatory requirement to have Muslim teachers instructing about Islam, and they always had to balance sharing their faith with the religious commitments and expectations of their host community.

Ada and Ida understood themselves as evangelicals, although this is not a prominent theme in their autobiography and accounts differ regarding the extent of their evangelicalism. Some who volunteered with them or came from the Hebron community highlight their openness and the good relationship they cultivated with conservative Muslims. Others remember their partnering with evangelism-focused, soul-winning US partners in receiving volunteers and partners with that orientation. Ada and Ida certainly required chapel attendance in which they taught, to some extent, a straightforward mid-twentieth-century Lancaster Mennonite theology that emphasized salvation through faith, evangelism, and strict day-to-day practices. Mennonite and other Christian volunteers and supporters helped sustain the school/orphanage after MCC and the school parted ways, and Palestinian Christians in the region had more influence at the school than they could have attained in Hebron otherwise.

Present-day community perception of the school seems to be positive, at least according to my interactions with a former student and the child of a former teacher. And one story from a former principal tells of a new imam coming to a mosque in the neighborhood. During Friday prayers one week, the imam said that parents should not send their children to a Christian school. But so many parents vouched for the school and spoke up about their good experiences that the next week the imam said it was ok to send children to the Christian school and that they are well-treated there. The street the school is on was officially renamed "Mennonite Street."

In a similar vein, a great many Arabs are not uncomfortable in openly Christian spaces, with a religion that explicitly tolerates fellow peoples of the book

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7 Alain Epp Weaver and Sonia Weaver, *Salt and Sign: Mennonite Central Committee in Palestine, 1949–1999* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1999). I am drawing on family discussions with and about Ada and Ida in this paper.

and with a long history of coexistence. Sometimes in highly religious cultures a religiously ambivalent attitude is more disconcerting than clear difference. To secular people in the West, evangelicalism can be a very uncomfortable tradition, but sometimes for Muslims in highly religious Muslim spaces, secular people are almost less comfortable conversation partners than Christians.

Through the decades, the Stoltzfus sisters offered a window into Palestine for many in their home community in the United States. They saw multiple waves of massive ethnic cleansing and shared what they saw with others while home in the US. And many who visited Israel-Palestine saw for themselves. In Hebron, Ada and Ida knew people displaced by early Zionists and the British-Jewish suppression of the 1936 to 1939 revolt. They also knew some of the roughly 750,000 people displaced in the Nakba and directly saw many more out of the 250,000 to 350,000 Palestinians displaced in 1967.[8] They knew generations of Palestinians in the city of Hebron—current population 200,000—that were continuously abused and occupied by a few hundred Jewish settlers who were part of a fanatical colony founded in 1967.

Hebron is still a city experiencing intense abuse at the hands of soldiers and settlers who occupy its core, block off many of its streets, continually harass its inhabitants, and have devastated its economy.[9] It is also a city with deep traumas for Muslims and Jews: An Arab pogrom against the Jewish community in 1928 and then Baruch Goldstein's Al Ibrahimi Mosque Massacre in 1994 each injured or killed over one hundred people. Hebron is a place where both the fierce violence and day-to-day banal cruelty of occupation and colonization are visible. Part of the legacy of the Stoltzfus sisters was the Mennonite world seeing earlier and more clearly what is far more obscure to most US Americans—that the creation and continuous expansion of Israeli settlement has significant and terrible consequences for the people of Palestine and the world's billions of Muslims and hundreds of millions of Arabs who bear witness.

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8 Dalia Karpel, "The Palestinians Who Didn't Flee During the Nakba," Haaretz, September 22, 2017, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2017-09-22/ty-article-magazine/.premium/the-palestinians-who-didnt-flee-during-the-nakba/0000017f-e0bc-d75c-a7ff-fcbdbc840000. See also Nathan Citino, Ana Martín Gil, and Kelsey P. Norman, "Generations of Palestinian Refugees Face Protracted Displacement and Dispossession," Migration Policy Institute, May 3, 2023, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/palestinian-refugees-dispossession.

9 For a detailed perspective of life in Hebron, see the recent film "Light," written and directed by Ahmad Abu Monshar and Community Peacemaker Teams Palestine, https://cpt.org/programs/palestine/light-documentary.

Sadi Othman

One person to come out of this context and do powerful work for good was a student of Ada and Ida's—Sadi Othman.[10] As a six-year-old, Sadi came to the orphanage along with his mother, who was hired as a worker caring for children when she could not take care of him and his siblings after his father died in an accident in Brazil, where the family had emigrated. Sadi lived with the Stoltzfus sisters for his entire childhood, and, with their recommendation and connection, he continued with his secondary education at the Beit Jala Mennonite school, now the Hope School. Later, again through Mennonite connections, Sadi found his way to Hesston College in Kansas, where he forged further lifelong Mennonite relationships.

After his studies, Sadi worked for a time in New York as a taxi driver; he was there on 9/11. In later interviews and conversations, Sadi expressed anger and deep shame that the perpetrators of this attack were Muslim like him. When the US invaded Iraq, Sadi thought the decision to attack was wrong, foolish, and reckless, but he enlisted as a translator with the US military. He would later say that he wanted to help Iraqis and American soldiers understand each other, to mitigate conflict.

Sadi's service as a translator brought him to Mosul, Iraq, in 2004, and one day when he came out of a restroom on the base, he ran into a middle-aged officer in jogging shorts. Standing six-foot-seven-inches tall, Sadi was quite noticeable, and the officer was struck by this very imposing Arab. He asked Sadi about his work and who he was. Sadi answered. Then the officer asked how Sadi thought the US was doing. Sadi responded honestly that the war was going poorly and that US Americans lacked cultural and linguistic comprehension and perspective. The officer said, "Well, my name is General Petraeus," and quickly invited Sadi to be his advisor.

Sadi is recognized by Iraqis and the US army and diplomatic services to have played an integral role in the US war effort, but from a perspective of negotiation, diplomacy, and peacebuilding. The military awarded him its highest honor for civilians—the Civilian Award for Humanitarian Service. Sadi fit naturally in the Iraqi tea tradition, visiting over tea with numerous stakeholders in Iraq's development and conflicts and talking long into the night. He was also a sensitive and

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10 This and following paragraphs are based on conversations with Sadi Othman. Othman has reviewed this paper for accuracy. See also Maranatha Prothro and Dave Osborne, "Communication for a Global Impact," Hesston College, December 5, 2014, https://www.hesston.edu/hesstoncollegetoday/article/communication-global-impact/; and David Lapp Jost, "Mennonite-Trained Pacifist Helped U.S. Army Defuse Conflict in the Middle East," *Mennonite Mission Network,* September 16, 2020, https://www.mennonitemission.net/resources/peace/4291/Mennonite-trained-pacifist-helped-U-S-Army-defuse-conflict-in-the-Middle-East.

thoughtful interpreter, mediating cultural differences while translating for top figures, including Iraq's prime minister and other national leaders, and for such American figures as President Obama, State Secretary Hillary Clinton, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, former Secretary of State Colin Powell, and former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Sadi was involved in numerous significant developments in US relationships in the region. He mediated after the US accidentally struck Turkish soldiers in the north. He played a vital role in a diplomatic-civil society movement called the "Sunni Awakening," in which Iraqi leaders in central and western Iraq gradually severed ties with many Al Qaeda elements connected to their communities. This movement corresponded with huge reductions in the number of suicide attacks and significant improvement in the security situation in central and western Iraq. Iraqi and US politicians honored Sadi specifically for his work in this communication with Sunni leaders.

In these matters, Sadi was serving American interests, but interests that also mostly corresponded with the security needs of Iraqis. Many Mennonites may struggle to see how serving those interests could be compatible with a commitment to peacemaking. Although a larger discussion about this topic is beyond the scope of this article, my hope is that the ambiguities in Sadi's story will not lead us to overlook the important contributions he made to helping Arab communities choose against worsening internal violence. As an Arab and severe critic of the invasion and occupation, Sadi was well-positioned to communicate from a position of concern for Iraqi people while working in ways that fit the US-American security agenda of pacifying Iraq.

Sadi Othman was awarded the highest civilian honor of the US military for this diplomatic and peace work and his contributions were significant, but the background scenario and work was morally fraught. Inevitably in his field he was involved in violent and questionable work. Many US commanders and soldiers were complicit in war crimes, and, indeed, Sadi is quoted in a negative light in many online articles that focus on US efforts to cover up or minimize accountability for committing torture. Many of Sadi's high-up colleagues were complicit in the invasion of Iraq, locally and globally unpopular occupations in Iraq or Afghanistan, and numerous other interventions and violent operations of US forces. No doubt Sadi's work reflected the interests and values of many Iraqis, and he has visited Iraq and many top Iraqi politicians since his years of service there. But he was also serving US interests.

During and after his work in Iraq, Sadi identified as a pacifist and identified with the Stoltzfus sisters. This author first learned about his story from an interview in a news magazine concerning the Iraq war.[11] The last question in the inter-

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11 I read this interview in a magazine in the Gift & Thrift Store in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and have been unable to locate it since.

view—the gist of which was "Sadi, how do you think of yourself?"—focused on how Sadi personally understood himself in view of having come from Palestine, lived in many different places, become a US American, and worked with different employers in various continents. He said, essentially, "I had two teachers who made such an impression on me growing up that I think of myself as Mennonite."

Sadi has repeated this sense of affinity with cultural Mennonitism in many spaces, which for him largely means a commitment to peacemaking and Mennonite relationships. This feeling of connection is very meaningful to him and continues to take shape in meetings and exchanges—relating with former teachers from his schooling in Palestine, connecting at Hesston College, and fundraising with Conestoga Mennonite Church (Morgantown, Pennsylvania) to support the school in Hebron.

Lessons from the Field

There is much we can learn about peace work from these stories. A first lesson could be to draw on the full wealth of one's community, navigating around apparent political and theological barriers to open to the gifts of all, including those with approaches that may differ from our own. Ada and Ida, for example, were very traditional Mennonites. They wore coverings their whole adult lives, were evangelical, and, by the standards and norms of today's church, were fairly coercive in their theological teaching, compelling student attendance in evangelistic chapels. They certainly did not have many years of background on Israel-Palestine or graduate education or the Arabic language, or a current-day sense of social justice issues. Nonetheless Ada and Ida clearly had much to offer, and their work bore a lot of fruit.

Still today we can look at various individuals, congregations, communities, and institutions and consider: What contributions can this community make to working for peace, justice, and the kingdom of God? Not everyone is equally well suited for all kinds of work, and, in fact, the different functions of the different parts of the body are written into our scripture (1 Cor 12). In peace and justice work, or looking at a region like Israel-Palestine, there are already-engaged, frequently politically progressive constituencies, but advocates for justice for Israel-Palestine ought to broaden the scope of people and projects in which we engage to draw on. We must value that people within and beyond Anabaptist communities, with a wide range of theological and political convictions can—like my great-aunts Ada and Ida, and Sadi Othman—learn from concrete experience of seeing the violence and injustice of the situation and respond in ways appropriate for them. Many of the dynamics of Israel-Palestine become clear to anyone who comes into the context with an open mind and recognizes the humanity of Palestinians. It is good to expose people with many different prior assumptions to the conflict and see what they see and observe how they respond.

Another lesson from the stories of the Stoltzfus sisters and Sadi Othman, as well as many other Christian and biblical stories, is that there can be a missional background thread holding together a story composed of many so-called missteps, or at least uncertain and contentious steps. Ada and Ida's professional path was complicated and bold, sometimes uncertain, and definitely unconventional in terms of career choice. And when MCC was no longer interested in supporting the school after a few years, the sisters navigated many resulting challenges. The process of separation from MCC after ten years with the institution, first in India and then in Palestine, was painful. Ada and Ida also embraced a degree of Christian evangelicalism that was a bridge and a novel direction for them the whole time in their ministry. After the end of their relationship with MCC, this bridge became an important connection to secure funding.

Sadi Othman's life path also included periods of uncertainty (taxi driving) and approaches that don't fit a progressive Mennonite path (going into the army). Nonetheless, I believe we see God at work along the way in his journey.

A final and hopeful lesson in this moment of despair in Israel-Palestine is this: We don't see the full fruit of our work during our lifetime. Ada and Ida died in the 1990s, long before Sadi did transformative peace work in Iraq, particularly with the Sunni Awakening. And Sadi was just one of many students at the orphanage/school in Hebron. Ada and Ida's work continues to resonate in the lives of their other students and generations after.

God's Love for All People

We need stories like Ada and Ida and Sadi's. This is a moment of horrific loss and trauma in Israel-Palestine; Palestinian peacemakers and the small but brave Israeli community of solidarity are marginalized. Tens of thousands of children and babies have been killed or maimed for life, condemned to live with brain damage or missing limbs, missing parents and siblings who love them.[12] We do not even know what revenge will come for these atrocities. We cannot conceive of the evil our politicians and global community have unleashed.

But there is also good news that we cannot yet envision or even perhaps imagine—the legacies of acts of love undertaken today that will resonate through the years. In the lives of Palestinian and Jewish people who have survived and thrived during and after attempted genocide, we see that goodness also carries on and takes new forms, the fruits of positive action passing on from person to person and community to community. In these stories we see glimpses of a deeper Good News—the ongoing story of God's love for all people, especially those suffering in places like Palestine and Israel.

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12 Rasha Khatib, Martin McKee, and Salim Yusif, "Counting the Dead in Gaza: Difficult but Essential," *The Lancet* 404, no. 10449 (July 20, 2024): 237–38.

Witnessing Palestine

Reflections of a Forty-Year Journey

Loren D. Lybarger

MCC West Bank, 1986–1989

We drove silently, speeding bumper-to-bumper up the New Jersey Turnpike, to New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport. At the security gate, I turned briefly to see my mother and father waiving. An hour later, I boarded my plane, a KLM 747. As the behemoth thrust itself into the clouds, I imagined myself free-falling through the sky. I was gone, cascading headlong, not daring to feel the pain of the separation or the fear of the unknown.

Twenty-four hours later I found myself in Amman. I tossed sleeplessly that first night in the Jordanian capital, rising bleary-eyed at dawn as the call to prayer roused the city's Muslims, reminding them that "prayer was better than sleep." A taxi ride with Harold Dueck, Mennonite Central Committee's (MCC's) West Bank director, lay ahead of me. Harold and I would cross the Allenby Bridge and then take another taxi westward past Jericho into the desiccated hills that ascended toward Jerusalem.

That journey occurred in August 1986. For the next three years, I would live in the West Bank Palestinian town of Beit Jala. Predominantly Christian, the village hugged the eastern side of a steep hill facing Bethlehem. The silver dome of its Greek Orthodox Church glinted in the morning sun. Hope Secondary School, my home and place of work during those years, sat at the top of the road that wound upward through the town. From my room's window, I could gaze over the western hills spilling down toward the plain and the Mediterranean Sea beyond. Just above the school, a wonderful restaurant called "Mt. Everest" offered plates of humus, freshly baked *khobz* (flat, pocketed bread), and tangy chopped salad. Israeli soldiers in jeeps would drive past or sometimes stop at the eatery on their

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way to the scientific observatory and security outpost perched at the top of the hill. The military vehicles, antennae, floodlights, and barbed wire of the hilltop settlement became a constant reminder of the Israeli presence in my adopted town.

I landed at Hope School having just graduated from college. The school, still known locally as *madrasat al-manunayt* ("The Mennonite School"), had been established decades earlier by MCC, which had eventually transferred control to a local group, the Arab Charitable Society. Recently, however, MCC had reversed course, renewing its support to help the school with nagging financial difficulties. My posting as a teacher had been part of the deal struck with the board.[1] I came to Hope School filled with an earnest, naïve idealism. I would teach English while also bearing witness to the cause of nonviolence "in the name of Christ," as the MCC slogan went. That idealism would soon be tested.

Within months of my arrival, the First Palestinian Intifada—or uprising—against the Israeli occupation began. The military closed the schools, trying to suppress the street demonstrations that youth were leading. Our students joined the protests, nonetheless. Some were shot or arrested while doing so. Months later, a soldier killed the eldest son of our school cook, firing on him at point-blank range. Jiriyis had been trying to cross an impromptu checkpoint on his way home from work.

Every day I sat with other Hope School teachers to listen to the minute-by-minutes updates on the BBC's Arabic Service. The protests were spreading and Israel's corresponding response intensifying. At one point, the military announced a new "breaking the bones" policy in which soldiers would fracture the arms of protesters caught in stone-throwing incidents. Soldiers also fired rubber bullets and live rounds. Deaths and injuries mounted. The daily litany of casualty figures stripped any pretension I might still have had to heroic service. What could I, a privileged outsider, possibly do or offer amid this unrelenting, engulfing violence?

Answers came eventually through the creativity and resilience of my neighbors. Community activists in Beit Sahour opened their homes to teach children

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1 I learned later that other expatriate non-governmental organizations had criticized MCC's decision. The reversal, they said, undermined basic development principles stressing local control of projects. MCC leaders had been fully aware of the potential consequences of financial reinvolvement for local autonomy. Their decision to increase support came after a sober realization that the school could not, at that point, survive entirely on its own. Requesting placement of a volunteer simply reflected the MCC principle of making human as well as financial investments in its projects. Even if it might have violated the prevailing orthodoxies of international development work, the opportunity I received to go to the West Bank would prove decisive for the rest of my life; as a scholar, I have written extensively about Palestinians and have taught my students about Palestinian historical experience. Arguably, in this sense of the impact on me, the decision to get reinvolved had positive consequences extending beyond the immediate financial needs of the school at the time.

who were unable to attend classes following the school closures. They invited me to provide English lessons as part of these efforts. During one session, I hurriedly exited the house I was in with my students as an Israeli patrol approached. The military, we had heard, would arrest teachers and students and even dynamite homes hosting underground lessons. Palestinians had always emphasized the necessity of education: The occupation could never confiscate your learning. But it could try to stop it.

We tried to keep our teaching activities going at Hope School. As the closure dragged on, we started delivering homework packets to our students in outlying communities. I would drive our Peugeot van with a teacher to the villages and refugee camps in which our students lived. The van, I remember, had yellow-colored Jerusalem license plates, which allowed us to cross through military checkpoints more easily than vehicles that featured blue plates indicating a West Bank registration. My presence in the driver's seat as a white foreigner also likely helped us avoid any extra scrutiny from soldiers manning the crossings.

After arriving in the villages or camps, we would give our students and their families the homework packets along with clothing, quilts, and cans of beef bearing MCC's logo. A week later we would return to pick up the completed work and distribute new assignments along with more food and other necessities. I'm not sure how much success we had in helping our students progress in their studies, but at least we maintained a supportive connection with them.

A new Palestinian human rights center linked to the Palestine Human Rights Campaign in the United States also launched in East Jerusalem during this time. Since I was no longer bound to a strict class schedule, I volunteered as a driver for the center's field-workers. I used our MCC cars, which also had yellow Jerusalem license plates. I traveled the length and breadth of the Occupied Territories with my Palestinian coworkers in these vehicles, documenting Israeli army abuses against Palestinian civilians in the camps and towns.

I left Beit Jala in 1989 with the Intifada still in full swing. I was headed to Egypt to study linguistics at the American University in Cairo. Two years later, degree in hand, I accepted a position directing the English Language program of the Amideast organization in the Israeli-occupied Gaza City. My task was to prepare Palestinian professionals for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the main hurdle to acceptance at US universities. The Intifada was imploding at this point following the suffocating twenty-four-hour lockdowns that the Israeli military imposed on the Occupied Territories during the Persian Gulf War (1990–91). Nightly curfews continued after my arrival. The prevention of movement allowed Israeli patrols to operate at will in the darkness. Tensions between the Islamist movement Hamas and the secular-nationalist Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) factions were also intensifying. Clashes, arrests, and killing continued without letup.

I left Gaza in 1993 just weeks before the announcement of the Oslo Memorandum of Understanding between Israel and the PLO. I had departed for Chicago, where my life would unfold in a very different direction. I nevertheless would remain deeply connected to the Palestinian issue, making it a focus of two books about the impact of religion on Palestinian identities in Palestine and in Chicago's Palestinian diaspora community. Today, as I write these words, I am at work on a third book exploring Palestinian experiences in Denmark and Sweden.

My leap into the void nearly forty years ago has led to a personal and professional journey with "the question of Palestine." The question has defied easy answers—at least for me. I went to the West Bank to serve the cause of peace "in the name of Christ." Four decades later, I have come to understand the terrible cost that the absence of peace exacts for Palestinians first but also for Israelis. I have also witnessed, especially now amid the horror of the war in Gaza, the courage and sacrifice of individuals, Palestinians and Israelis, Arabs and Jews, and the many others allied with them who refuse to accept anything less than a peace worthy of its name.

Memories from the West Bank and Gaza Strip

I will end this reflection with three brief memories from my experience of living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Two poems that I wrote during that time accompany these stories. The vignettes and poetry illuminate complex, intimate moments hard to capture through exposition or analysis.

The first story, which I have titled "Eggs," recalls an event that opened my eyes to the subtleties contouring Palestinian-Israeli interactions. The question of who is a Jew and who an Arab resists simplistic resolution, at least in this story.

1. Eggs

Eggs again. Two eggs, fried in olive oil, served on scratched glass plates with warm flat bread and a sweet paste made from grapes harvested at the end of summer. Every morning and every evening, eggs, our own eggs.

The Intifada gave us the eggs. The military's indefinite, prolonged closing of the schools threw us into financial crisis. To keep the lights on and salaries paid, we decided to build two chicken barns so we could sell eggs in the local markets. Building the barns had been the easy part; my teaching colleagues had construction skills. Finding the hens proved almost impossible; the military required dozens of permits they really did not want to give us. We tried to get them anyway. After a long, frustrating afternoon of traveling between government offices in Tel Aviv, we finally gave up. We knew what we were facing if we kept at it: endless rounds of application filing, fee paying, being told we had the wrong applications, needing to pay more and other fees, and pleading before military officers who

were never at their desks or wanted things we could never give them—information, cooperation, collaboration. Why even try?

Namir, my colleague who had taken the lead on this project, suggested another route—the black market. After some discussion, everyone agreed. So, one clear morning, Namir and I climbed into the school's dented, coughing vintage 1960s Volkswagen microbus. The car had an impish spirit. Its gears required coaxing and just plain luck to make them go. But I had long ago learned what to do, and soon we were on our way. Namir—a math teacher, handyman extraordinaire, and possessor of a name that means "leopard"—held a map and set of directions in his lap, guiding me through the meandering back roads of the West Bank hills. We were headed west across the Green Line—the invisible 1948 armistice border separating Israel from the territories it would occupy two decades later—toward a *moshav*, a type of Israeli co-op farm that doubled as a settlement outpost.

We pulled into the farm just before noon. A neatly paved road led past long barns. A sharp, acrid scent cut into our nostrils. The din from the caged birds muffled the backfire as I parked our van.

We got out of the car and walked past the barns toward a low office. The door appeared half open. Namir called out in his limited Hebrew, "Shalom!"

"Shalom," came the response from inside.

We stepped in. Seated around a low table in front of a desk were three stocky men—like Namir, olive skinned and mustached. Quickly evaluating the situation, Namir switched to Arabic—*Sabah al-khayr, kif halkum?* "Good morning! How are you all?"

The reply came immediately and fluently—*Al-hamdu lillah bi khayr, ahlan wa sahlan!* "We're fine and well, please come in!"

Namir and I took seats in front of the small table. Someone poured us tiny cups of sweet, thick coffee.

Namir got to the point. "We need eggs," he said.

"Where are your permits?" they asked.

"We don't have permits," Namir said.

A pause. We sipped our coffee. I drank carefully. Once at a cafe, soon after I had arrived in the West Bank, I swilled too quickly and ended up with a mouthful of grounds.

One of the men replied, "You know we need the papers."

Namir remained silent.

The man continued, "Maybe we can do something for you."

The real business now began. The man named a price, Namir balked. A new price was named, less than the first. Namir balked again. On it went for ten minutes between renewed rounds of the sweet, thick coffee. I could see from the corner of my eyes that we would soon be heading into a round of sweet tea. This was going to take a while.

Finally, the man nodded and Namir smiled.

A new tray of glasses. Tea this time, amber and sweet with mint leaves floating on the surface. The conversation turned to other topics. Namir had figured out that these Jewish men were from Yemen or Morocco or maybe Iraq. He was curious, so he asked: *Min al-maghrib?* "From Morocco (literally, "From the west")?"

Ayuwa [Yes], *min al-maghrib,* came the reply.

Namir continued asking questions. He wanted to know how they came here, what Morocco had been like, what they thought of Israel.

The last question triggered a bitter torrent: "Those Ashkenazim [Jews from Europe], they control everything! We can barely keep this business going! They've taken everything from us."

Namir told them that if they thought *they* had it bad, they should come visit him in the West Bank. Everyone laughed. I wondered about the laughter, though. Was the thought of coming to visit, of crossing the Green Line, of being a guest among the occupied somehow obscene, ridiculously out of the question? Or was the laughter a momentary recognition of a different obscenity, the one that insisted on a categorical distinction between Jews and Arabs, a difference that in this moment seemed to have evaporated amid shared Arabic, common feelings of marginalization, and glasses of amber mint tea?

The deal sealed, we stood up, shook hands with our hosts, and got back into the dust-covered microbus. The hens arrived a week later.

2. Rafah Salad

When I taught English in Gaza, I became friends with the field-workers in the offices of the human rights center across the hall from my classrooms. Khalil, about whom I wrote the poem that appears below, was one of these field-workers. He lived in the Rafah refugee camp on the border between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. Israeli soldiers constantly patrolled this camp, which had served as a center of Palestinian resistance during the First Intifada.

The poem recounts a moment in the kitchen of my apartment in Gaza. Khalil and two other friends were staying with me during one of the many curfews the Israelis had imposed on the city. Khalil offered to make lunch for us, and as he did so he told us about his brother who had recently been killed in a clash with soldiers. I call the poem "Rafah Salad."

"Rafah Salad"

Khalil slit the chest
of a plump tomato breast,
slicing onion,
squirting lemon.
I winced.
Recalling the cinderblock

he heaved
at a passing jeep,
Smashing heads of garlic now,
beneath the flat of the blade,
"They seized him," he said.
"But then,
Majnun![2] My brother spit in their eye,
So, they shot him spread eagle in the dust."

3. Imm Jiriyis

One of my duties as a volunteer in Beit Jala was to drive our school cooks—both middle-aged mothers—to and from their homes every morning and evening. One of these women—Imm Jiriyis ("Mother of Jiriyis")—would always make the sign of the cross as we passed the Greek Orthodox church dedicated to St. Nicholas.[3] In the evenings when I dropped her off at her home, she invariably invited me to join her and her family for a cup of tea. Sometimes I would accept the offer. During these impromptu visits, I came to know Jiriyis, her eldest son.

Jiriyis was a leader in the local Communist Party faction. The party had served historically as one of the main avenues for Christians to participate in Palestinian nationalist politics. The Communists had long advocated the formation of two states—one Israeli, the other Palestinian. During the First Palestinian Intifada, or uprising, which lasted from December 1987 until November 1993, an Israeli soldier, under unclear circumstances, shot and killed Jiriyis at one of the many checkpoints erected to inhibit Palestinian movement. From that moment, Imm Jiriyis, shattered by grief, wore the traditional black of mourning. In the weeks that followed, she descended into a valley of sorrow. The next poem captures a moment in which I passed by her kitchen door at the school and noticed her sitting at a low table in a pool of winter sunlight. She was reading her Bible.

"Imm Jiriyis"

Morning light lingers
in the creases of your soft wrinkled face.
Its rays thread
between the window's metal bars,

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2 The Arabic term *majnun* means "insane" or "possessed." It derives from a root that also generates the word for the mysterious trickster beings mentioned in the Qur'an (the *jinn*) who tempt and deceive but also sometimes help mortals. The same root produces the term for paradise (*janna*).

3 Traditionally, Arab parents receive this honorific after the birth of their firstborn child. A mother will be called "Imm . . .," or "Mother of . . . ." A father will become known as "Abu . . .," or "Father of . . . ."

twining with your wintry hair.

Illuminated on a creaking kitchen chair,
you sit reading a matins meditation,
elbows wedged into the grain
of a short-legged table,
brow bending into hands cribbing
your countenance of concentration.

Between the fingers your lips whisper
inaudible words into the silence
of a stilled life:
"Even though I walk
through the Valley
of the Shadow of Death."

"May God give you the strength."
My greeting intrudes upon your solitude.
Raising your face from your fingers,
You regard me, smiling gently,
inviting me,
into the light,
into your mourning.

"Is This Your First War?"

On-the-Ground Learnings from Israel/Palestine

Dorothy Jean Weaver

> It's risky business, embarking on a cross-cultural venture, leaving community and comfort behind, and spending a year in someone else's world. It's a course without a syllabus or even a designated professor. You can never guess who your teachers will be or where they will appear. You never know in advance what the lessons will be or how they will affect you.[1]

It's especially risky business setting off for a cross-cultural learning venture in Israel/Palestine, a land of enormous conflict and violence over the past century and onward to the present moment. I'm not at all sure I was prepared for what I would encounter on my first journey to the Middle East back in 1995–96.

What I knew was that I was a New Testament professor, that I had been teaching New Testament at Eastern Mennonite Seminary (Harrisonburg, Virginia) since 1984, and that I had never seen the places associated with all those stories I taught about in the classroom. It was my first full sabbatical, and I knew exactly what I needed to do with it. I needed to travel to Israel/Palestine to see all those biblical sites that were merely words on the pages and pictures in the books. I even knew where I needed to take up residence for this venture—Tantur Ecumenical Institute for Theological Studies in Jerusalem. I had known about this place ever since my own seminary days in the mid-70s, when one or another of my own seminary professors had gone off to Tantur for study leaves.

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This essay is based on an oral presentation to the Sabeel DC Metro's Advent Seminar, December 1, 2012, and was revised for publication September 4, 2024.

1 Dorothy Jean Weaver, "Beyond the Comfort Zone: Unsettling Revelations from a Cross-Cultural Education," *The Seminarian: Newsletter of Eastern Mennonite Seminary* 27, no. 2 (April 1997): 1.

I also knew I would be doing some writing while I was there—an essay on "Mission and Peace in the Gospel of Matthew."[2] What I didn't know was what else I would be doing and learning while I was at Tantur, and even before I arrived, for that matter.

I had originally intended to head off to Tantur in the spring of 1991 on a single-semester sabbatical. But those plans had been scuttled, very dramatically, in fact, by the buildup toward the first Gulf War; in place of my Middle East plans, I had gone to Cambridge, England. That should have been a wake-up call for me, especially as I sat in Cambridge and listened to the news with horror, night after night. I even read a poignant letter from friends of mine then serving under Mennonite Mission Network in Nazareth, Israel, about the challenges of sealing off rooms at the Nazareth Hospital EMMS against the possibility of chemical warfare. And I felt deep pangs of survivor's guilt because I was sitting, safely and sweetly, in Cambridge, England, rather than in Israel/Palestine in a hermetically sealed room and wearing a gas mask.

It was months before I had the courage and the heart to write to my friends. What could I have said? "Greetings, Bob and Nancy! Here I am, safe and secure in Cambridge, England. Let me tell you how much I am enjoying myself here." No. I couldn't send that letter. So I worked full speed ahead on an essay about Matthew 5:38–42, Jesus's words about "not resisting the one who is evil."[3] This was, I told myself, my own and my best response to the hot war going on in the Middle East.

Well, that was 1991. And I could and should have taken my cues from that event alone.

"Middle East Politics 101"

But this was now 1995–96. And I had not yet encountered the Middle East face to face. So I set out innocently enough, still imagining that my own self-established learning goals were firmly in place. I'm guessing I also imagined I could come home to my real world at the end of this academic year having had a nice sabbatical. I had no idea that this sabbatical was about to capture my heart, reshape my personal perspectives, transform my sense of calling, and bring deep changes into my real world for as far as the eye could see into the future.

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2 Dorothy Jean Weaver, "As Sheep in the Midst of Wolves: Mission and Peace in the Gospel of Matthew," in *Beautiful Upon the Mountains: Biblical Essays on Mission, Peace, and the Reign of God*, eds. Mary H. Schertz and Ivan Friesen (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies; and Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2003), 123–43.

3 Dorothy Jean Weaver, "Transforming Nonresistance: From Lex Talionis to 'Do Not Resist the Evil One,'" in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 32–71.

The lessons started early. One of the first came during the fall semester of 1995 while I was teaching a New Testament course at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, Lebanon. I had to pay for my sabbatical at Tantur somehow, and how better than to teach for a semester at a Presbyterian seminary in Beirut, where I would receive room and board for my efforts? But here I also gained major perspectives on the world I was about to enter and learned lessons I had no idea were there to be learned.

> Take the magic marker lesson, for example. Thursday, October 26, 10 am, another ordinary school day at the Near East School of Theology. Typically at this time I headed down the stairs from my efficiency apartment to the faculty-staff lounge on first floor for coffee and casual conversation with my colleagues. Others were ahead of me at the [coffee] table, so while waiting I turned to look at a wall map of the Middle East, one that I had seen many times before without paying much attention.
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> Then I saw it, for the very first time: The black magic marker line, dead center in the map. It had always been there, no doubt, but I had never noticed it. Now, this morning, it practically jumped off the page at me. There was no questioning the meaning of the line. The Mediterranean Sea was to the west, Lebanon to the north, Jordan to the east, and Egypt to the south. I knew what name, and what nation, it obliterated. The sudden awareness almost took my breath away; the irony jolted me.
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> At this time I was making travel plans for my upcoming journey to the Tantur Ecumenical [Institute] just outside Jerusalem, not many miles down the road from Beirut. It would be complicated to get there. I already knew that I would have to leave Lebanon "by another way" [cf. Mt 2:12]—Syria, Jordan, or Cyprus—to end up at Tantur. The country across the border was Lebanon's next-door neighbor, but one simply couldn't get [there] from [here].
>
> The bombshell exploded in my mind. And then there was space at the [coffee] table. I got some coffee and sat down to visit with my colleagues, externally composed but internally shaken. There had been no books to read, no papers to write, no tests to take, but I had just received a powerful education in Middle East realities, a lesson indelibly etched into my consciousness with the ink of a black magic marker.[4]

Had I gotten credit for it, the name of this course would have been "Middle East Politics 101." This was a major geopolitical lesson about the State of Israel and its neighbors and their relations (or not) with each other.

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4 Weaver, "Beyond the Comfort Zone," 1.

"Israeli Occupation 101"

Then in January 1996, as I arrived in Jerusalem, I found myself enrolling, up close and very personal, in a related course—"Israeli Occupation 101." And this was the course that took me by storm and set my world on end for the coming months and well beyond.

The setting for my daily lessons in this new course was, above all, Tantur Ecumenical Institute. And the location and the immediate circumstances of Tantur made the site itself into a profound learning experience. Located on a hilltop on the very southern edge of Jerusalem and just across the valley from Bethlehem, Tantur was, at that time, also directly up the hill from the Bethlehem checkpoint. This was the site where Israeli soldiers monitored the entrance to Jerusalem and allowed admission to Palestinians coming from Bethlehem, if they had valid permits. Countless Palestinians, however, did not have such permits.

And here was where Tantur came into play. The institute had a back gate that opened onto the West Bank, no more than a hundred yards from the Bethlehem checkpoint, and a front gate that opened on the Jerusalem side, well past the Bethlehem checkpoint. And now the picture becomes clear. In the winter/spring of 1996, there were, no doubt, hundreds of Palestinians from Bethlehem and farther south who streamed through the back gate of Tantur day by day, crossed the Tantur property, and headed out the front gate on their way to Jerusalem to find work, to get to the doctor, to sell their produce. That is, they streamed through the back gate unless the Israeli soldiers from the checkpoint were there patrolling, which they often were. And this was the daily drama that caught my eye and grabbed my attention irretrievably from the very beginning.

And here is where I received an early lesson on curfew. One day I learned that the Israeli military had started to close off the back lane leading to the back gate of Tantur. So the next morning I headed out to see for myself. Things were very tense at this time, following a spate of suicide bombings. But I was none the wiser. The story I sent home to my family and friends unfolds in this way:

> Well, I left the gate and headed out the lane to where I could see the mound of dirt and rocks blocking the road. When I got there, I looked down toward Bethlehem, and there I saw a white army van with several soldiers standing by it. And just as I noticed them, they also noticed me. They started yelling at me, in Hebrew, of course, which I didn't understand. So I turned around and started walking back where I came from, very slowly and deliberately. From the introductory manual to Tantur I had picked up the wisdom that if one ever encounters the beginnings of an incident of any kind one should *walk* away from the scene, *never run*! So I *walked* away. But this clearly did not satisfy the three (very young!) soldiers (they couldn't have been more than twenty years old) who were out on their morning's shift, protecting Israel from suicide bombers! They came running down the lane to the mound at the fork in the road and continued their yelling.

By this time, I knew I was in trouble and realized I would have to talk to them. So I turned around and faced them, pointed back up the hill to Tantur, and repeated several times, "I live there."

One of them could speak English. "What are you doing out here?"

"I'm just out on a walk."

"Don't you know there is a curfew on? You're not supposed to be walking here!"

"Until what hour?"

"There's a *curfew* on!"

"Until what hour?" (I obviously knew nothing about 24-hour-a-day military curfews.)

"Until the army decides it doesn't need it anymore and they tell you so on the radio."

"Oh, I didn't know that there was a curfew on."

"Are you Jewish?"

"No, I'm Christian."

"Where's your passport?"

"I don't have it with me. It's up there" [pointing up toward Tantur]. (This was my most glaring bit of folly that morning, to have left the gate and the grounds without my passport or my ID on me.)

"Well, you can't walk out here. There's a curfew on."

"I guess I didn't know that."

All the while this dialogue was going on, I was understandably quite concerned. I had no idea what they would do. I didn't know whether they might proceed to accompany me back to Tantur and come right into the building to make me get my passport. But worse than that was the fear that they might in their skittish, danger-zone mentality think to arrest me and to take me off someplace (minus my papers), thus creating a big problem for Tantur and a huge embarrassment for me.

It could well be that the three young men who were facing me were just as frightened as I was. They seemed very tense and very focused on their task. But at some almost imperceptible moment in the midst of our dialogue I sensed the soldiers beginning to relax as they figured out that while I might well have been stupid, I was equally harmless. So eventually they went their way and allowed me to go mine.

I headed back the lane and in the gate and went on in for breakfast, where I proceeded to tell my story. Issa at the front desk said to me, "You should have

> known better! You have been in Beirut!" I assured him that the Beirut I had experienced in past months was nothing at all like this![5]

That was one of the first of countless lessons in my ongoing course on "Israeli Occupation 101." The lessons happened on any day, at any place, and under any kind of circumstance. I recorded them in my letters and emails to friends and family. I prayed them into my prayer journal. Later I gathered them into story collections for public presentation in North America. And in 2003, on another sabbatical at Tantur, I wrote an essay entitled "Of Fear and Fear," which pulled together prominent threads from my learnings:

> I've been wanting to write this essay for a long time. It's the essay that begs to be written. It is, in fact, the subtext underneath virtually everything happening on the surface here in this land. It is the question of fear and fear. It doesn't take much time on the ground here as an outsider to observe a curious reciprocity of fear that profoundly shapes the lives of the Palestinians and the Israelis, each in their own communities.
>
> To start with the people "on the bottom" might be appropriate. Clearly the Palestinians are afraid of the Israelis, or, at the very least, of the military face of the State of Israel, the face that Palestinians encounter day by day at checkpoints, on any and every street of their towns, in the drivers' seats of house-and-olive-grove-eating bulldozers, in the skies over their cities in helicopter gunships and F-16s, and, most fearsome of all perhaps, in midnight raids into private homes, where belongings are trashed, people are terrorized, and, on occasion, wanted persons are summarily executed in front of their own families.
>
> This last atrocity actually happened here in Bethlehem not too many weeks ago. And just last week a beautiful young 10-year-old girl from Bethlehem was killed by accident when her family's car got caught in the way of an undercover Israeli police operation against some (evidently wanted) men in a car nearby. Clearly there are cogent reasons for Palestinians to fear the Israeli military and its weapons of destruction (whether mass, medium, or any other size). And the fear that they do have is entirely understandable.
>
> But . . . and this is why this essay begs to be written, the fear of the Palestinians is clearly matched, and perhaps even overtaken, by the fear of the Israelis. Strange as it may seem, the Israeli military—in spite of all the heavy weapons and all the overwhelming military power on their side—are virtually overcome with fear of the civilian population, whose personal lives they are busy harassing, whose houses they are busy destroying, whose lands they are busy confiscating, and whose right to justice they are busy denying.

5 Dorothy Jean Weaver, "Stories from the Back Gate: Crisis and Conversion on the Road to Bethlehem," unpublished paper (revised), 1996.

As I have noted before, the standard response I receive at the checkpoint if they don't want to let me into Bethlehem on a given day is that "it's very dangerous down there!" This is not a bluff on their part. *They actually believe this.* I have heard this statement too many times by too many different Israeli soldiers both here and elsewhere to imagine for an instant that they don't actually believe it. And for them it might actually be true. In the most perverse sort of human logic, *these Israeli soldiers with their machine guns and tanks and bulldozers are, in fact, turning their own worst fears into self-fulfilling prophecies by making themselves into the objects of Palestinian hatred.*

So for those of us who look on from the outside there is indeed a curious reciprocity of fear that shapes both communities in profoundly negative fashion. On the one side, this fear is palpable in the anxious loitering of Palestinians on the Tantur grounds on days when the soldiers are at the front gate in the morning or the back gate in the afternoon. It is audible in the anxious questions ("Soldiers?") directed at me as I walk the back lane or pass Palestinians on the Tantur grounds. And it is visible in the instinctive reactions of those faced with the fearsome prospect of encountering soldiers.

One evening Sami at the front desk asked me to accompany a young Palestinian couple down to the back gate because the soldiers were there. So we went out together. And when we got to the path leading down to the back gate, there was a soldier inside the property. Instinctively, the young woman drew back physically, obviously very frightened, and was ready to turn around and head back to the building. But her husband encouraged her to go on; and I did as well. The soldier had already seen us, in all events, so nothing could have been resolved by turning back at that point. And, in fact, we could not have turned back at that moment even if we had wanted to, since we could literally have been held at gunpoint by the soldier who had seen us. But it was the young woman's instinctive physical response that told me everything I needed to know. *Here was fear of the first order, perhaps even terror.*[6]

On the other side, the opposite fear manifests itself in equally vivid fashion. One day I had gone out to catch a bit of sun just after lunch and discovered that a group of Tantur staff was heading down to the back gate on their way home to Bethlehem. Just above the back path they had learned that soldiers were out in the back lane. But they decided to go ahead anyway. Tantur staff are supposed to be let through. But since I knew that soldiers were out back, I decided to go with them through the gate and watch to see that they were ok.

So we went on out, they in front and I in the rear. The soldiers were indeed out there, only well down the back lane. And as I stood on the mound and watched, I witnessed a little ritual, not uncommon at checkpoints, that man-

6 In the end, the couple were allowed to leave and head on back into Bethlehem while I stood and watched until they turned the corner, to make sure they were safe.

> ifested the genuine fear of these Israeli soldiers out on an ordinary everyday patrol in the West Bank. As the Tantur staff approached, they were instructed to stop at a significant distance from the soldiers. And then, one by one, each of the men was forced to lift his shirt and turn around, to demonstrate to the soldiers that he was not wearing an explosives belt. Only then did one of the soldiers approach the Palestinians, look at their papers, and allow them to pass. *Here was also fear—palpable, tangible, visible fear.*
>
> And so life proceeds in the dysfunctional world of Israel/Palestine, where the Occupied fear the Occupiers and the Occupiers fear the Occupied.[7]

"Intifida 101"

Then there was "Intifida 101," the major and terrifying course in which I was forced to enroll shortly after arriving in Bethlehem in the fall of 2000 to teach a "Life of Jesus" course to Palestinian tour-guiding students. I had been on the ground in Bethlehem not quite two full weeks when a massive and violent confrontation erupted on the Haram al Sharif (the Temple Mount area) between Israeli soldiers brought there by Ariel Sharon in a massive show of force and Palestinian men gathered for prayers at the Al Aqsa Mosque. This deadly confrontation lit the fuse that then precipitated the Second (aka "Al Aqsa") Intifada. In the beginning, however, I had no idea how to classify the violence. It was a conversation with Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb that put the word "intifada" into my head. And it was an incident that happened before class one day that brought the word "war" into focus for me. My e-mail essay reads as follows:

> Friday, October 20, 2000, Bethlehem. The incident was a simple one, and very small. But it struck me in a profound way. And I know that it will stay with me. It happened one day in the moments just before class started. I was at the front of the room, and people were visiting with each other before I called the class to order. And there it was, out of the blue, from Sahar, one of the women in the class, who was sitting right up front near me: "Is this your first war?"
>
> Well! What a question! And what a world in which such a question even needed to be asked! I assured Sahar that if this was indeed a war, it was my first. Her response? "Congratulations!"
>
> Hm . . . . Congratulations for what? Because I had thus far in my fifty years of sheltered existence completely bypassed all the ugly, brutal, horrific wars that have turned the world into a cosmic killing field? Because, to the contrary, I was now gaining a significant new life experience to add to all those I had lived up to this present moment? Or, perhaps, because I had now joined the

7 Dorothy Jean Weaver, "Of Fear and Fear," prepublication version (revised) of a subsequently abbreviated essay published in the *Daily News-Record*, Harrisonburg, VA, July 31, 2003.

> ranks of the initiated, the survivors who know what war is all about and are still around to tell the story? Pick your own answer, or add another one to the list. I didn't ask Sahar what she meant. But I do know that Sahar's question and her own response set me to thinking about life in a very new way. I won't soon, or ever, forget her words.[8]

At no time during that fall was I ever, to my awareness, in serious danger. Downtown Bethlehem, where I lived and worked, was neither the scene of gun battles nor the recipient of Israeli shelling. But what I did not experience personally I could nevertheless hear very well and at close range. I spent many evenings listening with horror to gun battles at Rachel's Tomb or between Israeli soldiers in Gilo and Palestinian gunmen in Beit Jala. A pair of journal entries from Wednesday evening, October 25, reflect my personal distress:

> I'm indoors and warm and cozy this evening and enjoying the deep silence of the quiet house and the absence of artillery fire. I simply can't put into words how profoundly beautiful and nurturing *silence* is. I don't know that I've ever before heard the beauty of silence as I have in this last day after the terrifying experiences earlier this week.
>
> O God, no! No! No! There was just a big boom of some kind. What could it have been? Please, God, no more Israeli bombs and artillery! Not now, just when the silence is beginning to heal the shock and trauma of past days! O Lord, please let this be a quiet night! Please, Lord![9]

Late that fall, Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb invited me to write an Advent meditation for the online newsletter of the International Center of Bethlehem (now the Diyar Consortium). I knew almost immediately exactly what I had to write. And it was this tiny "Advent Meditation on Matthew 2:13–23" that then gave me ongoing courage as I lived through the rest of that fall in the midst of "[my] first war":

> It was not an especially pretty world, the world into which Jesus was born. The Palestine of Jesus's day was a world of grinding poverty for the masses, hard labor for a daily pittance, wealthy tax collectors who made their fortunes by extorting money from the impoverished, and brutal military occupiers whose preferred method of crowd control was crucifixion for all those who dared to rise up and resist the occupation. Nor was the town of Jesus's birth an especially peaceful place, and hardly the idyllic Bethlehem of our beloved Christmas carol, lying "still" under the "silent stars" in "deep and dreamless sleep." The Bethlehem into which Jesus was born was one that was soon to know the terrifying clank of military steel, the blood-curdling shrieks of terrified children ruthlessly slashed to death by Roman soldiers "just doing

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8 Dorothy Jean Weaver, "Dona Nobis Pacem: A War Journal from Bethlehem," unpublished paper (revised), 2001.

9 Weaver, "Dona Nobis Pacem."

their job," and the heartrending cries of anguished mothers inconsolable over the brutal massacre of their innocent infants.

Two thousand years later the picture looks strangely similar. The Palestine of Christmas 2000 is a world of massive unemployment and growing poverty. And the Bethlehem of Christmas 2000, with its sister cities Beit Jala and Beit Sahour, knows only too well the terrifying sounds and scenes of war: the menacing drone of helicopter gunships, operated by soldiers "just doing their duty" and raining down death and destruction from the skies; the rapid-fire report of machine guns aiming live ammunition at live human beings in deadly confrontations on the ground; the heavy and horrifying boom of tanks that send shells smashing through the stone walls of ordinary houses, fill children's beds with glass shards, and turn defenseless civilians into refugees without a home; the screaming of Palestinian children, too frightened to go to bed; and the voiced and unvoiced anguish of Palestinian parents, incapable of protecting their little ones from the ongoing terror and the ever-growing destruction all around them.

This is the world and this is the hometown of Jesus Emmanuel, "God with us." When God comes to be with God's people, it is not to an idyllic, fairy-tale world of beauty and peace and "dreamless sleep." There would in fact be no need for "God with us" in that "never never" world. The world that Jesus Emmanuel comes to is rather the real world that all of us know somewhere, somehow, at some time: the world of poverty, extortion, callous cruelty, unrelenting terror, and inconsolable grief. It is this world, and none other, into which God comes to be with us in the person of Jesus, the defenseless child and the crucified Messiah. The God who comes to be "with us" in Jesus, born in Bethlehem, is a God who walks our streets, experiences our daily struggles, shares our pain, weeps our tears, suffers our humiliations, and dies the most agonizing of human deaths at the hands of his enemies. This is our God, the one who "comforts those who mourn," claims "peacemakers" as "children of God," and grants inheritance in the kingdom of heaven to those who "hunger and thirst for justice." This is Jesus Emmanuel, God with us. And this is the "good news of the kingdom." Thanks be to God![10]

A Broken-Open Heart and an Expanded World

My "on the ground learnings from Israel/Palestine" over the past quarter century-plus have transformed my life in unmistakable and irreversible fashion. I have never recovered from my 1996 sojourn in Jerusalem. Instead, the risky business of engagement in Israel/Palestine has broken my heart open and expanded my real world in ways I could never have imagined. I can only thank God.

10 Dorothy Jean Weaver, "The Massacre of the Innocents," in *Christ for All People: Celebrating a World of Christian Art*, ed. Ron O'Grady (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 54.

Mennonite Mission Involvement in Nazareth Hospital

Wayne Speigle

Since 1861 Nazareth Hospital in northern Galilee has been a significant health-care presence in the region, aligned with Mennonite ministries particularly since 1950. The hospital initially began with a married physician and nurse couple.[1] Over time, buildings and specialties were added, until it became a regional medical center. The hospital is currently supported by government funds and international donations, with local and international staff. It has been significantly affected by regional politics, ethnic and religious tensions, and recurring war. In this essay, I first review the history of Mennonite involvement in the hospital and explore several major issues that have arisen in the hospital's ministry. I conclude with a reflection on its future.

Historical Overview of Nazareth Hospital

Hospital Expansion and Staffing

The earliest physicians were sponsored in the 1860s by the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society (EMMS) in Scotland and worked out of their homes.[2] Life expectancy at the time—with tropical diseases prevalent, including cholera, dysentery, and malaria—was twenty-two years old for males and twenty-four for females. The closest hospitals were in Beirut or Damascus.[3]

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1 Dr. Kaloost Vartan and nurse Mary Anne Stewart. See EMMS International, "How EMMS International Began," accessed September 27, 2024," https://web.archive.org/web/20121210024846/http://www.emms.org/about-us/origins-and-background.

2 EMMS International, "How EMMS International Began."

3 Melanie Schulze-Tanielian, "Disease and Public Health (Ottoman Empire and Middle East)," International Encyclopedia of the First World War, Version 1, January 8, 2017, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/pdf/1914-1918-Online-disease_and_public_health_ottoman_empiremiddle_east-2014-10-08.pdf.

In 1904 EMMS purchased land for a hospital to be built. The first building was completed in 1912, with additional buildings erected in 1919 and a nursing school established in 1924.[4] Israeli government support began in 1950 and universal healthcare in 1988 (with the requirement that health practitioners be able to read and write in Hebrew). A maternity clinic, kitchen, and specialists in dialysis followed after 1956, with an intensive care unit added in 1976. New doctors came mostly from the Arab community, including a medical director in 1981, when Nazareth Hospital was named the official district hospital during healthcare reform by the Israeli government.[5]

By the 1980s, local Arab doctors with specialty training in surgery, orthopedics, obstetrics, anesthesiology, and general medicine began to replace the expatriate medical staff. This change happened as a result of new licensing requirements of the Israeli Ministry of Health. In 1988 a local physician became the medical director. Currently, Nazareth Hospital is the second largest employer and the main trauma center in the area, serving Nazareth—"home to 46 percent of the Arab population in Israel"—"and the surrounding towns and villages," adding up to a total of about 264,00 people.[6] In 2001 the founding agency and owner of the hospital, Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society (EMMS), became EMMS Nazareth, and in 2010 Nazareth Trust.[7] In 2021, with over 800 employees, the hospital served 260,000 patients with 150 beds.[8]

Hospital Funding

Following the war in 1948, Quaker volunteers on their return from Nazareth Hospital to the US formed a small nonprofit called the Holy Land Relief Fund to collect supplies for the hospital. Over the proceeding decades, the fund changed location and leadership several times. Finally, in Pennsylvania in 1989, it was reorganized and renamed the Nazareth Project, Inc. (NPI).[9]

Since 1990, NPI has raised funds for special projects and received financial support from both individuals and foundations. Individuals with medical

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4 "Our History: Healing in the Name of Jesus Since 1861," Nazareth Hospital EMMS, accessed September 27, 2024, https://nazhosp.com/home/our-history/?lang=en.

5 John Wilkinson, *The Coogate Doctors: The History of the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society, 1841 to 1941* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society, 1991), 43, 51–53.

6 "Our Work: Nazareth Hospital EMMS," Nazareth Project Inc., accessed September 27, 2024, https://nazarethproject.org/our-work/nazareth-hospital/.

7 "Our History," https://nazarethproject.org/about-us/history/.

8 "The Nazareth Trust," EMMS International, accessed September 27, 2024, https://nazarethtrust.org/.

9 "Our History," https://nazarethproject.org/about-us/history/.

expertise, as well as chaplains and other volunteers, have served as hospital personnel for terms ranging from a few weeks to as long as a year. Other individuals have volunteered through the SERVE program.[10] Individuals have also contributed by participating in NPI-promoted events such as biking fundraisers and, more recently, hiking the Jesus Trail. In addition, the organization's 501(c)3 US tax status has allowed for charitable donations that otherwise would not be tax deductible.

At the foundation level, NPI has applied for and been granted significant funds from US Agency for International Development/American Schools and Hospitals Abroad (USAID/ASHA). The purpose of USAID/ASHA grants is to provide

> assistance to overseas schools, libraries, hospital centers, and centers of excellence to highlight American ideas and practices, to provide concrete illustrations of the generosity of the American people, to further U.S. Government public diplomacy, and to catalyze collaboration between U.S. citizens and citizens of other countries.[11]

Since 1995, NPI has received grants totaling $8,341,475 from ASHA. Grants during the first fifteen years were used to expand and equip new areas of Nazareth Hospital, including a new clinical wing and a new OR suite. Beginning in 2013, grants were used to equip new capacities such as a Heart Catheterization Unit and a Pediatric Surgery Unit. In 2019 the Dialysis Unit was expanded with upgraded equipment. More recently the hospital received $1.5 million to purchase new equipment for the Trauma Unit (including Ophthalmology; Maxillofacial; and Ear, Nose, Throat [ENT] equipment), and the School of Nursing received $1.5 million to equip new simulation rooms, classrooms, and offices.[12]

Mennonite Involvement: Dr. Robert Martin and Dr. Nancy Martin

Drs. Robert (Bob) Martin and Nancy Martin have played significant roles within the Nazareth Hospital and School of Nursing. They served at the hospital from 1965 to 1968 and again from 1971 to 1978. The Martins returned to Nazareth in 1987, when Bob became Medical Director (1988–1995) and Nancy developed

10 The *Nazareth Project Newsletter* 15, no. 3 (Fall 2005).

11 Dan Galat, "American Schools and Hospitals Abroad," USAID, accessed October 3, 2024, https://www.usaid.gov/work-usaid/business-funding/grant-programs/american-schools-and-hospitals-abroad.

12 ASHA Awards to The Nazareth Project, Inc., updated April 11, 2024 (document provided by NPI Executive Director).

an RN degree program with the School of Nursing. Nancy later served on the board of Nazareth Trust and Bob on the Nazareth Project board.[13]

In the 1950s and 60s, a "missionary zeal" in the Mennonite church and desire for service experiences coincided with the reality of increasing military draft numbers. Bob and Nancy, with their medical and nursing training, joined other Mennonite workers who were in Tel Aviv. Some were fulfilling draft service requirements, which needed to be approved by the US Selective Service.[14]

Arriving in Nazareth in 1965, the Martins became part of an international community that worked alongside increasing numbers of local physicians and nurses. Along with many other expats, Bob and Nancy stayed through the 1967 war, despite the risks of doing so. They were on the ground immediately after the war to distribute relief supplies from Mennonite Central Committee.[15]

With service requirements fulfilled, the Martins returned in 1968 to the US for medical residency, then were invited to return to Nazareth in 1987. They found that tensions had remained since the 1967 war. The Israeli embassy was also focused on resettling Jewish people in Israel and was less eager to welcome expatriates.

But the work at the hospital continued. International contacts in the following years led to development of cardiac and renal specialties. Continued connection to Mennonite Medical Association resulted in short- and long-term service opportunities for physicians and nurses, as well as other volunteers. This created a continuing source of ongoing supporters for Nazareth Hospital.[16]

After Nancy earned graduate degrees in nursing, she was asked to return to Nazareth to further develop a nursing program. The nursing school had begun in 1924 to train practical nurses for the hospital. It was (and still is) the only Arab-language nursing school in Israel. Because changing language requirements and immigration constraints were resulting in fewer expat nurses, a resident registered nursing program was needed. Classes in that program were in English, which was challenging for students whose first language was Arabic, and the nursing exam was conducted in Hebrew.[17]

The Martins brought administrative changes that were not always easily accepted—toward more democratic and less hierarchical styles. Centuries of dominance by foreigners under the Ottoman empire had conditioned locals to

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13 Robert Martin, *Together in Galilee* (Morgantown, PA: Mastof, 2020).

14 Martin, *Together in Galilee*, 55–58.

15 Martin, *Together in Galilee*, 70–73.

16 Martin, *Together in Galilee*, 80–97.

17 Martin, *Together in Galilee,* 108–23.

more authoritarian leadership, and implementing greater participatory governance took time and small steps.[18]

The mix of foreign workers alongside those of Jewish and Arab background has provided additional stress that required sensitive management, especially during repeated wars in the Mideast, when loyalties to different perspectives came into tension.[19] This mix of cultures has also provided many opportunities, such as an Arab/Jewish soccer match sponsored by hospital staff on the eve of the Gulf War in 1991. Sensitivity to political tensions remains at the forefront of the organizational management today.

Nazareth Village Built on Hospital Grounds

Visitors, volunteers, and tour groups tended to visit traditional sites in Nazareth but not stay long. In 1994 a vision began to emerge for a "living history museum" on grounds that were owned but not yet developed by the hospital. As the hospital is an extension of the healing ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, the village was seen as focusing more on how Jesus might have lived. An ancient winepress was identified as well as terracing from wine grapes and the remains of a first-century farm, including a stable and winepress. Archeological work began, along with some reconstruction using ancient methods. Pottery found during the digs dated to the Early Bronze Age.[20]

Nazareth Village began as a dream of Dr. Nakhle Bishara,[21] who envisioned showing people what first-century Nazareth was like. That dream came to fruition through the leadership of Nazareth Village's first Director, D. Michael Hostetler (a Mennonite photographer and filmmaker),[22] and was made possible by significant fundraising in the US and Europe. This fundraising was supported by Mennonite Board of Missions and the newly formed Miracle of Nazareth International Foundation, alongside a local board.[23] The doors of Nazareth Village opened to the public in 2000.

A tour of the Village includes a visit to a synagogue in first-century style, fields, and a tomb; and guests receive authentic meals served in an open-air room.

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18 Martin, *Together in Galilee*, 114–15.

19 Martin, *Together in Galilee*, 124–26.

20 Stephen J. Pfann et al., "Surveys and Excavations at the Nazareth Village Farm (1997–2002): Final Report," *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 25 (2007): 19–79.

21 "Our Vision," Nazareth Village, accessed October 3, 2024, https://nazarethvillage.com/about/vision/.

22 Martin, *Together in Galilee*, 149.

23 Miracle of Nazareth International Foundation, https://www.causeiq.com/organizations/miracle-of-nazareth-international-foundation,352046656/.

The Village also offers workshops with staff and volunteers, with many North American volunteers working alongside local staff. Since its opening, Nazareth Village has hosted local school children and visitors from across the globe, as many as one hundred thousand annually.[24]

Issues During a Century of Healthcare Work in Nazareth

The following significant issues have arisen over the past century of healthcare work in Nazareth.

1. Colonialism

In the early years of international mission, religious groups and charities often provided mutual support with the colonizing countries. This created a legacy of colonialism that continues to be challenging:

> As historians of colonial medicine have shown, colonial medicine occupied a place within a more expansive ideological order of the empires. Colonial efforts to deal with the health of developing regions were closely linked to the economic interests of the colonizers. Health was not an end in itself, but rather a prerequisite for colonial development. Colonial medicine, or "tropical medicine," as it was called during the late 19th century, was concerned primarily with maintaining the health of Europeans living in the tropics, because these individuals were viewed as essential to the colonial project's success. The health of the colonized subjects was normally only considered when their ill health threatened colonial economic enterprises or the health of the Europeans. Accordingly, the success or failure of health interventions was measured more in terms of the colonies' production than by measuring the levels of health among the native population.[25]

ASHA grants, though not exactly "colonial" in their goals, "highlight American ideas and practices . . . provide concrete illustrations of the generosity of the American people . . . further U.S. Government public diplomacy, and . . . catalyze collaboration between U.S. citizens and citizens of other countries."[26]

Though grants need to be approved and their use verified, the focus on collaboration can enhance mutuality and mitigate against hierarchical relationships.

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24 "Plan Your Visit," Nazareth Village, accessed October 3, 2024, https://nazareth-village.com/plan-your-visit/.

25 Nadav Davidovitch and Zalman Greenberg, "Public Health, Culture, and Colonial Medicine: Smallpox and Variolation in Palestine During the British Mandate," *Public Health Report* 122, no. 3 (May–June 2007), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1847484/#.

26 Galat, "American Schools and Hospitals Abroad," https://www.usaid.gov/work-usaid/business-funding/grant-programs/american-schools-and-hospitals-abroad.

Grant objectives are identified by those closest to the work in the hospital, involving a range of personnel from diverse backgrounds. For example, while the dialysis unit has a sign on its door "USAID from the American People," it is wholly run by hospital personnel.

2. Foreign and Local Leadership, Merits, and Shortcomings

As part of a mission hospital, early medical personnel at Nazareth Hospital were expatriates from Europe and later from the US, who often became involved through personal influence and professional connections.[27] Over the past century, medical personnel have increasingly been from local populations—nurses trained in Nazareth and physicians elsewhere in the Middle East and Europe. Though cultural patterns and stereotypes continue, leadership has become more inclusive and egalitarian. Nazareth Village staff are mostly local alongside international volunteers, and the current director, Maha Sayegh, is a local woman who has been involved in the organization for two decades. The current CEO of Nazareth Trust, Waaseem Dibbini, is Palestinian, as are members of the senior management team.[28]

A mix of local and foreign leadership is being considered for future roles. At the same time, there are distinct benefits to an international presence among staff, given the multicultural dynamics of the region. When a local hospital within an Israeli system is owned and governed by a Scottish mission group, international influences can be both suspect and influential.

3. What Is the Mission: Evangelism or Health Care?

While the goal of Nazareth Hospital (Trust and NPI) has been to provide medical care, their work has often been alongside others who would want to "make Christians." When NPI representatives met with a US rabbi to explore mutual interests and potential support for Nazareth Hospital, an immediate question was, "Is this about proselytizing?" Though the answer was negative, some supporters desire a distinctly Christian witness. Should the chapel (NPI is currently raising funds for its renovation) include Jewish, Muslim, and Christian symbols? Should the NPI board edit its mission statement to be more explicitly evangelical to appeal to wealthy evangelical donors?[29]

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27 Martin, *Together in Galilee*, 111–28.

28 "Our Leadership," Narareth Trust, accessed October 3, 2024, https://nazareth-trust.org/about/team-2/.

29 The project's mission statement (see "Our Mission," Nazareth Project, Inc., accessed September 30, 2024, https://nazarethproject.org/about-us/our-mission/) states:

> Nazareth Project promotes a Christian ministry of healing, peace and reconciliation in the Holy Land through supporting health care and health education services in the Galilee region of Israel.

Nazareth Hospital has chosen to emphasize the work—health care and healing—as an expression of Christian values, aiming to include a broader constituency. NPI philosophy has been consistent with that of Mennonite Central Committee, to "partner with local . . . agencies—their understanding of community resources, needs and context helps shape programs that meet real needs and make a lasting difference,"[30] and with Mennonite Mission Network, to "participate in holistic witness."[31]

4. Advocacy and the Murky Territory around Zionism and Treatment of Palestinians

Nazareth Hospital treats any patient and does not discriminate in staffing based on religion or ethnicity:

> Following the teaching and example of Jesus of Nazareth, the Trust . . . aims to reach out to the local population and to the wider world, irrespective of faith, political persuasion or tradition, through healthcare, education, proclamation and service.[32]

The mission of the hospital is to be a multicultural, multireligious practical presence. The proven and practical track record of the hospital appeals to supporters who do not want to take sides, who want to promote peace in the region. This is especially challenging when there is more intense conflict between the Israeli government (on which the hospital depends for support) and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (which includes hospital staff, along with relatives of staff). What does advocacy look like in the US when we also represent people who may be vulnerable to political fallout? The stance of the NPI board and supporters is to promote the work of the hospital as a practical ministry that includes every ethnic and religious group, while at the same time encouraging individuals to follow their conscience in other ways.

> In the spirit of Christ, we support compassionate medical services available to all persons, regardless of religion, culture or ethnicity.
>
> We bear witness that wholeness and healing for humanity is most completely found in Jesus of Nazareth.

30 "Where We Work," MCC.org, accessed September 30, 2024, https://mcc.org/what-we-do/where-we-work.

31 "Mission and Vision," MennoniteMission.net, accessed September 30, 2024, https://www.mennonitemission.net/about/Mission%20and%20Vision.

32 "Our Mission: Health Care, Healing and Education," The Nazareth Trust, accessed October 3, 2024, https://nazarethtrust.org/about/mission/.

Reflections on the Future of Nazareth Hospital

As an international institution, Nazareth Hospital will continue to deal with the dynamics of historical colonialism and institutional hierarchies. However, significant personnel and egalitarian leadership practices have provided models that have been appreciated, and current staff relations seem healthy. The new plan to name a Palestinian executive along with an international director can build on a partnership that offers both challenges and positive potential.

In addition, while the religious and ethnic tensions of Nazareth and Israel/Palestine are bound to continue providing issues to work through, such tensions will also likely mitigate against any notion of proselytizing. While proselytizing would not technically be illegal, there are considerable pressures against trying to convert others. Those who volunteer and work at Nazareth Hospital are clear about their motivations yet, at the same time, practically humanitarian and respectful of others' faith. While some potential donors may not endorse this accommodation, others welcome the focus on addressing health needs apart from religion or ethnic background. This respectful approach should be appreciated by Anabaptist supporters.

Challenging political dynamics may be the most difficult to navigate. The hospital relies on positive relations with the Israeli government financially and administratively. These relations have at times shifted unpredictably, leaving leadership staff to speculate about motivation and how to respond. They have sought to keep their focus on health care and to avoid political stances, especially on social media. International supporters follow their lead. Though some can be frustrated at inability to positively influence policy, the privilege of supporting a productive and caring effort helps mitigate the frustration.

Though in the future Nazareth Hospital must contend with the perennial volatility of the region, its history is one of resilience. In the midst of significant challenges, it has become a respected and valued institution because of its organizational ethos of respect for every person; the collegiality among its staff; and strong international support. Its philosophy and mission are especially appealing to Anabaptists who are drawn to medical service.

When the Stories of Bethlehem and Zurich Rhyme

Palestinian Theology and Experience and What They Might Say to Anabaptists

Byron Rempel-Burkholder

In the spring of 2016, my wife, Melita, and I volunteered for three months at Bethlehem Bible College (BBC) in the West Bank, Palestine, under a short-term ministry program of Mennonite Church Canada. Our schedule allowed us to sit in on an English-language class taught by Jonathan Kuttab, a BBC board member and an internationally recognized Palestinian human rights lawyer. The course offered a Christian perspective on international law and peace in the Middle East.

As a Mennonite, I naively expected the course to draw heavily on my Anabaptist peace traditions and resources. Weren't we—the historical "peace" churches—the global authorities on the matter? Instead, I saw only one or two Mennonite authors on the course reading list. Kuttab drew on other sources, including Middle Eastern thinkers and, of course, his own vast experience as a peace practitioner.

Encounters with Palestinian Christians and Palestinian theology that year and in the years since have taught me how a gospel commitment to peace, authentic to its own setting, was already rooted in the restive and conflicted land that is Palestine today. To expect Palestinian peace witness to look like, or use the same language as, Western Anabaptism was paternalistic and ethnocentric.[1] My task

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1 True, Kuttab and several other Christian leaders of his generation have attended Anabaptist institutions through their contact with Mennonites who have done

was to recognize the work of the Spirit in its own right, in that setting—to learn from it, to be challenged by it. Could it even help unlock a renewal of my own faith in this worrying time of mounting political upheaval in my corner of the world, Turtle Island (North America)?

In this personal narrative reflection, I have picked three themes that recur in historic Anabaptist theology and resonate with much of what I have heard, read, and observed in my encounters with Palestinian Christians. I will favor the voices of several emerging leaders under age forty who are adding fresh meaning to the theologies that their seniors have been forging in the contemporary Palestinian context.[2] I will also highlight the relevance of these observations in the current context of Israel's war on Gaza via the following themes:

1. A Christ-centered gospel of love for neighbor and enemy
2. Mutual accountability in the community of faith
3. Baptism as martyrdom

I have chosen the language of *rhyming* because the correspondences are sometimes slanted rather than direct; rhyming connotes hints of similarities, suggestions of relatedness that can be pondered and explored, like poetry.

1. A Christ-Centered Gospel of Love for Neighbor and Enemy

During our sojourn at BBC, I came to know Anton Deik, a faculty member who is now completing his doctorate in New Testament studies through the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, with plans of returning to teach. Deik grew up in the Catholic church of St. Catherine, adjacent to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Of all the teaching he received as a child, the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew were central.

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humanitarian and development work in Palestine and Israel since 1949, mostly through Mennonite Central Committee. These have included Bishara Awad, founder of Bethlehem Bible College, and his brother Mubarak, a leader in nonviolent peace protests in the West Bank during the late 1980s. And yet, their way of expressing peace theology, for me, did not feel transplanted and derivative. The many people we met from other traditions—Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and evangelical—spoke a similar language and reflected an authenticity that belonged to Palestinian culture and experience.

2 My staples over the past eight years have been works in English by Anglican and Lutheran Palestinians: Naim Ateek's pioneering work in Palestinian liberation theology, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989); Mitri Raheb's *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible through Palestinian Eyes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014); and Munther Isaac's *The Other Side of the Wall: A Palestinian Christian Narrative of Lament and Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020). Their focus on justice and liberation is also reflected in other Western theologians' writing on Palestine and Israel, including Jewish (the late) Marc Ellis, and evangelical scholar Gary Burge.

"For Palestinian Christians, 'love your neighbor' and 'love your enemy' are community markers," Deik told me in an interview. "I'm not saying that we're a perfect community, but for us, Jesus's ethic of love is what makes a Christian *Christian*!" That this conviction would take hold in the context of the West Bank moved me, given the deepening enmity between Palestinians and the Israelis who occupy and control their land in contravention of international law.

Deik's upbringing had also taught him how, since Pentecost, the Christian communities of Palestine have historically negotiated ways to live in relative peace with their Jewish and then their Muslim neighbors—until recent decades, and especially now.[3]

Deik's faith was severely tested shortly after graduating from university. While serving abroad with an international youth mission group, he was shocked to meet so many Christian peers who, almost as a tenet of their faith, supported modern, secular Israel as an instrument of God's will in direct continuity with the ancient covenant people of God.

How could it be that God was on the side of a regime that had forcefully taken over Palestinian land in 1948; conquered and occupied the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem in 1967; and continued to build more and more Jewish settlements in those territories in violation of international law? How, Deik asked, could fellow Christians bless a government that kept his people subjugated and bereft of basic rights to movement, water, citizenship, and self-determination? If God was on the side of the self-proclaimed and militaristic "Jewish state," where did that leave Palestinian believers? How did it square with the teachings of Jesus?

What Deik was encountering was Christian Zionism, an ideology of end-times formulas drawn from the Old Testament and Revelation, with little reference to Jesus. By contrast, Deik and the Palestinians I encountered circled back to Jesus as the hermeneutical key to the Bible. As with Anabaptists, their rootedness in the Gospels, the universal love of God, and the call to love even the enemy ran through their biblical reflection.[4]

The centrality of radical, Gospel-centered love was also at the heart of a document that has helped the global church understand the experience of Palestinian Christians today. In 2009, in the wake of the Second Intifada and decades of failure in peace efforts, Palestinian Christian leaders from across the theological

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3 The parade of imperial powers that have administered and colonized Palestine down through history—from the Romans to the Byzantines, to the various Muslim overlords, to the Ottomans—has mostly allowed the religious and cultural diversity of Palestine to flourish well together. Ironically, the bloodiest times of conflict came from the West—first the Christian Crusaders in the Middle Ages, determined to take back the Holy Land by force and to slaughter the Muslims, and, more recently, the colonization and displacement of Palestinians by European Jews fleeing persecution and genocide.

4 See note 2 on key theological works by Palestinian Christians.

spectrum in Israel and Palestine—Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, evangelical—issued "A Moment of Truth—A Cry of Hope from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering." This manifesto boldly named the Israeli occupation a "sin against God and humanity."[5] It was explicit in its call to resist the occupation but not through the militant armed resistance that just war theorists might have called for and that jihadist groups favored.[6] Instead, it called for a "logic of love."

Love for Israelis, the "enemy," was not a matter of Palestinians sacrificing their identity and dignity to the oppressor; rather, it meant working toward a liberation of the enemy from a destructive culture of domination and supremacy: "Through our love, we will overcome injustices and establish foundations for a new society both for us and for our opponents. Our future and their future are one. Either the cycle of violence that destroys both of us or peace that will benefit both."[7]

In his 2020 book *The Other Side of the Wall* (InterVarsity Press), BBC academic dean and Lutheran Pastor Munther Isaac puts it this way: "Christ's [kingdom] was the kingdom of the meek—the lovers of righteousness, justice, and truth—and the cross symbolizes that kingdom. Not the cross of the Crusaders but that of Golgotha, that of sacrificial love."[8]

Sacrificial love for others, including enemies, is a principle etched into my Anabaptist identity and faith, tested historically in the fires of persecution and iconized in the story of Dirk Willems rescuing his jailer from a frozen pond. What was new to me in the Palestinian context, however, was the call to pair the "logic of love," as found in the Gospels, with political resistance to oppression:

> Resistance is a right and a duty for the Christian. But it is resistance with love as its logic. It is thus a creative resistance for it must find human ways that engage the humanity of the enemy.[9]

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5 Kairos Palestine, "A Moment of Truth—A Cry of Hope from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering," section 4, accessed September 26, 2024, https://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/about-kairos/kairos-palestine-document.

6 "A Moment of Truth," section 4.2.2: "When we review the history of the nations, we see many wars and much resistance to war by war, to violence by violence. The Palestinian people has gone the way of the peoples, particularly in the first stages of its struggle with the Israeli occupation. However, it also engaged in peaceful struggle, especially during the first intifada. We recognize that all peoples must find a new way in their relations with each other and the resolution of their conflicts. The ways of force must give way to the ways of justice. This applies above all to the peoples that are militarily strong, mighty enough to impose their injustice on the weaker."

7 "A Moment of Truth," section 4.3.

8 Munther Isaac, *The Other Side of the Wall: A Palestinian Christian Narrative of Lament and Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020), 71.

9 "A Moment of Truth," section 4.2.3.

Occasionally, I've asked my Palestinian interlocutors whether they are pacifist. The answers I've gotten are usually ambiguous. As Deik told me, the term has become "tainted" and would not define the self-understanding of Palestinian Christians. It suggests passivity and non-engagement. Echoing the authors of the Kairos document, Deik and his peers prefer the term "nonviolent resistance."

"The ethic of loving both neighbor and enemy is very important for us Christians," Deik told me. "This is what our community offers as an alternative to any ideology that glorifies military might, whether Christian Zionism, or Palestinian militancy: nonviolent creative resistance, which is more powerful than armed resistance."

Such words stand in contrast to Mennonites and other Anabaptists who defend the quiet-in-the-land language of "nonresistance"—who resist confrontation, or who promote mid-way, both-sides stance of mediation and compromise. The Kairos document may not satisfy those who wish for a more explicit renunciation of the sword. Palestinian Christians do, however, call for a robust, active engagement in peacemaking that is rooted in the gospel. They follow in a stream of lights such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Walter Wink, who don't bear the Anabaptist label but with whom many Anabaptists find resonance.

The question of whether Palestinian Christians would ever take up arms is hypothetical (just as it has always been for members of our peace church traditions, despite our professed ideals). It is for Palestinians to answer in their context. Still, it is remarkable that the impulse toward nonviolent resistance and loving concern for the enemy persists in Palestine, given the suffering they have endured in recent decades. Would Western Anabaptists today muster the same courage if they found themselves in those circumstances?

2. Mutual Accountability in Apocalyptic Times

Palestinian notions of how Christ-centered peace theology plays out in practical discipleship is intertwined with another key principle often cited as a distinctive of historic Anabaptist faith and practice—mutual accountability in the church. This tenet, expressed as church "discipline" survives in our confessions of faith, notwithstanding far too many instances of its abuse in church life.[10] We still hold on to the notion that we need each other to remain true to the faith we profess. In my congregation, baptismal candidates promise to be open to give and receive counsel. We rely on each other to remain centered in Jesus and his way.

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10 In my denomination's *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1995) page 55, church discipline, rightly exercised, is intended to "liberate erring brothers and sisters from sin, and restore them to a right relationship with God and to fellowship in the church" and it "gives integrity to the witness of the church in the world."

Can this congregational practice apply in a global church setting and across denominations? Especially since the start of the Gaza War—but for years before, too—Palestinian churches and leaders have been asking the Western church to scrutinize its theology of Israel, the Land, and justice. The Kairos Palestine "Moment of Truth" statement cited above is one instance of that. But now, the nudge has become more insistent.

In October 2023, just days after the horrific eruption of the war, Daniel Bannoura, a native of Beit Sahour (adjacent to Bethlehem) and currently a PhD candidate at the University of Notre Dame (South Bend, Indiana), met online with three fellow faculty members from Bethlehem Bible College to discuss their response to the crisis. Melita and I had met all of them in our visits to Palestine: The others were Anton Deik; Yousef Al Khouri, who grew up in Gaza; and academic dean Rev. Munther Isaac, who pastors Bethlehem's Christmas Lutheran Church and has become a prominent voice for a just peace in the region. All except Isaac were men in their thirties who were completing doctorates in preparation for ministry in Palestine and were already part of a robust network of young Christian leaders in Palestine and in the diaspora.

As I heard Bannoura describe the meeting, I had a fleeting picture of another, earlier moment of reckoning: the gathering of Conrad Grebel, George Blaurock, and Felix Manz—a group of young adults in the Zurich of 1525 who for months had found themselves at odds with what they felt were unbiblical requirements of the magisterial church of their city. At this gathering, they debated their dilemma and then prayerfully followed what they sensed to be the Spirit's leading: They expressed their resistance by rebaptizing each other in an act of civil disobedience, eventually going on to affirm a discipleship in Jesus's way of peace.

And now, here were four emerging Palestinian leaders responding to a crisis. They prayed, they lamented, and from there they moved swiftly to action: They wrote an open letter to leaders and members of the global church. While condemning the death and suffering among both Israelis and Palestinians on October 7, 2023, and since, their "Call to Repentance: An Open Letter from Palestinian Christians"[11] summoned Christians around the world to condemn the massive retaliatory response of Israel to the October 7 Hamas attacks.

The call, endorsed by a wide assortment of Christian organizations in the occupied West Bank and Jerusalem, launched on October 20. More than twenty-one thousand people across the world signed the attached petition.[12] Then, as the war ground on into 2024 and the scale of destruction and death mounted in Gaza, the letter helped energize grassroots movements of protest, marches,

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11 Kairos Palestine: A Movement of Truth website, accessed September 26, 2024, https://www.kairospalestine.ps/images/A_Call_for_Repentance__An_Open_Letter_from_Palestinian_Christians_1.pdf.

12 The petition is still open for more signatures at https://chng.it/QqykNS4p58.

and prayer for peace, including Mennonite Action[13] in North America, and the Gaza Ceasefire Pilgrimage,[14] a global initiative of evangelical progressives and neo-Anabaptists, including Shane Claiborne, Jarrod McKenna, and Lisa Sharon Harper. Hymn-singing activists were arrested for occupying the rotunda of Washington's Capitol. Peace theology, expressed in "creative resistance" was on full display. But it wasn't the sea change that would stop the war.

In May, Bannoura, Deik, AlKhoury, and Isaac were among the speakers at BBC's 2024 "Christ at the Checkpoint," a biennial conference sponsored by Bethlehem Bible College. The gathering brings Christian leaders, theologians, and other interested persons from around the world to join Palestinian peers in reflecting biblically on peace and justice in the Middle East. The Gaza war, raging less than sixty miles away, complicated travel into the region, with canceled flights and other barriers. But the sessions went ahead, and over one hundred internationals were able to come in person. I joined many more on the livestream. The sessions featured Palestinian leaders as well as others, mostly from contexts that rhymed with that of Palestine: South African, Latin American, and African American.

Bannoura told delegates how the "Call to Repentance" had come about.[15] He recounted how Russell Moore, editor of the evangelical *Christianity Today*, had urged Christians everywhere to exercise "moral clarity" by standing with Israel in its war on Gaza.[16] This distressed Bannoura and his colleagues. While not excusing Hamas's actions, they were shocked that Moore and so many other Christian leaders in the West were supporting the massive and disproportionate response of Israel. How could they not see that a sixteen-year blockade of Gaza—along with the decades of occupation and dispossession since 1948—had created the conditions ripe for the explosion of violence that October?

Bannoura recounted how just months earlier Moore had written a book in which he challenged evangelicals to recover their ethical authority and to rediscover the Sermon on the Mount as their guide through polarizing times.[17] "Ironically, Moore fails to quote the Sermon on the Mount in support of the war," Bannoura lamented. That negligence lay at the root of the concluding words of the open letter:

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13 See https://www.mennoniteaction.org/.

14 See Gaza Ceasefire Pilgrimage: A Via Dolorosa of Solidarity, https://www.gazaceasefirepilgrimage.com/.

15 Daniel Bannoura, "CATC2024 Day 2: A Call for Repentance–Daniel Bannoura," June 3, 2024, YouTube video, 24:44, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cfZkDKmWsrM.

16 Bannoura, "A Call for Repentance," https://youtu.be/cfZkDKmWsrM.

17 Russell Moore, *Losing Our Religion: An Altar Call for Evangelicals in America* (New York: Penguin, 2023).

> We are deeply troubled by the failure of some western Christian leaders and theologians to acknowledge the biblical tradition of justice and mercy, as first proclaimed by Moses (Deut 10:18; 16:18–20; 32:4) and the prophets (Isa 1:17; 61:8; Mic 2:1–3, 6:8; Amos 5:10–24), and as exemplified and embodied in Christ (Matt 25:34–46; Luke 1:51–53; 4:16–21).[18]

In another address at the conference, Deik explored the impact of Christian Zionism on the mission of the church. “Knowingly or otherwise, these theologians depict God as a racist, tribal deity, who favors the Jews over the Palestinians,” he said. “These theologians portray God as a warlord.”[19]

Deik noted the upcoming Fourth Lausanne Congress in South Korea—a large global gathering of evangelicals designed to empower the global church to “declare and display Christ together to a watching world.” “If Lausanne is serious about declaring and displaying Christ to a watching world,” Deik said, “then addressing Christian Zionism is an imperative—unless we want to declare and display . . . a god of favoritism, who supports ethnic cleansing and apartheid.” The world will be watching, Deik agreed, but will it be convinced that the God we proclaim is a God of love and justice for all?

The most poignant “ouch” moment of the conference for me came in the plenary address given by Munther Isaac, principal organizer of the conference. In it, he called out the “peace churches” for being too weak in their witness. Isaac acknowledged their—our!—efforts to teach and speak for peace, pray for peace, and give generously for humanitarian efforts. Now, with the Gaza war raging, the peace churches even issued statements calling for peace.

However, Isaac lamented, most of these declarations “lacked the assertiveness needed to respond to war crimes. They felt harmless. You see, the church stays away from speaking truth to power . . . from calling things by their name [in order] to avoid controversy. This is a problem . . . . True peacemakers discern what is really happening, call things by name, and speak truth to power. They also act.”[20] Isaac challenged the church to demonstrate, write letters, nag political leaders, and join sit-ins. Words are not enough.

Was the Call to Repentance issued by the Palestinian church something the early Anabaptists would have signed? How many Anabaptist Christians today signed it?

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18 Kairos Palestine, https://www.kairospalestine.ps/images/A_Call_for_Repentance__An_Open_Letter_from_Palestinian_Christians_1.pdf.

19 Tony Deik, “CATC2024 Day 4: Missiology After Gaza: Christian Zionism, God’s Image, and the Gospel—Tony Deik,” June 3, 2024, YouTube video, 41:20, https://youtu.be/GTw5U6fLO5Q.

20 Munther Isaac, “CATC2024 Day 1: A Christian Response to Gaza—Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac,” June 3, 2024, YouTube video, 37:32, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6Rc7makz08&t=1782s.

In addition to the call to be Christ- and gospel-centered, therefore, I saw church accountability in action—in this case, not so much at the congregational level (although it may have repercussions there, too, as we learn to speak hard truths to each other) but at a global level. How can we Anabaptists, especially those of us in the West who are not as directly affected by war and military oppression, be more open to prophetic words from outside our privileged context? For those of us who have come from a tradition of missionizing and evangelizing, often under colonial protection, can we become listeners? As a Canadian, will I wrestle with my own complicity, my own negligence, my own anger and frustration in not adequately recognizing the plight of Palestinians and other oppressed peoples? Am I really open to having my discipleship be costly? This last question is at the heart of the third rhyme of my reflection.

3. Baptism as a Radical Commitment to the Kingdom of God and a Repudiation of Empire

The theme of believers baptism, such a key issue for the early Anabaptists, jumped out at me on January 4, 2024, as I sat in on the weekly online prayer service and Bible study hosted by the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre in East Jerusalem. At this service, Christians of many traditions from around the world sit with Palestinian Christian leaders to discern what messages the weekly lectionary text are speaking into the current political realities of Palestine.

That day the meditation and discussion were led by Sabeel staffer Samuel Munayer, a twenty-six-year-old Palestinian Jerusalemite with Israeli citizenship. The text was the Gospel of Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus. My ears perked up as he introduced the meditation: "With the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the overall seventy-five years of settler colonialism and suffering for us Palestinians . . . it is clear to me that we should understand baptism as bound up with martyrdom."[21]

Munayer went on to explain how "baptism is a realignment of power and time, which sets the mandate of our discipleship. Moreover, it is an act of committing oneself to the loyalty of love, not nationality; humbleness, not pride; losing oneself for the sake of the God of the oppressed, not attempt to gain it by one's own might. . . . Authentic baptism that is of the Holy Spirit is a political act."

Now describing himself as "ecumenical," Munayer was raised evangelical, although his parents come from Orthodox and Anglican traditions. Baptism was a personal recognition of Jesus as Savior (evangelical), or it was an induction into an institutional church long steeped in Constantinian alliances of church and state (Anglican and Orthodox). But baptism as a political act?

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21 This and subsequent quotes are taken from the text of Munayer's meditation sent in an email to me.

Baptism as martyrdom was not a topic I had discussed with Palestinians or read about in their writings. Yet here was this insight emerging in a Bible study conducted amid Palestinian angst over the future, as Israel was destroying Gaza and accelerating the theft of West Bank land for more settlements.

The "rhyming" with the Anabaptist movement, for me, was unmistakable. For early Anabaptists, Christian discipleship included not just a baptism of water and of the Spirit but also a "baptism of blood."[22] For many that meant literal martyrdom at the hands of the state. But for all, the phrase connoted something deeper and more universal—a daily willingness to give up one's entire life to following Jesus, whatever the cost. To quote Balthasar Hubmaier, "The flesh must daily be killed since it wants only to live and reign according to its own lusts . . . . Day and night he practices all those things which concern the praise of God and brotherly love."[23] By rejecting infant baptism and its alignment with the powers of the state, early Anabaptists repudiated the supremacy of those powers, recognizing instead the supremacy of Christ and his kingdom.

The trinity of water, Spirit, and blood in baptism persists in my denomination's *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. The confession reminds me that while the prospect of physical martyrdom is quite remote in my context, those who are baptized "follow Jesus in giving their lives for others, in loving their enemies, and in renouncing violence, even when it means their own suffering or death."[24]

Munayer's reflections came at a time when religious extremism and settler violence were on the rise, causing fear in the church communities. Like their Muslim counterparts, Christian Palestinians were being pressured off their land to make way for new Israeli settlements and restricted roads. A Christian cemetery just outside Old Jerusalem had been desecrated just a year earlier by extremist settlers, and parts of the Armenian (Christian) Quarter of Old Jerusalem were under threat of being forcibly taken over to expand the Jewish Quarter. In the past year, a young Anglican woman was incarcerated and held without charge for nonviolent protests against the occupation. In a variety of ways, the church is being threatened by increasingly extreme ethnoreligious forces that contradict the moral values of all three monotheistic religions.

For Munayer, baptism entails being willing to suffer, standing firm in faith and in a commitment to a peace that is rooted in justice. "We must be like John the Baptist and Paul the Apostle and pray that our churches be baptized with the

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22 C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: Revised Student Edition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 1997), 161.

23 Cited in Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 161.

24 *Confession of Faith in A Mennonite Perspective*, Article 11 on "Baptism," 47.

Holy Spirit and center themselves to martyrdom. The waters of baptism both cleanse and drown."[25]

Embracing Our Palestinian Siblings in Faith

Can North American Anabaptists who confess unity with Jesus-followers everywhere allow Palestinian Christians to help us sharpen our own identity and witness in a troubled and divided world? I believe we must—with great humility and open eyes. As a North American, I am tainted by a history of settler-colonial land theft and genocide. My society still marginalizes Indigenous folk and people of color. Supremacist and ethnocentric assumptions have tainted the history of my church's missionary efforts. All of these are reasons to embrace Palestinian siblings in faith, who suffer these historic ills right now. Listening hard to their voices might help us find better ways of spreading the hope of the gospel in the world.

When it comes to confronting the systemic injustices perpetrated by Israel, we must be honest about antisemitism in our history. The silent complicity—and in some cases active support—of Mennonites regarding the genocidal policies of the Third Reich must be acknowledged and repented of. Antisemitism today, especially in the wake of October 7, 2023, is a scourge that we must oppose as vehemently as we oppose other forms of racism. We must root it out of ourselves. None of this, however, requires that we hesitate to work for justice or that we ignore the plight of the Palestinian people, who had nothing to do with the Holocaust and yet are paying for it as Israel occupies and ethnically cleanses their land. In fact, as Anton Deik noted in an interview, "True repentance from antisemitism is expressed in solidarity with Palestinians."[26]

For our Anabaptist witness today, the Palestine-Israel dilemma can help us reexamine and reclaim the core of our faith—Jesus, the one who revealed God's universal love to all people, who stands with the downtrodden. In our commitment to mutual accountability in the church, the current crisis may remind us of our call to listen intently to our siblings in faith who are living under the thumb

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25 *Martyr* language is current in Palestine these days—invoked to describe people who are dying at the hands of the Israeli military, whether because of nonviolent protest, stone-throwing, armed resistance, or acts of terrorism, or simply being caught in the crossfire. The various connotations of the term in both English and Arabic should be judged carefully, especially regarding armed resistance and terrorism. Whatever the spectrum of meaning, the word nevertheless reflects a willingness to give one's life to a different and better world that has yet to be born. For Palestinians as a whole, that means a society of equal justice and dignity for all—Jews, Muslims Christians. For Palestinian Christians, the vision includes this, but it also goes beyond: It points to the new heavens and the new earth of the Kingdom of God.

26 Author's interview with Anton Deik, June 5, 2024.

of Empire—in this case, the alliance between Israel and Western colonial powers like Canada and the US—and to prioritize over our comfort their plight within a system of domination. And finally, it can remind us of our own baptismal commitments in following Jesus, who calls Christian witnesses (*martyrs* in Greek) to the way of the cross, dying to our own selves as we usher in the Kin-dom of God.

The Identities of Jesus

Hannah Redekop

When I was a kid,
I confused Jesus with the doctor.
Both, I was told,
were healers.
I didn't know which one to call
to get better.

When I was in high school,
my Jesus was a judge.
Weighing my actions,
keeping the score,
both held the gavel,
to keep me from damnation.

Then, Jesus became justice itself.
Not a life—or death—sentence,
but a life*style*,
a companion,
and advocate.

But as Dr. Cornel West says,
"Justice is what love looks like in public."[1]

It wasn't until Jesus became love to me
that I began to understand the meaning
of Jesus.

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This poem was first published in the Community Peacemaker Teams (CPT) Friday Bulletin and is also available on the CPT International website at https://cpt.org/2023/11/28/the-identities-of-jesus.

1 Cornel West, "Justice Is What Love Looks Like in Public," April 17, 2011, YouTube video, 1:00:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGqP7S_WO6o.

Historical Jesus was a Palestinian Jewish man,
who today hangs precariously
between two identities
that were never meant to be divided.

But you see, love opens doors,
it doesn't close them.
Love is not exclusionist,
it only knows how to grow.

When we enact love and justice
for Palestinians,
this does not mean
there is less love for Israelis.

Just like when we enact love and justice
for our queer and trans siblings,
this does not mean
there is less love for straight people.

Just like when we enact love and justice
for Black and racialized folks,
this does not mean
there is less love for white communities.

It means that
love
justice
and freedom
are inclusive.
Our struggles are parallel,
our liberation is interdependent.

The beautiful thing about love
is that
it will free us all.

Fig Branch

Nick Schuurman

Cultivating a Common Mind on Israel-Palestine

The 2017 Mennonite Church USA Consensus Resolution "Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine"

André Gingerich Stoner

In July 2017, the Mennonite Church (MC) USA delegate assembly in Orlando, Florida, adopted the resolution "Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine."[1]

This action was more than simply a vote on a statement; it was the culmination of a six-year process of deliberation and discernment that involved thousands of church members.

Unlike statements from other denominations, this resolution addresses Mennonite complicity both in policies of military occupation of the Palestinian people and in antisemitism. The resolution laments that complicity and commits the denomination to take concrete next steps in both arenas.

Despite the fact that theological and political perspectives within the denomination are wide ranging, the 2017 resolution was adopted with 98 percent of the 548 delegates voting in favor of it.[2]

This article is a short summary of the framework and content of the resolution and of the process surrounding its adoption, followed by a reflection on how this

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1 Mennonite Church USA, "Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine: A Resolution for Mennonite Church USA," 2017, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/IP-Resolution.pdf.

2 "Mennonites Choose 'Third Way' on Israel and Palestine," Mennonite Church USA News, July 6, 2017, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/mennonites-choose-third-way-israel-palestine/; Daoud Kuttab, "Christian Consumers: How the Mennonite Church Came to Boycott Israel," *The New Arab*, July 10, 2017, https://www.newarab.com/analysis/conscious-consumers-how-mennonite-church-came-support-bds.

faith community discerned together and came to a common mind and substantive shared commitments on a contentious set of issues. I served as Director of Holistic Witness for Mennonite Church USA during this time and share these reflections as a member of the team that was deeply involved in this process.

The Resolution

The "Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine" resolution addresses the injustices of Israel's military occupation, with the goal of seeking a just peace in Israel-Palestine. It also opposes antisemitism and seeks right relationship with Jewish communities. The resolution states that "the suffering of these two groups"— Palestinian and Jewish peoples—"has too often been set one against the other. We recognize, rather, that the legacy of Jewish suffering is intertwined with the suffering of Palestinians. Palestinians have often borne the consequences of persecution of Jews" (lines 10–12).

Some advocates for justice for Palestinians, as well as some Mennonites and Jewish partners, urged us not to address these issues together. A focus on antisemitism, we were told, has often been used to avoid or delay addressing the injustices suffered by Palestinians. To address Palestinian suffering, others warned, would minimize and relativize the horrors and evils of the Holocaust and centuries of antisemitism. After the fact, one critic argued that addressing both issues constituted a calculated effort to be "balanced," to create a "false equivalence."[3]

The authors and advocates of the resolution were not seeking some kind of balance. We were not diminishing the sufferings and injustices experienced by either people, nor were we comparing the wrongs the two peoples have suffered. Instead we recognized that these experiences of suffering are intertwined. Further, we acknowledged that Mennonites have not adequately addressed our involvement and complicity in either set of injustices, and we affirmed that both matters are important and urgent and call for concrete action.

The resolution takes a confessional and restorative justice approach. The posture it adopts is not that of outside assessment or judgment on others. Instead the resolution begins each section with confession and lament, naming concrete ways that we as "Western Christians, Mennonites and U.S. citizens" are complicit in and share responsibility for harms to each people.

The three-person writing team—André Gingerich Stoner, Lisa Schirch, and Rod Stafford—along with staff consultant, Jonathan Brenneman, included Mennonites who have family relationships and affinity with both the Jewish and the Palestinian experience. Jonathan and Lisa carry deep knowledge of the issues

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3 John Kampen, "Assessing the 2017 Mennonite Resolution on Israel/Palestine," in *Peace and Faith: Christian Churches and the Israel-Palestine Conflict*, eds. Cary Nelson and Michael C. Gizzi (Philadelphia: Presbyterians for Middle East Peace, 2021), 298–99, 310, 314.

and were attentive to nuances of history and language. Lisa brought a restorative justice frame. Rod is a pastor whose life work has been forming communities of faith. I listened and helped us all listen to each other and to varied perspectives within the church. We were alert to how phrases and words carry contested meaning. We worked hard to write so that various communities would feel heard. We sought to communicate in ways that would speak with integrity for our own faith community.[4] We tested concepts and language with Jewish and Palestinian partners. In addition, the writing team formed and consulted regularly with a ten-person reference group of diverse Mennonites who gave us important feedback and suggestions.

Commitments and Implementation

Unlike many church statements, each section of the resolution names specific actions and concrete steps that Mennonite church members, our congregations, and our institutions can and should take toward making things right. Within one year, concrete next steps were taken on nearly every commitment in the resolution. Many of those actions reverberate to this day.

Perhaps the most significant commitment in the section on occupation was to urge individuals, congregations, and Mennonite-related organizations "to avoid the purchase of products associated with acts of violence or policies of military occupation, including items produced in settlements," and to "[withdraw] investments from companies that are profiting from the occupation" (lines 90–101). In an appended section, "Clarifications," this commitment is presented as an outgrowth of longstanding Mennonite efforts to put faith into practice in their economic activities, from refusing to buy war bonds to advocating fair trade and developing socially responsible investment options.

The Clarifications section highlights the fact that while the resolution urges Mennonites to avoid purchases and investments directly related to the military occupation of Palestinian territories, it does not call for a boycott of all Israeli goods or for an academic or cultural boycott, as the Boycott, Divestment

4 One example is the several references in the resolution to the role of the state of Israel in the Jewish experience: "The longing for a secure Jewish state and hostility to Jews resulted in many Jews fleeing to Palestine and establishing the state of Israel" (lines 12–13). The resolution confesses our "failing to understand the significance of the state of Israel for many Jewish people and the diversity of perspectives and understandings among Jews related to Israel and Zionism" (lines 124–25). These words reflect an honest grappling by the Mennonite community, which embraces a non-statist, nonviolent theology and ethic, and these elements were included because of the reflection and attention of the diverse writing team. This accounting is somewhat at odds with Lisa Schirch's portrayal in "Anabaptist-Mennonite Relations with Jews Across Five Centuries," *Mennonite Life* 74 (July 9, 2020).

and Sanctions (BDS) movement does (lines 25–51). In an interview with *The New Arab* several days after the resolution was adopted, Jonathan Brenneman explained that the resolution does not endorse the full BDS movement, because there was not agreement in the church on academic and cultural boycotts.[5] In a video introducing the resolution to the church, executive board member Bishop Leslie Francisco said that we "don't condemn or condone BDS."

One step in implementing the section of the resolution on opposing military occupation was a consultation sponsored by Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) on investment and Israel/Palestine, held November 2018, five months after the delegate action. The day-long meeting included representatives of Everence—the stewardship agency associated with the denomination—Mennonite Mission Network, Mennonite Education Agency, Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Palestine Israel Network (MennoPIN), and Christian Peacemaker Teams (now Community Peacemaker Teams). Everence reported on its military and human rights screens in relation to Israel and how it had "augmented its screening processes, invested in new research and developed tailored products for investors concerned about military occupation."[6] The day included reports from the various organizations and extended conversation and exchange.

Six months later, in May 2018, MC USA leaders advocated for peace and justice in Palestine and Israel at Washington, DC, congressional offices in a further step of implementing the resolution. Each of the six delegates had spent time in Palestine and Israel, some through MC USA's Come and See tours. The delegation visited fifteen congressional offices representing five states and referenced the denominational resolution in their visits. The day of advocacy was planned and financed jointly by MC USA and the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) U.S. Washington Office and took place just days after Israeli soldiers killed more than sixty largely nonviolent Palestinian protesters in Gaza earlier that month.[7]

The resolution encouraged individual Mennonites to put their faith into practice on this issue, sometimes at a significant personal cost. Esther Koontz, a Mennonite math teacher in Kansas, lost her job because she could not in good conscience sign a statement that she was not involved in a boycott of Israel. Multiple experiences led her to this conclusion, including the adoption of the

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5 Kuttab, "Christian Consumers," https://www.newarab.com/analysis/conscious-consumers-how-mennonite-church-came-support-bds.

6 "MC USA Consultation on Investment and Israel/Palestine," Mennonite Church USA News, Jan. 23, 2018, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/mc-usa-consultation-investment-israel-palestine/.

7 "MC USA Leaders Visit Capitol Hill to Advocate for Peace in Palestine and Israel," Mennonite Church USA News, June 26, 2018, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/mc-usa-leaders-visit-capitol-hill-to-advocate-for-peace-in-palestine-and-israel/.

MC USA resolution earlier that summer.[8] The lawsuit she brought against the state of Kansas, with the support of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), was reported on widely and led to the Kansas legislature significantly rewriting the legislation. It was the first such lawsuit in the country. Others have followed.

In the fall of 2023, six years after the resolution was adopted, Mennonite Action was formed, a grassroots movement of Mennonites taking public action for a ceasefire in Gaza. Its first mass Zoom call at the end of November 2023 engaged an unprecedented eight hundred people from more than two hundred fifty congregations across the US and Canada.[9] Since then, Mennonite Action has coordinated prayer vigils, hymn sings and protests at more than forty locations across the US and Canada, led a large civil disobedience action in Washington, DC, and joined an interfaith coalition protesting the national conference of Christians United for Israel.[10]

At the initial Zoom mobilization and subsequently, organizers repeatedly referenced the 2017 resolution and the process leading up to it as laying significant groundwork for the widespread engagement of Mennonites now taking action for a ceasefire. It was important and overdue for Mennonites to officially and formally address antisemitism, as the second section of the resolution did. Lutherans, Catholics, and other Christian denominations had wrestled with these questions in the decades after World War II and had produced major statements in the 1980s and 1990s. Some Mennonites lived with the illusion that as a historic peace church we do not share in the complicity of other Christians, even though the Nazi involvement of some German Mennonites who immigrated to the Americas was becoming an open secret. The "Seeking Peace" resolution named Mennonite failure "to do the hard work of examining our participation in anti-Semitic belief and practice" (line 115).

Encouraged and supported by the resolution and as one important next step, Bethel College (North Newton, Kansas) in March 2018 hosted the first academic history conference in the US on Mennonites and the Holocaust.[11] Mennonite

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8 Esther Koontz, "Kansas Won't Let Me Train Math Teachers Because I Boycott Israel," ACLU, Oct. 12, 2017, https://www.aclu.org/news/free-speech/kansas-wont-let-me-train-math-teachers-because-i-boycott-israel.

9 "Mennonite Action Mobilizes 800 Participants in Call for Ceasefire," Mennonite Church USA, Nov 29, 2023, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/mennonite-action/.

10 "Movement News," Mennonite Action, https://www.mennoniteaction.org/news.

11 "'Mennonites and the Holocaust' Conference Issues Call for Papers," Mennonite Church USA News, March 10, 2017, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/mennonites-holocaust-conference-issues-call-papers/. See also "Mennonites and the Holocaust" conference schedule, March 16–17, 2018, https://mla.bethelks.edu/MennosandHolocaust/.

Church USA provided seed money and the impetus for this conference. More than two hundred people attended. Papers presented at the conference were published by the University of Toronto Press in 2021 in the book *European Mennonites and the Holocaust,* edited by Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiesen.

The resolution also affirms and encourages conversation on how Mennonites read scripture in light of the Holocaust. While the resolution was being drafted, Mennonite Church USA staff secured funding for such a conference. Seven years later, in May 2023, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana) hosted a symposium of Jewish and Mennonite clergy and scholars on reading the Bible after the Holocaust.[12]

In conjunction with the resolution, Mennonite Church USA convened a Mennonite-Jewish Relations Group, bringing together for the first time Mennonites who have a wide range of close relationships with Jewish partners. Various Mennonites in this group had close relationships with a senior staff member at the Anti-Defamation League and key leaders at Jewish Voice for Peace. The Mennonite-Jewish Relations Group included representatives of two congregations who shared a building and, in one case, pastoral staff with a synagogue; congregations who worked closely with Jewish congregations on local justice efforts; and Mennonites who had married Jewish partners. Most of these Mennonites had not previously been in conversation with each other. Seven years later, this group continues to meet. As the resolution was being drafted and considered, Mennonite Church USA staff also compiled an extensive twenty-one-page bibliography of "Resources on Mennonite and Jewish Relations."[13]

The Mennonite-Jewish Relations group and the Mennonite Palestine Israel Network (MennoPIN), which formed during the multi-year process of preparing for this resolution, are both still active and collaborate on occasion, such as sharing a booth at Mennonite Church USA conventions together with other Mennonite social justice organizations.[14]

Regarding both military occupation and antisemitism, the resolution includes an assessment of where we are as a church, what needs to be confessed, what work needs to be done, and what concrete next steps we could commit to

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12 David C. Cramer, "AMBS Hosts Jewish-Mennonite Symposium on Reading the Bible after the Holocaust," Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary News, May 25, 2023, https://www.ambs.edu/news/ambs-hosts-jewish-mennonite-symposium-on-reading-the-bible-after-the-holocaust/.

13 "Bibliography of Resources on Mennonite and Jewish Relations," Mennonite Church USA Israel/Palestine initiatives, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/ministry/peacebuilding/israel-palestine-initiatives/, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/bibliographymennonitejewishrelations_2018feb/.

14 Personal email with Jonathan Brenneman, August 31, 2024.

taking. A range of stakeholders have taken seriously the implementation of the resolution. It is far more than a statement; it has set much in motion in the church.

How Did We Get There?

Grassroots and Senior Leadership: A Top-Down/Bottom-Up Strategy

For years, some Mennonites, especially those who have served with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and/or Community Peacemaker Teams (CPT), have been profoundly aware of the injustices that Palestinians endure because of Israeli military occupation supported by the United States.

In 2007, a delegation of senior leaders of Mennonite agencies traveled to Israel-Palestine in recognition "of the need for a common conversation among various parts of Mennonite Church USA." The group wrote an Open Letter to Mennonite Church USA Congregations.[15] Among other things, the letter called on church institutions to avoid investments that violate international law and promote violence.

In 2011, after consultation with the Executive Board of Mennonite Church USA, Executive Director Ervin Stutzman released a public letter of response to the "Kairos Palestine" statement. That remarkable statement had been written by Palestinian Christians committed to struggle for justice in the spirit of "Jesus' way of love" (lines 20–21). To these Christians, Stutzman wrote that Mennonites "commit ourselves to promote and expand opportunities for our leaders and members to visit you and learn firsthand about your suffering. . . . Further, we will continue to wrestle with the way our lives are enmeshed in the policies and implementation of occupation through our economic practices and seek to turn from them." This open letter was accompanied by a letter to Mennonite Church USA congregations.[16] Acknowledging that "within Mennonite Church USA the perspectives and commitments related to Israel and Palestine vary greatly," the letter urged Mennonites to study and engage with the Kairos Palestine document.

In 2013, grassroots leaders submitted a resolution for consideration by Mennonite Church USA delegates. This process involved vetting by the Constituency Leaders Council (CLC)—an advisory board comprising representatives from each of the area conferences and constituency groups (representing

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15 Delegation participants, "An Open Letter to Mennonite Church USA Congregations: Becoming Peacemakers in Israel/Palestine," Mennonite Church USA, June 2007, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/2007OpenLtrAndResourcesIsraelPalestine2007June.pdf.

16 Ervin Stutzman, letter to sisters and brothers in Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Church USA, October 5, 2011, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/KairosLtrToMCUSA_2011Oct5.pdf.

racial/ethnic associations in the church, for example).[17] The draft resolution did not adequately build on previous work in the denomination and did not have broad ownership. It was summarily dismissed by the CLC, which chose not to pass it on to delegates for further consideration.

These various experiences highlighted the role both of senior leaders and of grassroots leaders in making change happen. The 2007 open letter and the 2011 executive board response to Kairos Palestine were significant in that the most senior levels of denominational leadership showed their concern about and openness to addressing these matters. In the denomination, for example, not only the executive director but also key executive board members, including moderators, had firsthand knowledge of the injustices of occupation. Patty Shelly, for example, had spent years as MCC staff and regularly led student groups on learning tours to the region. At the same time, many grassroots church members had firsthand knowledge, experience, and relationships that compelled them to engage in activism and advocacy. These initiatives could be seen as top-down/bottom-up efforts at change, but they weren't enough to lead to concrete action by the denomination.

The Missing Piece: Mid-Level Leaders

John Paul Lederach, known for his pioneering work in justice and peacebuilding, has an insightful essay on how change happens in a community.[18] While Lederach was primarily writing about protracted community conflicts, his insight also applies to how change happens in a denomination such as Mennonite Church USA, which at that time had roughly 875 congregations, 90,000 members, and 19 area conferences.

Lederach points out that grassroots activists are often personally affected, deeply committed, and very engaged. They also often feel isolated and powerless.

Senior leaders have visibility and power, but their every move is scrutinized. That scrutiny can make them cautious, especially in matters that they do not see as a priority, even if they are sympathetic or supportive. If they are not being pushed and supported by a broad base, they will likely not act, or the action they take may have a limited impact.

Senior leaders in Mennonite Church USA understood something about the injustices in Palestine, and they were willing to make a statement, but Israel-Palestine simply wasn't their priority in the midst of the slow implosion

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17 Annette Brill Bergstresser, "Resolutions Are Back, but with a Difference," Mennonite Church USA News, November 9, 2012, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/resolutions-are-back-but-with-a-difference/.

18 Michelle Maiese summarizing John Paul Lederach, "Levels of Action (Lederach's Pyramid)," *Beyond Intractability*, July 2003, https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/hierarchical_intervention_levels.

of the church underway at the time around issues of sexuality. The grassroots was not sufficiently connected, not organized in powerful ways, and not strategic enough to make change happen. Lederach's essay and the experience at the CLC with the 2013 resolution proposal helped some of us see what was missing: mid-level leaders.

Mid-level leaders have relationships with senior leaders, and they have relationships with the grassroots. They also have relationships across the system with other mid-level leaders. Because they are not as visible and exposed as senior leaders, they can experiment and take risks in ways that are difficult at the very top. Key mid-level leaders in Mennonite Church USA were leaders of area conferences and constituency groups, people who make up the CLC.

The executive director's response to Kairos Palestine had committed the church to providing learning opportunities for Mennonites. The experience at the CLC helped us see that we should focus on area conferences and constituency groups.

While participants in previous MCC and other learning tours to Israel-Palestine were mostly self-selected people who were already attentive to the plight of the Palestinian people, we now worked with area conferences to recruit key pastors and leaders in that conference. We urged them to include leaders of color in delegations. One learning tour was organized especially for Latino and Black leaders. We also made it a requirement that after returning to the US, participants would share with the conferences through workshops at area conference assemblies and writing for their conference periodicals.

It was a good idea. But how to fund it and make it happen?

An Inside-Outside Strategy

Much of the grassroots activist attention focused on Everence and its investment practices. Students especially targeted Everence because it managed the large Mennonite college endowment for Mennonite Education Agency.

Everence has had a long history of pioneering socially responsible investment and was a leader in the field. The agency saw itself as a servant of the church and was cautious about being seen as out of sync with the church. Already at this point, Everence staff had been applying military and human rights screens to investments related to Israel-Palestine and had been leading conversations and initiatives with their counterparts in the world of socially responsible investment. But they used "investment-speak" rather than the language of advocates and activists.

Students at Mennonite colleges were pushing Everence hard to take more action and to make it public. Everence staff asked whether the church was supportive. Denominational staff asked Everence if they were ready to help the broader church become better informed. In the end, Everence and MCC, with a smaller contribution from Mennonite Mission Network (MMN), provided a $1,000

scholarship for every participant in what were later called "Come and See" learning tours.

While student groups often have a brief lifespan, in 2013 a grassroots network of pastors, former MCCers and CPTers, and concerned church members formed Mennonite Palestine Israel Network (MennoPIN) to connect and coordinate advocates for justice across the church. These leaders took inspiration from advocacy groups in mainline Protestant denominations. MennoPIN developed a study guide on the Kairos Palestine call[19]—made available in English and Spanish—and created "space for advocacy and action on the issue of boycott, divestment and sanctions within Mennonite Church USA."[20]

Encounter and Transformation

In the spring of 2014, the first of what we came to call "Come and See" learning tours included fifteen key leaders from Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Mutual Aid, MCC, MMN, and other church institutions.[21] The purpose was to test whether to promote this initiative in the church. The consensus was to move forward with an agreed-on set of goals and criteria.[22]

Staff from these organizations met regularly to discuss direction and strategy for the tours. We set a goal to send 100 leaders on Come and See tours over the course of the next 5 years. In the end, 112 pastors and leaders from at least 12 area conferences, Iglesia Mennonite Hispana, the African American Mennonite Association, and denominational agencies participated in learning tours in 3 years.[23] Participants reported experiences that made them read the newspaper and the Bible in new ways[24] and challenged them to follow Jesus with new courage and

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19 "Kairos Palestine: A Moment of Truth," a four-week congregational study plan, Israel/Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Mennonite Palestine Israel Network (MennoPIN), 2016, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Kairos_StudyGuide_Menno_9_Digital-2.pdf.

20 "Brief History of Mennonite Involvement in Palestine-Israel," MennoPIN About, https://mennopin.org/brief-history-of-mennonite-involvement-in-palestine-israel/.

21 Jenn Carreto, "'Come and See': Mennonite Leaders Visit Israel/Palestine," Mennonite Church USA News, March 24, 2014, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/come-and-see-mennonite-leaders-visit-israelpalestine/.

22 "Come and See Fund, Mennonite Church USA," September 13, 2013, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/TourCriteria.pdf.

23 For a listing of participants, see "'Come and See' Learning Tour Participants and/or Recipients of 'Come and See' Scholarships," Mennonite Church USA, 2020, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2017_10_Come_and_See_Participants_update.pdf.

24 "Seeking Peace in Palestine and Israel through People-to-People Connections," MCC, March 22, 2024, https://mcc.org/our-stories/seeking-peace-palestine-and-israel-through

conviction.[25] They came back and presented workshops, led chapels, preached sermons, and wrote articles in conference newsletters and other settings.

Aligning Partners

Grassroots and agency leaders collaborated to bring a second resolution about justice in Palestine to the delegates at the 2015 Mennonite Church USA delegate assembly.[26] By this time there had been significant further conversation and collaboration between the service and advocacy organizations like MCC, CPT, and MennoPIN, on the one hand, and Everence, on the other. These parties worked together closely in drafting the new resolution. Though the advocacy groups and Everence used different language, they shared an interest in helping the church live out its faith in its financial life.

This time the resolution moved more easily through the CLC vetting process and came before the delegates at Kansas City in 2015. But those setting the agenda for the delegate sessions were focused on what seemed like a head-on collision in the church regarding LGBTQ inclusion. The executive board planned to bring two competing and contradictory resolutions on issues of sexuality to delegates on Thursday, July 2. They wanted the Israel-Palestine delegate discussion to happen on Wednesday, before the contentious LGBTQ inclusion discussion. The result was that many workshops and seminars on Israel-Palestine, led in part by Come and See tour alumni, were scheduled for later in the week, after the delegate deliberation on Israel-Palestine had already happened.

On Wednesday, delegates discussed the Israel-Palestine resolution, both at their tables and in floor debates. While there was strong support for the resolution, some raised concerns that it did not address the experiences of Jewish people. The delegates voted to table the resolution and urged denominational staff to revise it and bring it back at the next delegate assembly for further consideration.[27]

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25 "Come and See Learning Tour Travelogue," Mennonite Church USA, April 21, 2015, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/come-and-see-learning-tour-travelogue/.

26 Michael Miller Yoder, "Mennonite Church USA Kansas City 2015 Resolution on Israel-Palestine: Submitted to the 2015 Kansas City Convention Resolutions Committee of Mennonite Church USA," MennoPIN, February 27, 2015, https://mennopin.org/2015/03/22/resolution/.

27 Caitlin Nearhood, "Delegates Grapple with Israel-Palestine Resolution," Mennonite Church USA News, July 2, 2015, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/delegates-grapple-with-israel-palestine-resolution/.

Organizing the Base

After the delegates tabled the resolution, an engaged pastor in consultation with authors of the tabled resolution drafted a short resolution to salvage the important work that had been happening. Rev. Alex Awad, a prominent Christian Palestinian and former dean of students of Bethlehem Bible College, spoke gently but firmly to the delegates. They unanimously adopted a "Partners in Peacemaking" resolution, which called on Mennonites to study, discern, and partner with Palestinian and Jewish peacemakers in preparation for consideration of a revised resolution.[28]

Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Mission Network created a voluntary service position to help implement the Partners in Peacemaking resolution.[29] Jonathan Brenneman served for two years as Partners in Peacemaking Coordinator.

As Director of Holistic Witness for Mennonite Church USA, I had the privilege of supporting and supervising Jonathan, who was uniquely equipped for this role. Rather than starting by planning events or producing educational resources, Jonathan approached this work as an organizer. One of his first assignments was to travel to communities with large concentrations of Mennonites and build relationships. He met with people who had deep connection to Israel-Palestine, as well as with pastors and decision-makers. He spent time in Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Kansas, and Mennonite communities in other parts of the country.

Jonathan built groups in each of these areas, often drawing in recent alumni of Come and See tours. He then worked with local leaders to coordinate multiple speaking tours that included Palestinian and Jewish peacemakers, and to undertake educational and advocacy efforts that engaged hundreds, if not thousands, of people across the church. This organizing work played a critical role in preparing Mennonite Church USA delegates to take action on a revised resolution in 2017.

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28 "A Statement of Support for Our Palestinian and Israeli Partners in Peacemaking—2015," passed by the Mennonite Church USA Delegate Assembly at Kansas City, Missouri, July 4, 2015, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/resource-portal/resource/a-statement-of-support-for-our-palestinian-and-israeli-partners-in-peacemaking-2015/.

29 Annette Brill Bergstresser, "New MVS Position Created to Carry Out Partners in Peacemaking Resolution in Local Settings," Mennonite Church USA News, August 17, 2016, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/new-mvs-position-created-to-carry-out-partners-in-peacemaking-resolution-in-local-settings/.

Extensive Consultation and Engaging Critics

After the 2015 assembly, comments from table groups were carefully reviewed and considered.[30] The executive board approved a broadly consultative and participatory process for rewriting and testing the resolution.

Lisa Schirch, Rod Stafford, and I became a writing team, with support from Jonathan Brenneman. We brought shared commitments and important differing experiences and perspectives. We formed a diverse ten-member reference group with whom we shared outlines and drafts. We consulted with Jewish and Palestinian leaders and partners and incorporated their insights into the document.

The staff and writing team engaged in extensive conversation and consultation with critics of the 2015 resolution. Careful listening led to a fundamental restructuring of the resolution and shaped the language of the text. In some cases, engaging deeply with brothers and sisters involved inviting them into new perspectives.

While the emerging resolution was in significant continuity with the 2015 text, it was a substantively different resolution in two important respects: It adopted a restorative justice frame, and it addressed complicity in antisemitism—while continuing to advocate strongly for justice for Palestinians.

Well before the next delegate assembly, a draft resolution was made public and shared with the church. Seventeen hundred people viewed the draft resolution, and more than eighty responses were received. In March 2017, the executive board approved “Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine” for consideration by the delegates.

When MC USA delegates met in Orlando a few months later in early July, the breadth of the church had been engaged on the content of the resolution. Endorsements for the resolution had been collected from a wide range of leaders across the church.[31] In the delegate session, a range of agency leaders were involved in presenting the resolution. Conversation and careful preparation had taken place for years. Still, it was surprising and gratifying to writers and organizers when 98 percent of the delegates voted in favor of the resolution.

Some observers outside Mennonite Church USA have compared this outcome to contentious delegate action in other denominations and have assumed that the 98 percent vote can be attributed to Mennonites being one of the so-called historic peace churches and naturally leaning progressive. In fact, Mennonites

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30 “Process of Drafting ‘Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine,’” Mennonite Church USA, April 2017, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ResolutionProcess_2017April.pdf.

31 “Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine” Resolution Endorsements, Mennonite Church USA, April 8, 2017 https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ResolutionEndorsements_2017April8.pdf.

span the theological and political spectrum, with strong influences of conservative cultural evangelicalism. There are, for example, deep veins of Christian Zionism within parts of the Mennonite world. I would suggest other factors leading to this outcome:

- Denominational staff and agencies investing in and leading an extended process of learning and discernment (rather than simply processing a resolution at a delegate assembly);
- Framing the resolution in terms that respected and built on Mennonite theology, tradition, and practice while being attentive to debates and developments outside the church;
- Carefully listening to multiple voices in the church; and
- Writing and vetting the resolution over an extended time frame with broad input and participation.

Wrestling with Contentious Matters: Coming to a Common Mind

The process surrounding adoption of the "Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine" resolution is a reminder that with attention and care, patience and persistence, respect for brothers and sisters, and openness to the Spirit, the church can wrestle with important and contentious matters, learn and grow together, come to a common mind, and take concrete and substantive steps together in its journey of faithfulness and witness.

An Earnest Effort Falls Short

The 2017 "Seeking Peace" Resolution of Mennonite Church USA

John Kampen

The 2017 resolution of Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) "Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine" was the logical development of Mennonite interactions and experience with the peoples of the Middle East. It set the course for subsequent engagement with the people of the area since October 7, 2023.[1] Of the 548 delegates who voted on July 6, 2017, only 10 opposed the resolution and 2 abstained. The persons who lined up on the conference floor to speak to the resolution were overwhelmingly in favor. "I could not support the resolution two years ago. It was too simplistic," Mennonite World Conference president Nelson Kraybill said, speaking in support of the motion during comments at the microphones and appearing to reflect the viewpoint of many. "I commend the committee for their thorough work."[2] Presumably the majority of the delegates

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1 "Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine: A Resolution for Mennonite Church USA," 2017, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/IP-Resolution.pdf.

2 "Mennonites Choose 'Third Way' on Israel and Palestine," July 6, 2017, http://mennoniteusa.org/news/mennonites-choose-third-way-israel-palestine/. For the 2015 resolution that was narrowly defeated, see "Resolution Israel-Palestine: For Consideration by the Delegate Assembly at KC2015," accessed October 18, 2024, https://mennopin.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/israel_palestine_resolution_2015april08.pdf. Note the further discussion of this resolution below.

were in agreement with the sentiment of the MC USA press release on that date titled "Mennonites Choose 'Third Way' on Israel and Palestine."[3]

Since the prior resolution tabled in 2015 did not include the section on antisemitism, it is this addition that made the designation "Third Way" possible. What was less clear in the rollout of the resolution and the resulting publicity, however, was the precise meaning of the phrase. The level of consensus in the final vote suggests that the delegate body believed Mennonite Church USA was adopting a new approach to the conflict in the Middle East. What the majority of the delegates believed was a very even-handed resolution was celebrated as a tremendous victory by many who had a particular interest in supporting the Palestinian cause, even though there were those who thought anything less than a full and unambiguous endorsement of BDS (Boycott, Divestments, and Sanctions campaign)[4] was inadequate.

Of greater significance was the rejection of the resolution as a sincere effort to reach out to the Jewish community of North America and Israel, as evident in the reaction of the Jewish press and even earlier in the response of a Jewish representative invited to read a draft of the resolution in formation. Later in this paper I discuss this problem as an instance of false equivalence. While it is tempting to resort to the old canard that if a statement is opposed by both sides of an argument there must be some truth to the claim, such a sanguine conclusion is not justified in this instance. Some analysis of the wording of the resolution itself and the process of its development, as well as its context in the history of Mennonite engagement with the area since 1949, demonstrates its problematic nature and its inadequacy as a basis for response to last year's October 7 murders and subsequent events.

The MC USA resolution of 2017 is the outcome of a long history of engagement with the Palestinian people and of theological development within the Mennonite church, particularly that portion of the church that has the most interest in social justice and peacemaking. As a graduate of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary and an ordained member (credentials now retired) of MC USA, I understand the logic undergirding the resolution and have some appreciation of

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3 The "third way" has been a popular label for designating a distinctive approach to theological and religious issues in recent Mennonite and Anabaptist traditions. The label is an outgrowth of an approach to these questions inspired by the perspective of Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo: Conrad, 1973). The metaphor has been employed in various ways in subsequent decades such as to designate an approach different from both a socially conscious liberal Protestantism and an individualistic "biblical" piety.

4 "The BDS Movement (boycott, divestment, and sanctions) was launched in 2005 by 170 Palestinian civil society organizations calling for economic, 40 cultural, and academic boycotts of Israel" (lines 38–40, "Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine" resolution).

the experiential background informing its development. This is true not only in general terms but also informed by regular, some prolonged, periods of time spent living in East Jerusalem since 1992. In addition, I am informed by a different set of perspectives and experiences beginning in 1975, when I enrolled in the PhD program at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati. Ever since that time, I have been privy to the ongoing conversations about Israel within the Jewish communities of the United States and Israel, particularly those informed by the liberal Zionism of Reform Judaism. I remain involved with Hebrew Union College and Reform Judaism in a variety of positions. My studies in Second Temple Judaism, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the New Testament informed a growing understanding of the history of antisemitism and its implications. Regular travel to Israel/Palestine for research and academic engagement since the early 1990s also informs my perceptions.

These experiences call for an examination of the content of the resolution and the assumptions undergirding it. While not on the writing team for the resolution, I was part of the larger reference group that provided periodic consultation for its formation. I had indicated to that body that I would not support the resolution in its final form.

Mennonites in Israel/Palestine[5]

The Mennonite Board of Missions (now Mennonite Mission Network) became engaged in Israel/Palestine in the 1950s. The Messianic Jewish movement was a consistent focus of the organization for the next half-century.[6] The establishment of what became Israel College of the Bible, described as the seminary of the Messianic Jewish movement in Israel, was an ongoing project, with Mennonites serving as faculty members earlier in its development. Roy and Florence Kreider were sent to Israel as missionaries by the Mennonite Board of Missions in 1953, and Roy studied at Hebrew University as part of his assignment.[7] During the

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5 See the summary of this period in Lisa Schirch, "Anabaptist-Mennonite Relations with Jews Across Five Centuries," *Mennonite Life* 74 (2020): 42–46. Also online at https://ml.bethelks.edu/2020/07/09/anabaptist-mennonite-relations-with-jews-across-five-centuries/. A pdf version runs to 109 pages, and the page citations in this article are from that downloaded version, hence only approximate. See also John Kampen, "Words Matter! Reorienting Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Studies with Attention to Antisemitism," *Antisemitism Studies*, forthcoming.

6 Marie Shenk, *Mennonite Encounter with Judaism in Israel: An MBM Story of Creative Presence Spanning Four Decades, 1953–93*, Mission Insight 15 (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Board of Missions, 2000).

7 The messianic mission to the Jews is clearly articulated in Roy Kreider, *Judaism Meets Christ: Guiding Principles for the Christian-Jewish Encounter* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1960). Roy and his wife, Florence, were the major staff persons in Israel for the Mennonite

1970s and 1980s, Roy was also engaged with the interfaith organizations in Israel. The placement of staff with Nazareth Hospital began in the 1960s and continued for decades. One result was the creation of Nazareth Village, with Mennonite involvement central to its formation. The establishment of this tourist center, which opened in the year 2000, has been a good source of employment for and engagement with the Arab community of lower Galilee. This history of Mennonite missions involvement had a minimal impact on the developments that led to the resolution adopted by MC USA in 2017.

Mennonite experience with Palestinians goes back to 1949 when MCC responded initially in the Gaza Strip, then in Lebanon and Jericho, to the needs of the Palestinian refugees from the war of 1948.[8] MCC actively engaged in the distribution of food and began to coordinate the distribution of clothing to Palestinians for other church agencies as well. Material assistance continued in Jericho until 1966.

In 1954 MCC began distributing American surplus food through the US Title III program, so that in the space of a decade it dispensed 26,254,935 pounds of cheese, butter, oil, dried milk, and bulgur wheat. Primary distribution sites for these materials were the schools MCC had begun in Beit Jala and Hebron. Food was also handed out through women's society contacts and to welfare cases identified by the Jordanian government.

Of long-term significance was the sewing program begun in 1951 in Ein el-Sultan refugee camp near Jericho. This program was rapidly absorbed into the needlework program—established in Bethlehem in 1952—which became a visible symbol throughout North American Mennonite churches of MCC's involvement in the region and a significant source of income for some Palestinian families. Here traditional Palestinian embroidery patterns were utilized in the production of products for the North American market, still sold today in Ten Thousand Villages stores.

Upon the initiative and advocacy of MCC staff working in the West Bank, the organization began a rural development program that ran from 1976 to 1988. This program was initiated out of a desire "to push MCC in the direction of greater solidarity with Palestinians in the face of Israeli occupation."[9] Desirous of a more active role in advocacy rather than continuing the traditional Mennonite stance of nonresistance, these North American staff members sought opportunities to become advocates for the Palestinian people and the issues they faced.

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mission to the Jews from 1953 to 1985. See Roy H. Kreider, *Land of Revelation: A Reconciling Presence in Israel* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2004).

8 This history is available in greater detail in the volume by Alain Epp Weaver and Sonia K. Weaver, *Salt and Sign: Mennonite Central Committee in Palestine, 1949–1999* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1999).

9 Weaver and Weaver, *Salt and Sign*, 55.

These rural development programs made possible the addition of Palestinian staff members, some of whom were involved in other initiatives that brought more attention to the issues among foreign press and international agency personnel.

On the minds of many was the question of whether MCC had a peacemaking role in the area. In this case, the peacemaking role refers to a program of conflict resolution that would make a contribution to an eventual peace in Israel/Palestine. Frank Epp, a historian and later president of Conrad Grebel College (now Conrad Grebel University College) in Waterloo, Ontario, was sent to Israel and the West Bank to evaluate the potential for a peacemaking initiative. He eventually authored three volumes on the region—one more historical and the other two the results of interviews with Palestinians and Israelis.[10]

Yet there is little evidence that MCC staff in the region were interested in developing such a program or even that such a program was possible. It is rather attention to the occupation that has characterized the efforts of MCC related to the region from that time until the present day. Peace efforts largely centered around documenting and challenging various aspects of the occupation. MCC has remained an engaged and active presence in the Palestinian communities, continuing to the present and including projects in the Gaza Strip. As its own literature states:

> Through the years, MCC has accepted invitations from Palestinians to walk alongside them as they search for justice, peace and freedom. MCC has worked with Israeli partners since Israel's occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip in 1967. MCC supports the efforts of both Palestinians and Israelis committed to nonviolence and to a future of peace, justice and reconciliation for both peoples.[11]

The most important initiative for peacemaking was the development of the peace library in Jerusalem, called the Peace Resource Center, which operated until 1997. As a Palestinian national consciousness began to build in the 1970s, MCC began to provide training in methods of nonviolent struggle. These efforts included the translation of materials on peacemaking and nonviolence—such as the writings of Gene Sharp—into Arabic. This center made available to both Palestinians and Israelis thousands of volumes on the themes of peace and justice, along with videos and periodicals.[12]

Throughout the entire period of MCC engagement in the Middle East, workers have considered their interpretive role as very significant. MCC volunteers have

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10 Frank H. Epp, *Whose Land is Palestine? The Middle East Problem in Historical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970); Frank H. Epp, *The Palestinians: Portrait of a People in Conflict* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976); Frank H. Epp, *The Israelis: Portrait of a People in Conflict* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1980).

11 https://mcc.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/mcc_palestine_israel_booklet.pdf.

12 Weaver and Weaver, *Salt and Sign*, 87–88.

made themselves available to the multiple Mennonite tourist groups and study tours by Mennonite agencies and educational institutions that have impacted whole generations of students and church leaders. A total of 177 volunteers served in these programs from 1948 to 1999. Included in this list are many who became faculty members at Mennonite colleges and seminaries as well as persons serving in influential positions of denominational and Mennonite agency leadership.[13]

The impact has been a comparatively widespread understanding of the Palestinian perspective among the leadership of MC USA, MC Canada, and MCC. There is ample evidence of the tremendous impact that the time of service in Israel/Palestine had upon the lives of the volunteers and the life of the denomination.[14] This impact has countered some of the dispensationalist views and other Christian Zionist perspectives that were influential in some segments of these Mennonite churches.

Among the volunteers listed are members of the Awad and Kuttab families—Palestinians who remain connected with the Mennonite world and were leaders in the development of organizations and strategies of peaceful resistance to Israeli occupation. The impact of this work is apparent in the life of Mubarak Awad, who in 1983 founded the Palestinian Center for the Study of Nonviolence. He had learned about nonviolent resistance during his years of study at Bluffton (Ohio) College (now University). His promotion of resistance attracted the attention of Israeli authorities, so he was deported in 1988 to the United States, where he became a citizen. Adjunct Professor of Peace Studies at American University in Washington, DC, Mubarak was recognized by *Newsweek* magazine as the "Palestinian Gandhi."[15]

This continuing impact in Palestine is apparent in the work of Mubarak's brother, Bishara Awad, the founder of Bethlehem Bible College, and his nephew, Sami Awad, the founder of the Holy Land Trust and also a prominent activist in the tradition of nonviolence. Another brother, Alex Awad, is a charter member of the Board of Trustees and faculty of Bethlehem Bible College. He is also regarded as a founder of the influential Christ at the Checkpoint conferences. Senior pastor of the East Jerusalem Baptist Church, he advises the United Methodist Church's Board of Global Ministries and the Mennonite Palestine Israel Network (MennoPIN) on issues regarding Palestine and Israel. Mubarak Awad and Jonathan Kuttab are co-founders of Nonviolence International. Kuttab is a Mennonite Palestinian who also was involved in the founding of the Palestinian Center for Nonviolence. With an office in East Jerusalem he has been

13 Weaver and Weaver, *Salt and Sign*, 135–40.

14 Weaver and Weaver, *Salt and Sign*, 111–28.

15 Jeff Stein, "The 'Palestinian Gandhi' Who Still Believes Non-Violence Is the Answer," *Newsweek*, August 12, 2014, https://www.newsweek.com/2014/08/22/palestinian-gandhi-who-still-believes-non-violence-answer-264041.html.

engaged in Human Rights issues with agencies of the United Nations and has a substantive international presence. His brother Daoud is a prominent Palestinian journalist. As discussed below, members of these families have remained a regular source of information and counsel for various Mennonite bodies engaged in the issues of Israel/Palestine.

A new initiative that developed in large part out of the history of the MCC experience was the involvement of Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT, now Community Peacemaker Teams) in Israel/Palestine.[16] Begun in 1986 by leadership from the Mennonite Church, the General Conference Mennonite Church, and the Church of the Brethren, and later joined by Friends meetings, CPT established a program in Israel/Palestine at Hebron in 1995 and continues its presence in that city.[17] This presence has included patrols that accompany Palestinian children to school, monitoring settler violence and soldier home invasions, and working against home demolitions. It supports Palestinian-led nonviolent resistance to Israel's military occupation and educates people in North America. At various times it has also attempted other projects that were more short-lived. It endorsed the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign in 2010.[18] Itineration in Mennonite churches by present and former CPT volunteers is commonplace.

It is this growing and sustained engagement with the Palestinian community over a period of seventy-five years that made possible the development of a resolution considered by MC USA in 2015 and the subsequent adoption of a resolution by that same body in 2017, as well as the resolution adopted by MC Canada in 2016. It is this history that informs not only the adoption but also the perspective and content of these resolutions. Similarly, support for the resolution as well as its perspective and content has been informed by the failure to develop within the Mennonite staff and constituency a deep understanding of the nature of Israel, its importance to the worldwide Jewish community, and its history, as well as the challenges to its well-being and survival. Thus, the Mennonite leadership, staff, and constituency has not over the past seventy-five years developed

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16 Kathleen Kern, *In Harm's Way: A History of Christian Peacemaker Teams* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 93–228.

17 http://cptpalestine.com/.

18 "Brief History of Mennonite Involvement in Palestine-Israel," prepared by Timothy Seidel and André Gingerich Stoner, MennoPIN, accessed October 18, 2024, https://mennopin.org/brief-history-of-mennonite-involvement-in-palestine-israel/; "The Impact and Importance of the BDS Movement: What Is the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement Mobilizing For? What Are Their demands?," CPT Palestine, accessed October 18, 2024, https://cpt.org/2024/07/09/the-impact-and-importance-of-the-bds-movement; Ameera Al-Rajabi, "The Power and Complexity of BDS: Insights from an Interview with Human Rights Advocate Hisham Al-Sharbati," CPT Palestine, accessed October 22, 2024, https://cpt.org/2024/04/08/the-power-and-complexity-of-bds.

a network of relationships that would permit them to understand the nature of Jewish life in Israel and abroad. So the denomination, its staff members, and its constituency were ill-equipped to draft a comprehensive resolution addressing both Israeli Palestinians and Jews in an informed and empathetic manner, much less the concerns of the worldwide Jewish people.

The Origin and History of the 2017 Resolution

The resolution of 2017 had its origin in an Executive Board decision of MC USA to send a delegation of its "leaders from across its agencies to visit Palestine-Israel with the purpose of engaging the discussion on divestment."[19] In light of what they described as "these disconcerting realities"—observations confined primarily to the occupation and its impact most particularly on Palestinian life—they returned with recommendations that were circulated in a June 2007 letter to all the churches of the denomination, calling for pastors and leaders "to visit both Israel and Palestine and to deepen their understanding of the current situation in the region."[20] They did call on "all parts of the church to strengthen our commitment to bridge-building between the alienated factions in this region," a noteworthy attempt to address the complexities of peacemaking in the region.

In December 2009, Palestinian Christians released the Kairos Palestine document. This provided a new and more focused context for the denomination's interest in the area. The response came in the form of a letter dated October 5, 2011, addressed to "Dear sisters and brothers in Christ in Palestine."[21] In this letter signed by Ervin Stutzman, the Executive Director of the denomination, the situation of the Palestinians was recognized: "We open our hearts when we

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19 "Brief History of Mennonite Involvement in Israel-Palestine," prepared by Timothy Seidel and André Gingerich Stoner, accessed October 22, 2024, https://mennopin.org/brief-history-of-mennonite-involvement-in-palestine-israel/.

20 "An Open Letter to Mennonite Church USA Congregations: Becoming Peacemakers in Israel/Palestine, June 2007," Mennonite Church USA, accessed October 18, 2024, https://mennopin.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/mc-usa-2007-open-letter-becoming-peacemakers-in-israel-palestine.pdf. I responded to this letter already at that time: "Mennonites, Judaism and Israel-Palestine," *The Mennonite* (online), July 23, 2007. My response is no longer available on the website, but it is cited in the blog post by Tim Nafziger, "A Window into Antisemitism and Nazism Among Mennonites in North America, Part 1," *The Mennonite* (online), July 27, 2007, https://anabaptistworld.org/window-antisemitism-nazism-among-mennonite-north-america-part-1/.

The letter also encouraged the study of books such as that of Alain Epp Weaver, ed., *Under Vine and Fig Tree: Biblical Theologies of Land and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2007).

21 Ervin Stutzman (Mennonite Church USA Director), Letter, October 5, 2011, http://mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/KairosLtr_2011Oct5.pdf.

again hear of the suffering you experience in an occupied land as homes are taken from you, families and communities are separated by walls and checkpoints, and countless large and small indignities and humiliations are visited upon you each day." Later in that letter, the Palestinians' situation is compared to that of Christ: "We hear in your call the appeal of Christ to us." Pledges for continuing to send persons to see the situation firsthand and for continuing study were included in the letter. It provided the genesis of the extensive "Come and See" tours—the coordination of trips to Israel/Palestine for at least 110 participants by April of 2017. For a relatively small denomination of now approximately 62,000 members—in 2007 around 135,000 members—this included a good deal of the national and local leadership.

In 2013 an organization called MennoPIN (Mennonite Palestine Israel Network) grew out of this rather large investment of time and resources in this effort, spurred on by the interest and energy level of many persons engaged in these trips, the decades of work by Mennonite Central Committee, and the educational opportunities for travel to and study in the area supported by all of the Mennonite colleges and seminaries. "MennoPIN has given particular attention to the Kairos Palestine call, producing a study guide for Mennonite congregations, and creating space for advocacy and action on the issue of boycott, divestment, and sanctions within Mennonite Church USA."[22] The study materials are an adaptation of those produced by the Presbyterian Church. As is well known, the statements of the Presbyterian Church about Israel/Palestine have been the source of conflict with major organizations of the Jewish community.[23] While MennoPIN is independent of any formal denominational connection with MC USA, Mennonite Church Canada PIN (Palestine and Israel Network) is a volunteer organization that operates within the organizational structure of Mennonite Church Canada.

The other major connection for the leadership of MennoPIN has been Sabeel, the Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center formed by Naim Ateek, former canon of St. George's Episcopal Cathedral in Jerusalem, and the author of *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*[24] and other books. A number

22 *Kairos Palestine: A Moment of Truth*, Four-Week Congregational Study Plan, accessed October 18, 2024, https://mennopin.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/kairos_studyguide_mennopin.pdf.

23 Note the critique by Ted A. Smith and Amy-Jill Levine in "Habits of Anti-Judaism: Critiquing PCUSA Report on Israel/Palestine," *The Christian Century* 127, no. 13 (June 29, 2010): 26–29. The case of the deteriorating relations between PCUSA and the Jewish community is regularly noted as a significant development in discussions of the recent history of Jewish-Christian relationships.

24 Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989).

of leaders in MennoPIN are also heavily involved with FOSNA (Friends of Sabeel North America), the North American arm of Sabeel. Its executive director is Jonathan Kuttab, mentioned above. This organization is heavily engaged with the support of and advocacy for the BDS movement in North America.

It is largely through the concerted planning, organizing, and strategizing of MennoPIN that a resolution on Israel/Palestine was considered at the biannual convention of MC USA in 2015.[25] Representatives from contacts in the Palestinian community were present at the convention, engaging in a variety of discussions and leading workshops, as were leaders from MennoPIN. The resolution failed to pass because of the efforts of a few who pointed out the rather limited view of the conflict that was assumed in the resolution, described as simplistic by Nelson Kraybill in the press release quoted above in the first paragraph of this article. Some ambiguity with regard to procedural issues within the assembly probably also contributed to its defeat. The delegates passed a resolution requesting further work and a resubmission for the 2017 assembly.

Denominational and MennoPIN leadership perceived the need for a more extensive educational process in the directions indicated in the earlier correspondence to the denomination in 2007 and 2013. Leadership for the development of the new resolution was delegated to André Gingerich Stoner, then Director of Holistic Witness and Interchurch Relations for MC USA. Jonathan Brenneman, with a master's degree in Peace Studies from Notre Dame and a North American Mennonite father and an ordained Mennonite mother born in Bethlehem, was appointed to a voluntary service position as coordinator of the educational efforts in this field. Now speakers of Palestinian background were itinerated among the churches, district conferences, and schools to educate persons about the situation of the Palestinians from the perspective of Kairos Palestine.

For example, for two months the Jewish and Palestinian Voices for Peace tour traveled to over twenty Mennonite venues across the country. Jonathan Kuttab, the well-known Palestinian Mennonite human rights lawyer mentioned above, shared the stage with members of local Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) chapters.[26] JVP is the only Jewish organization that was involved in these educational tours, or who was invited to present at the convention. It would surprise most leaders of major Jewish organizations and movements to learn that JVP could be seen as a representative voice of the Jewish community and its concerns in these matters or that it would be the only Jewish voice consulted by a major religious body drafting a resolution on Israel/Palestine. Alex Awad, consultant to MennoPIN and mentioned above, was invited to speak at various events in preparation for

25 "Mennonite Church USA Kansas City 2015 Resolution on Israel-Palestine," February 27, 2015, https://mennopin.org/2015/03/22/resolution/.

26 "Reflections on the Jewish and Palestinian Voices for Peace Tour," June 19, 2017, http://mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/reflections-jewish-palestinian-voices-peace-tour/.

the 2017 MC USA convention and was present for discussions and workshops in both 2015 and 2017.[27]

André Gingerich Stoner created a broader, more consultative process for the formation of the new resolution. A three-person writing team was appointed and a broader reference council invited to respond on a periodic basis to the drafts produced.[28] When the process was somewhat advanced, a draft was also posted on the denominational website, inviting comment. It was presented at the 2017 convention with wide endorsement and, as mentioned in the introduction above, passed with an overwhelming majority based upon the widespread belief that it had taken adequate account of the concerns of both the Palestinian and Jewish people through adequate consultation with both.

The Structure and Content of the Resolution

The overarching perspective of the 2017 resolution is stated in its first few lines: "As followers of Jesus and his gospel of reconciliation, we long for peace, security, justice, and the flourishing of all people living in Israel and Palestine."[29] This statement provides the context for an attempt at a more comprehensive approach to the issues being addressed than was apparent in the proposed resolution of 2015. While one paragraph in the Preamble of the latter proposal addresses the history of Christian antisemitism, the "injustice of the current Israeli occupation of Palestine" is its focus.[30] The same orientation is apparent in the Preamble to the 2016 resolution of Mennonite Church Canada: "This resolution emerges largely in response to the plea of Palestinian Christians that the global church come alongside the Palestinian people as they suffer under Israel's 49-year military occupation of their lands: the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza."[31]

Immediately following the opening lines of the 2017 resolution are two sentences that establish the parameters of the initial, more comprehensive statement as they focus on "the cry for justice of Palestinians . . . living under oppressive military occupation for fifty years" and "antisemitism and violence inflicted

27 Proposals for representation from Jewish agencies with experience in interfaith relations were rejected.

28 I was a member of that broader reference council and responded to successive drafts on a regular basis. I also made it possible for some feedback from Jewish agency representatives. As the draft neared its final form, I made it clear that I could not support the resolution in public presentation nor would I provide any written endorsement.

29 "Seeking Peace," Summary, lines 2–3.

30 "Resolution: Israel-Palestine; For Consideration by the Delegate Assembly at KC2015."

31 "A Resolution to the Mennonite Church Canada Delegate Assembly July 2016: Resolution on Palestine and Israel," accessed October 22, 2024, https://www.commonword.ca/FileDownload/23828/2016_Assembly_ Resolutions_Summary_Israel_Palestine.pdf.

upon Jews in the past and the present."[32] These two foci form the structure of the two-section resolution:

(1) "Opposing Military Occupation and Seeking a Just Peace" and
(2) "Opposing Antisemitism and Seeking Right Relationship with Jewish Communities."

While the resolution appears to reflect the concerns of both bodies, the concerns addressed were selected by the writers and do not reflect a concerted attempt to identify the issues most important to the people involved. The structure of each section consists of an introduction—"Confession and Lament"—and "Commitments." This structure is rooted in the methodology of restorative justice, an approach that has been championed by the academic programs in restorative justice, conflict management, and peacebuilding within the Mennonite colleges and universities and utilized widely in programs of the denomination and its agencies.[33]

So does the content of the resolution support the rhetoric of its literary structure? Does it reflect the genuine "third way" proposed in the denominational press releases accompanying its adoption? An examination of its content demonstrates the inadequacy of the "balance" proposed for its formation. A probe into the history that precedes it and the process of its development provides some explanation for this inadequacy, yet also explains why the overwhelming majority of representatives who voted for its adoption found it convincing in its claims.

Assessing the Resolution

The preceding description of the resolution provides the outlines of an earnest attempt to bring a different perspective rooted in the Mennonite tradition into the contested and often tragic relationship of Israelis and Palestinians of the Middle East. It also demonstrates the experiential, historical, and theological limitations of this Mennonite attempt to provide the outlines of such a "'two-handed' approach"[34] to the people of the region and the issues that impact their welfare by "both speaking clearly against any injustice and violence and also extending a hand of understanding and relationship to all parties."

What is most apparent is that the parallel rhetorical structure of the resolution is based upon a false equivalence. The direct connection between Palestinian suffering at the hands of Israel on one side of the "scale" and the history of the Jewish experience with antisemitism on the other is not apparent. Nor is it a helpful way of characterizing either of these problems, or of attempting to address them.

32 "Seeking Peace," Summary, lines 4–5.

33 "Seeking Peace," Clarification #7, lines 68–75.

34 "Seeking peace," Clarifications, line 70.

On the one hand, the parallel structure deflects attention from the fact that there is a real conflict over land that is at the heart of the issue being addressed in this statement. There is a very real struggle here between and within two groups of people with claims to the land that remain unresolved.[35] By making this assertion I by no means assume a simple definition of either Israel or Palestine that looks to political terms defined primarily by geography and history or to broader cultural and/or religious terms.

Emphasis on the term "occupation" has legitimacy with regard to land brought under the control of Israel in 1967 and assumed to be temporary, a situation made more troublesome by the West Bank settlements. However, "occupation" as the only term used to define the issue of land in a more comprehensive manner is problematic. It is rather the case that legal, historical, and religious claims to the land all are brought to bear on a present political reality in which almost all parties feel imperiled and marginalized by some portion of the international community. Only a more comprehensive approach to all of these claims can bring about a just and sustainable life for all of the parties inhabiting this limited piece of land.

The view of the land informing the resolution and recommended for further study in the document to MC USA is "Kairos Palestine." This document provides the definitive interpretation of the political situation informing the resolutions of both 2015 and 2017.[36] There is no indication of its limitations or of critiques of it. One such critique can be found in an official response from the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) in their "CCAR Resolution on the 2009 *Kairos* Document" adopted April 15, 2010.[37] In that resolution, the CCAR notes the continuous use of supersessionist language; ambiguity regarding the nature of the occupation and thereby ultimately rejecting the notion of a Jewish state; failure to acknowledge the violent Arab resistance to the establishment of a Jewish state; and failure to acknowledge the later violence against Israeli citizens, simply regarding it as acts of resistance.[38]

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35 For the recognition of what this means for Mennonite peacemaking see Lisa Schirch, "Improving Mennonite Support for a Just Peace in Israel and Palestine," *Anabaptist World* 5, no. 6 (June, 2024) 20–22.

36 The central document recommended for study by Mennonite Church USA in preparation for both conferences was *Kairos Palestine* and remains the definitive document recommended by the denomination for congregational and individual study.

37 https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-resolutions/ccar-resolution-2009-kairos-document/.

38 Certainly elsewhere the CCAR has supported the two-state solution and continues to be engaged in a variety of human rights initiatives within Israel, including those of the Arab citizens of Israel, and arguing for fair and humane treatment of Palestinians. The diversity of views throughout the Reform movement is apparent in the volume of essays it published intended to provoke discussion about Israel and its future. See Stanley

While neither the Kairos document nor these critiques should be endorsed simplistically or uncritically, the failure to recognize the critiques is a problem. To ignore totally the issues raised in this and other critiques while utilizing the Kairos document as a primary source of information and publicizing it exclusively in that manner is a failure on the part of the resolution's promoters to provide an adequate context for its use by those who were to vote on its adoption or for those who used it for educational purposes after the convention. The Kairos document is a statement of the Palestinian Christian churches and cannot be accepted as an attempt to provide a holistic or comprehensive view of the situation representing all the major groups of the area. Use of this document as the primary resource for information and education conveys the impression that all criticism of the viewpoint advanced in the document is illegitimate and simply reflects a general Jewish/Israeli rejection of Palestinian claims and aspirations. The opportunity for supporting/facilitating a broader discussion about how the peoples who presently inhabit the land might find some mode of coexistence is not made possible in this basic resource; hence, the opportunity is not presented in the resulting resolution. Similarly, in her critique of the Kairos document, Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine extensively engages in various aspects of Jewish-Christian dialogue, points out the document's weaknesses and what she terms mistakes, and highlights the manner in which compositions of this nature form an obstacle toward the formation of alliances between Jewish and Palestinian advocates for a peaceful solution.[39]

Among the confessions listed in the second part of the 2017 MC USA resolution is "Failing to understand the significance of the State of Israel for many Jewish people and the diversity of perspectives and understandings among Jews related to Israel and Zionism."[40] Noteworthy is the fact that this failure is included in the second portion of the resolution focusing on antisemitism, not in the first part where the major underlying issue is the land. This is another instance obscuring the recognition that there are two major narratives justifying claims on the land that need to be central to any attempt at peacemaking.

M. Davids and Lawrence A. Englander, eds., *The Fragile Dialogue: New Voices of Liberal Zionism* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2018). Note also David Fox Sandmel, "The *Kairos Palestine Document*, Anti-Semitism, and BDS," in *Peace and Faith: Christian Churches and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, eds. Cary Nelson and Michael C. Gizzi (Philadelpha/Boston: Presbyterians for Middle East Peace/Academic Studies Press, 2021), 277–95.

39 Note the argument of Amy-Jill Levine, "Un-Christian Responses to the Middle East," ABC Religion and Ethics, July 21, 2010: https://www.abc.net.au/religion/un-christian-responses-to-the-middle-east/10102228.

40 "Seeking Peace," lines 124–25.

Furthermore, the emphasis on "diversity of perspectives" is misleading and raises a different issue. Recognizing that Jewish Voice for Peace was a significant partner in the educational campaign leading up to the adoption of the resolution demonstrates the intent of these words—to indicate that the Jewish world is not as unified in its support of Israel as popular perception might suggest. The recognition that there is considerable diversity on what this means for the Jewish people, the state, its policies, and its politics is important and means that this deep commitment to the welfare of Israel is not tied to any particular government or its policies. The widespread demonstrations in Israel in the past two years are evidence of this diversity. Many Israelis who awoke on October 7 intending to go out and protest against the judicial overhaul attempted by the Netanyahu government instead without hesitation donned their uniforms and left home to join their reserve units, indicating both the diversity and the basic commitment to the welfare of the state.[41]

The recognition of diversity does not alleviate the need for the Mennonite community to take responsibility for the first half of the statement—for recognizing that considerably more effort should have been expended to understand the history and significance of Israel throughout Jewish history and contemporary Jewish life before ever attempting to create a resolution on the matter for the church as a whole. The acknowledgment of failure in this regard in the confession is noteworthy. However, the lack of any willingness on the part of the drafters of the resolution to begin to address this failure within the body of the text was problematic and perhaps indicative of its intended direction.[42] Furthermore, the response of the worldwide Jewish community to the October 7 massacres as an attack both on Israel and the worldwide Jewish community demonstrates Israel's centrality to Jewish life.[43]

While one might wish for a clearer statement recognizing the failure of Mennonites to bring some understanding of "the land" in post-biblical Jewish

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41 This was the response relayed to me by academic colleagues in Israel prior to and during my visit to Israel January 1–7 with a Jewish Studies Faculty delegation to colleges and universities in Israel. Dr. Nir Kedar, President of the Sapir College in Sderot, one-half mile from the Gaza border, indicated his total lack of trust in President Netanyahu and the government bureaus affecting the life of the college and its students. There was a wide acknowledgment that President Netanyahu's term would end with the end of the war. Coupled with that response was broad support for the necessity of the war effort itself. Note the commentary by Anshel Pfeffer, "One Month Into Gaza War, Israel Is Experiencing a Moment That Transcends Politics - Israel News - Haaretz.com" (November 8, 2023).

42 I can verify that representatives of major Jewish organizations were willing to meet with a Mennonite delegation on these matters or even to attend the Mennonite convention.

43 This was affirmed by my visit to Israel as a part of a Jewish Studies faculty from the United States during the first week in January (John Kampen, "Since Oct. 7, Israel Will Never Be the Same," *Anabaptist World* 5, no. 4 (April 2024): 23.

literature and thought to bear upon the question,[44] it must be recognized that Mennonites and other Protestant academics who engage the issue of the land frequently do so from the perspective of the Hebrew Bible, and in some instances the New Testament, read from a Christian "universalizing" perspective.[45] Of course, a recognition of the role of Israel in post-Holocaust Jewish life and thought also is necessary. Failure to attempt to understand the meaning of the land in Jewish religious and cultural life makes a "third way" approach to the question of the land impossible.[46] What is missing in both the resolution and in the earlier Mennonite history sketched above is substantive engagement with the Jewish community of Israel and the United States about understandings of Israel, as a political reality as well as a center of religious aspiration and imagination. This is a failure both at the congregational and the academic level.

Basic to the narrative of the Kairos document and carried throughout the Resolution is the displacement of 750,000 Palestinians in 1947–48, the "Nakba."[47] This reality is important and catastrophic, as acknowledged in the lament of Yossi Klein Halevi: "As we Israelis celebrated our reclaimed sovereignty and achieved one success after another, your people exchanged homes and olive orchards for the scorched earth of refugee camps, where you raised children without hope, the unwanted outcasts of the Arab world. I mourn the lives wasted in the bitterness of your despair against my joy."[48]

But there are a few things missing from this picture. This is apparent in the next succinct words of Halevi: "But I cannot apologize for surviving. What almost any Israeli Jew will tell you is that if the Palestinian and Arab leadership had accepted compromise instead of declaring a war to the death, the Palestinian

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44 This question was already addressed in Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 1993, reprint of 1909 and 1961 eds.), 80–115. For a collection of textual references, see Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah. Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. William G. Braude (New York: Schocken, 1992), 359–73. See also W. D. Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Isaiah M. Gafni, "Land, Center and Diaspora: Jewish Constructs in Late Antiquity," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement* Series 21 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

45 Marlin Jeschke, *Rethinking Holy Land: A Study in Salvation Geography* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2005). See also the influential works by Walter Brueggemann: *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); Walter Brueggemann, *Chosen? Reading the Bible Amid the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

46 For a survey of the history of views of the land in Jewish and Christian perspectives, see Adam Gregerman, "Land of Israel," in *Encyclopedia of Jewish-Christian Relations Online* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019–), here 2024.

47 "Seeking Peace," lines 13–15, 56–57.

48 Yossi Klein Halevi, *Letters to my Palestinian Neighbor* (New York: Harper, 2018), 84.

tragedy would not have happened." This is a reference to the rejection in 1937 by the Arab nations of the first proposal for the division of the land into two entities—a proposal that had been reluctantly accepted by the Zionist Congress because of the Jewish disappointment that their portion of the territory was considerably smaller (less than half of the territory) than they had hoped for.[49]

And then Halevi lists "another reason why Israeli Jews refuse to be cast as criminals in 1948. At least half of Israel's population is rooted in the Jewish communities of the Middle East." There is no acknowledgement in the resolution of the displacement of 830,000 Jews from the Arab lands of the Middle East and North Africa during those same years.

> Jews either fled violent anti-Semitism—a form of expulsion—or left of their own will, partly out of fear of anti-Jewish outbreaks and partly out of love for Zion. Anti-Jewish pogroms throughout the 1940s—in Baghdad and Benghazi and Aleppo and other Arab cities—took hundreds of lives and created the atmosphere of terror that led to mass flight. Jews were stripped of their property, imprisoned, and hanged.[50]

In 1948 nearly one million Jews lived in the Muslim world, today 40,000.[51] The diverse cultural composition of the Israeli population is not merely the result of more recent immigration patterns but rather the product of complex factors that for at least a century have driven Jews from around the world to relocate to their ancestral homeland.

The second half of the resolution is not a response to the call of the Kairos document but one aspect of the delayed response of the Mennonite churches to the chain of events that resulted in the Holocaust. This delayed response is another result of limited ongoing relationships with the Jewish communities of our world, particularly those of North America. On the one hand, Mennonites have been an integral part of Western history, thereby bearing their share of the blame for the atrocities of the Holocaust. Where MC USA departs from many of the major Protestant denominations is that it has not, in any formal manner, grappled with the issue of its responsibility for the Holocaust.[52]

Many denominations have issued statements and even adopted study guides and other such materials to provide guidance on the topic of antisemitism and

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49 Daniel Gordis, *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn* (New York: Ecco [Harper Collins], 2016), 121–23, 145–49.

50 Halevi, *Letters*, 85.

51 Halevi, *Letters*, 85.

52 John Kampen, "Mennonites, Jews and the Land: Preparing for a Discussion," *The Mennonite* (online), June 10, 2016, https://themennonite.org/opinion/mennonites-jews-land-preparing-discussion/; John Kampen, "Our Commitment to Jewish Dialogue," *The Mennonite* 21, no. 3 (March, 2018): 32; John Kampen, "We Need to Engage the Jewish Community," *The Mennonite* 19, no. 5 (May, 2016): 31.

the issues of Jewish-Christian relations, but MC USA does not have a history of such engagement. While one venue for these conversations has been the National Council of Churches (NCC)-National Council of Synagogues dialogue, MC USA has been an observer only at the meetings (not a member of the NCC) and, up to that point, had taken no initiative to reach out to the Jewish community and its agencies to invite input and conversation.[53] Only recently, for the most part since 2017, have concerted efforts to address this question begun to enter into the public discussion, even though some rather isolated academics have been researching this field for some time.

What is apparent in this research is not only that Mennonites share their portion of blame in the participation of these events in the societies of which they were a part but also that they were active perpetrators, in some places, of the atrocities whose purpose was to eliminate the Jewish people. The record of Mennonite participation in the German army, complicity with the Nazi movement, and support for the Nazi cause is rather extensive and encompasses major centers of Mennonite population such as Germany, Prussia (present-day Poland), and the Ukraine.[54] Extensive evidence of support for the Nazi cause among the Mennonites of Canada and South America is also apparent.[55] Addressing our own history of complicity in all of its intricacies is a necessary step in coming to terms with Jews and Judaism. The same is true for the antisemitism in our theology and religious teaching.

Coming to terms with the implications of the Holocaust for the Western world has provoked intense theological scrutiny among major Christian traditions. This issue, however, has not received sustained attention in the Mennonite church, and only now in the wake of the 2017 resolution has it begun to become a more central concern among limited segments of MC USA. Since so much of Anabaptist Mennonite theological attention has centered on the reading and interpretation of scripture, reappraisal begins here.

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53 I was an official observer representing MC USA to that dialogue from 2016 to 2018. Most denominational statements and resources were developed independent of, in many cases prior to, the limited confines of that dialogue, even though it may have had an influence on some.

54 Ben W. Goossen, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiessen, eds., *European Mennonites and the Holocaust* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020); Lisa Schirch, "How Mennonites Reckon with Our History in the Holocaust," *The Mennonite*, March 26, 2018, https://anabaptistworld.org/mennonites-reckon-history-holocaust/.

55 Frank H. Epp, Frank H. "An Analysis of Germanism and National Socialism in the Immigrant Newspaper of a Canadian Minority Group, the Mennonites, in the 1930s," (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1965); John D. Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi? Attitudes Among Mennonite Colonists in Latin America, 1933–1945*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History 37 (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora, 1999).

There are also two aspects of this issue that require attention: First, Western theology has been developed and nurtured by an anti-Jewish reading of the Bible, which could be used to support an explicitly antisemitic theology that was basic to a good deal of twentieth-century church teaching. For example, what are now almost self-evident issues, such as the negative portrayal and use of the Pharisees in preaching and teaching or the perception of Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus, have not received sustained treatment in popular Mennonite publications. Second, there are also questions that derive from particular Anabaptist emphases that have become mainstream in Mennonite church teaching. Most prominent for further evaluation would be the idea that Jesus taught a new law that superseded prior revelation. Does a supersessionist theology inform some of the uncritical Mennonite acceptance of the Kairos document and its claims?

The Impact of the Resolution

The false equivalence between the two sections of the 2017 MC USA resolution is apparent in the respective presentation of the "Commitments." While the first section on military occupation highlights accountability, the section on antisemitism is more aspirational. Although both sections stress relationship building in North America and Israel, there are more specific actions of advocacy and accountability in the first half. The resolution asks Everence, the financial services organization of the denomination, to periodically convene representatives of Mennonite-related agencies and organizations to "review investment practices for the purpose of withdrawing investments from companies that are profiting from the occupation."[56] There are no aspects of advocacy specified, or even mentioned, in the second half of the resolution with regard to countering antisemitism or acting on behalf of the Jewish people.

The higher level of specificity in accountability in the first section is not surprising given the history of the denomination's engagement with Israel/Palestine and its people. Noteworthy also is the extent to which BDS was an integral part of the history of the resolution—formally endorsed by both CPT and FOSNA-Sabeel—and one of the three major links on the home page of MennoPIN website. This attempt to isolate Israel economically, culturally, and academically in the world of nations is not a strategy that can, in any manner, be understood as the basis for a "third way" approach to Israel/Palestine.

Kairos Palestine also calls for economic boycott and divestment. While BDS is not formally endorsed in the 2017 MC USA resolution, the reliance of the denomination on organizations such as MennoPIN and CPT for continuing education on matters related to Israel/Palestine and on their members for advice and leadership in its advocacy work point to the continuing influence the BDS

56 "Seeking Peace," lines 97–100.

impulses have among the Mennonite leaders and advocates involved in these matters. The mandate for advocacy with the US government, while emphasizing nonviolence, betrays no hint of a third way for peace in Israel/Palestine but rather simply supports the Palestinian cause.[57]

The impact of the resolution on Mennonite church engagement in these issues since 2017 demonstrates the continuing problematic in developing a genuine two-handed approach. Relationships at the individual and congregational level have received more attention than was previously known or more broadly acknowledged. Interested individuals formed a Mennonite Jewish Relations Working Group that continues to address issues of Mennonite-Jewish relations and antisemitism within the denomination; however, it is composed totally of volunteers without any formal connection to either denominational offices or staff. Its work has not been endorsed or supported by the denomination or any of the Mennonite agencies.

Two important conferences were convened, supported in part with grants solicited by the staff responsible for drafting the 2017 resolution. The first conference, "Mennonites and the Holocaust," was held at Bethel College (Newton, Kansas) in March 2018 and drew about two hundred participants. The resulting volume of essays provides significant new research for transforming Mennonite understanding regarding widespread complicity in those tragic events.[58] The second conference, on "Reading the Bible After the Holocaust," was held May 8–10, 2023, on the AMBS campus. It was MC USA's first attempt to explicitly address the question of biblical interpretation related to the Holocaust.[59]

The implications of the resolution for continuing Mennonite engagement with Israel/Palestine is evident in the formation of the Mennonite Action Network in response to the tragic murders by Hamas on October 7, 2023, and the resulting Hamas-Israel war. In its explanation of "Why We Take Action," the Mennonite Action website points out that "Mennonite Central Committee, Community Peacemaker Teams, MennoPIN and other Mennonite groups and congregations have been present in Palestine for decades."[60] In other words, the same history of engagement that informed the 2017 resolution. A few sentences later, "In 2017, MCUSA passed a resolution committing to oppose Israel's military occupation of Palestine, in addition to actively opposing anti-semitism."

57 "Seeking Peace," lines 85–89.

58 Jantzen and Thiesen, *European Mennonites*.

59 "AMBS Symposium Unites Jews and Mennonites to Counter Antisemitism: Event Breaks New Ground in Mennonite-Jewish Dialogue," *Anabaptist World*, June 2, 2023. There were no published proceedings of this conference.

60 "How Can Mennonites Be Public Peacemakers in This Moment?," Mennonite Action website, accessed October 18, 2024, https://www.mennoniteaction.org/call-to-action.

There is no evidence here that these Mennonite groups and their leaders have attempted to broaden their perception of the issues or that they will suggest to the Mennonite church as a whole that there are other people and viewpoints that must be brought into the conversation.

While the immediate goal of these actions is a ceasefire, the long-term objective is "a lasting peace."[61] To think that Mennonites could contribute to that long-term goal in a meaningful manner without having developed a deep understanding of and experience with both dominant narratives, much less their multiple variations, is illusory. Nor does such thinking reflect the principles of restorative justice, said to be basic to the resolution.[62] While the resolution attempts to account for its privileging of one narrative with regard to the land by citing the dynamics of a power imbalance within that specific geographical location, it fails to give any acknowledgement of the difficult broader context for the existence of the state of Israel within the remainder of the Arab and Muslim Middle East.

The problematic nature of the resolution "Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine" adopted by MC USA in 2017 is the logical outcome of Mennonite engagement in the area that has focused primarily on supporting the Palestinian cause for the past seventy-five years and sets the course for future engagement in the area by various bodies within the broader Mennonite world, including its denominations and its agencies. Both the history of this engagement and the theological commitments it brings to those experiences prohibit MC USA, and presumably other portions of the worldwide Mennonite body, from embracing the broader peacemaking role it aspires to claim it is called upon to carry out. Israelis, Palestinians, and the Mennonite church all stand to lose from this failure.

A recent volume collects official reports of international and national Mennonite encounters with Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist, and Seventh-day Adventist bodies as well as a broader representation of churches related to the Radical Reformation.[63] Volumes of papers from Shi'i Muslim Mennonite Christian dialogue sessions are also available.[64] No corresponding record of substantive encounter with representation from the Jewish world is

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61 https://www.mennoniteaction.org/goals. The underlining is in the original text.

62 "Seeking Peace," Clarifications, lines 68–75.

63 Fernando Enns and Jonathan Seiling, eds., *Mennonites in Dialogue: Official Reports from International and National Ecumenical Encounters, 1975–2012* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015).

64 Harry Huebner and Hajj Muhammed Legenhausen, eds., *Peace and Justice: Essays from the Fourth Shi'i Muslim Mennonite Christian Dialogue* (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite University Press, 2011); Harry Huebner and Hajj Muhammed Legenhausen, eds, *On Being Human: Essays from the Fifth Shi'i Muslim Mennonite Christian Dialogue* (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite University Press, 2013).

available. This is a major gap when the church continues to take actions that directly impact not only the hopes but also the welfare of the Jewish people.

This omission could be corrected. Relationships with the religions and traditions noted above have been the result of work by the educational institutions of MC USA and MC Canada, Mennonite World Conference, in some instances MCC, as well as the denominational bodies and related agencies. A similar initiative with the denominations and agencies of the Jewish world is quite possible. This is of great importance if the church continues to work at resolutions and advocacy that have a direct impact on the welfare of the worldwide Jewish community.

The nascent efforts of the Mennonite church in the past decade with regard to Jewish-Mennonite relations are important, and the work on the resolution of 2017 and its aftermath have made a significant positive contribution to these developments. Addressing antisemitism is important, for the Jewish people and for the Mennonites. The historical and theological analysis of Mennonite beliefs and actions related to their impact on Jewish life and welfare is important. So a deeper relationship is called for, one in which Mennonites not only begin to see the problem of antisemitism but also develop a more comprehensive understanding of the threats to the welfare and livelihood of the Jewish people and of the strengths that are important for Jewish survival and contribution to the common good. Within the context of the resolution, this includes a better understanding of the importance and role of Israel for Jewish life.

Book Reviews

Sarosh Koshy, *Beyond Missio Dei: Contesting Mission, Rethinking Witness* (Postcolonialism and Religions), Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 392 pp. $139.99. ISBN-13: 978-3-030-82067-1.

In *Beyond Missio Dei*, Sarosh Koshy highlights the problematic aspect of understanding Christian mission as *missio Dei* and offers the notion of witness as an alternative path toward a postcolonial mission. In chapter 1, Koshy introduces his work, presents key conceptual elements, and summarizes his proposal. In chapters 2 and 3, he situates his work in the Joban tradition—the biblical tradition around the Book of Job—to then provide the main arguments against the *missio Dei* in chapters 4, 5, and 6, arguing in favor of the notion of witness as well. In the final chapter, chapter 7, Koshy offers the conclusion of his work. Since *Beyond Missio Dei* is an extensive, comprehensive, and complex work that engages with many theological, biblical, postcolonial, and poststructuralist proposals, I will focus here on Koshy's main argument and the possible avenues that it opens to rethink mission from the Anabaptist tradition.

For Koshy, the notion of *missio Dei* has been used to present Christian mission as a task performed primarily by God and, therefore, as an endeavor at the center of God's salvific project, in contrast to other notions of mission that seem to focus on the church's expansion. Hence, the notion of *missio Dei* aims to understand Christian mission as God's sending of the church to the world as a sign, foretaste, and instrument of God's reign. In this regard, says Koshy, the notion of *missio Dei* has helped to clean the Christian mission's damaged appearance, from a self-righteousness and arrogant church-centered enterprise to the embodiment of God's salvation in the world. However, Koshy claims that the *missio Dei* still entails a very problematic engagement with the world (5–7). The fact that God is now the protagonist of mission—after shifting the Christian mission as the church's enterprise to God's—has not implied a substantial change in the notion and practice of mission itself but has only resulted in a different perception of mission and a mere adjustment of missional strategies (83). In this respect, Koshy argues, the main problem with the notion of *missio Dei* is that it does not question the traditional understanding of mission as an overarching mission.

Within an overarching mission, says Koshy, Christian mission is still conceived as a mandatory and non-negotiable enterprise that consists of sharing the Christian faith and transforming the world, regardless of any contextual factors or historical situations that would require revising or even holding the

missional task. In this regard, Christians ought to engage in mission repeatedly and indefinitely, and mission itself becomes an unquestionable law that could be nominally satisfied and mechanized regardless of its negative impact on other cultures, religions, and individuals. In the end, since the notion of *missio Dei* still entails an understanding of mission as an overarching mission, Koshy underscores that it becomes just another missional model that claims to be fully in line with God's goal for history. In that respect, it prevents deep engagement with the missional context and an equal relationship with individuals and communities in that context. For Koshy, the notion of *missio Dei* has shielded the church from questioning all missional endeavors, eliminating missionary reflexivity, and ultimately putting the Christian mission at risk of becoming another invitation for colonialism and tyranny (159–63, 282–87).

Koshy states that the notion of *missio Dei* is inconsistent with the Christian faith due to its overarching character. Therefore, he proposes witness as an alternative "mission." For Koshy, the very process of becoming Christian bears witness to God since it highlights God's invitation to humans to become Christ's disciples. In this regard, a key element in his proposal is the idea that no one can actually become Christian and be such after that since becoming and being Christian is better understood as discipleship, a journey of faith and hope that no one can claim to have finished or accomplished. In the same vein, Koshy underscores that only God can direct human endeavors toward the eschatological end. Thus, disciples can only bear witness to God's goal of history. In the end, says Koshy, witness is a matter of God bearing witness to Godself on who God will be, a "powerful magnet" that continually draws new disciples who will then be invited to the continual process of "becoming" witnesses themselves.

In a powerful statement, Koshy specifies that even God cannot be perceived as preoccupied with a singular overarching mission of certain goals and transparent methods because this would restrain God from reflexivity, domesticating the living God and ultimately distorting the Christian understanding of the Divine. In the same way, disciples' witness can only be sustained in reflexivity, which includes the ability to discern God's precepts within the specific disciples' contexts, considering its challenges and potentials (7–14, 35, 283–84). In this respect, says Koshy, "the notion of mission can only be conceived and configured in a limited, secondary, or penultimate sense, and it can only be as a way to carry out the specific goals that express the significant witness that is relevant at a specific historical time and space" (185).

In Koshy's view, this notion of witness follows the Joban biblical tradition because the Book of Job for him must be read as "God's caution against the simplistic quest for well-defined eschatology and the designing of a self-assured praxis at arriving at any of the imagined eschatology" (67). Within the Joban tradition, the call to repentance that leads to conversion is a call that "begins with the problematization of an ongoing praxis and embracing another praxis

that appropriately and adequately helps bear witness to the different modes of becoming that an individual or a community testifies to have initiated" (68). In this regard, Job offers his witness by testifying to the presence of God in the world despite the absence of God in his life. This posture is similar to that of the crucified Jesus himself and also to that of his disciples, who are continually becoming Christians and cannot be anything more than God's witnesses amid the many occasions of God-forsakenness (269).

As an Anabaptist Christian, I welcome Koshy's notion of discipleship as a never-ending process of "becoming" Christian, especially in connection to challenges that this understanding of discipleship could entail for the notion of *missio Dei* and other missional paradigms. Koshy's interpretation of the "Sermon on the Mount" is also especially significant for Anabaptists (285–308), not only because of its commonalities with some Anabaptist interpretations of the text but also because it offers a missional reading of the Sermon and not only an ethical one—a reading against a mechanized overarching mission.

Because *Beyond Missio Dei* is extensive, comprehensive, and complex, the book is unclear and confusing at some points, especially given a lack of explicit connectors between the different sections and the many ideas, topics, and authors that this work presents in order to sustain the main argument. However, I receive *Beyond Missio Dei* as an important invitation to engage with thinkers and proposals that are often outside and beyond Anabaptist main interests. In this regard, Koshy's conversation partners—such as Derrida, Spivak, Deleuze, and many others—could help Anabaptist theologians develop a radical theology of mission centered in witness, one that could be intentionally Anabaptist and, because of that, different from other theologies of mission.

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Matthew C. Clarke, *Disrupting Mercy: The Gift of Extreme Kindness Motivated by Compassion*, Newcastle, Australia, Turning Teardrops into Joy, 2022. 337 pp. $17.50 USD. ISBN: 978-0648724827.

The room was small and smelled like burnt coffee and secondhand clothing. I found a seat on a worn couch, set down my coffee cup, balanced a notebook on my knee. I looked around sheepishly, not quite sure what to expect at my first

board meeting for The Micah Mission.[1] Micah is a restorative justice organization, walking closely with men just getting out of the carceral system, supporting their reintegration and the restoration of community through friendship.

Out of the small office two part-time staff did everything from helping recently released guys get prescriptions or rides to probation check-ins, to phoning around for leads on jobs, to facilitating a number of Circles of Support and Accountability for members who'd offended sexually.[2] Over the next nine years I'd hear their reports of this work, and I'd find myself carried into all the gladness and heartache of friendship with guys who got out, who faced the grinding challenge of addictions and PTSD and finding work when you have a record, who reoffended, went back inside, got out again, disappeared.

Work for restorative justice is one of the worlds within which Matthew C. Clarke orients his exposition of mercy. Clarke and his wife, Annabella Rossini-Clarke, operate Turning Teardrops into Joy, an umbrella nonprofit that, among other projects, seeks to address modern slavery via a perpetrator-centric lens.[3] Stories from this work and from people caught in the carousel of the carceral system are scattered throughout Clarke's *Disrupting Mercy*. Mercy, Clarke suggests, must make sense in this context if it's to make sense anywhere.

Clarke's other frame for his account of mercy is biblical—the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19. To the question "Who can be saved?" (Luke 18:26), Jesus responds with mercy, first to blind Bartimaeus on the outskirts of Jericho (18:35–43) and then to the rich, corrupt outsider Zacchaeus, calling him down from his sycamore tree. Jesus enacts mercy as running "against the social current," as "dignifying," as a gift that "upended the idea of debt" (7).

These touch points—restorative justice, Zacchaeus—keep Clarke's (at times philosophical) task of better-defining mercy anchored both in the grit and grief of life in the real world and in the narrative shape of God's life given in Jesus. They also resonate with the key tensions addressed in Clarke's redefinition of mercy: sin and guilt, charity, forgiveness, and power.

Clarke encapsulates his new definition of mercy in what sounds like a simple phrase: "Mercy is a gift of extreme kindness motivated by compassion" (13). But this definition seeks to step carefully through ground rent by historic theologies

1 Find more information about The Micah Mission at https://themicahmission.org/.

2 To learn more about Circles of Support and Accountability and their astounding effectiveness in reducing recidivism rates, visit CoSA Canada's website at https://www.cosa-canada.com/. See also Grant Duwe, "The Use and Impact of Correctional Programming for Inmates on Pre- and Post-Release Outcomes," National Institute of Justice, June 2017, https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/250476.pdf.

3 For this aspect of Clarke's work, see https://www.turningteardropsintojoy.com/freedom-keys. See also Clarke's "Perpetrator-Centric Strategies for Addressing Modern Slavery," *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 13, no. 2 (July 2021): 407–25.

of atonement, by critical philosophical accounts of power and the gift. Clarke endeavors to locate discussion of mercy beyond forgiven guilt and within God's tender compassion toward all suffering and God's yearning for full-fledged *shalom*. Mercy is one moment in a greater "ecology of love" (15), disrupting structures of harm, opening possibilities for transformation.

But, Clarke stresses, mercy—even *divine* mercy—only opens *possibilities* for restoration. As *gift*, mercy remains wholly noncoercive, with no assured results. Clarke, in dialogue with John Barclay's *Paul and the Gift*, lands on the term "nonconditional": Mercy acts in compassion with no guarantee of results, like Jesus who freely heals the ten men with leprosy (Luke 17:11–19). Through sensitive readings of mercy in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament and via nuanced conversation with partners ranging from Jacques Derrida and Genevieve Vaughan to *Les Miserables* and Nick Cave, Clarke establishes mercy as "the foundation stone of a gift economy," one which "save[s] us from the tyranny of transactional thinking" (28).

Clarke maps mercy beyond the logic of exchange or retributive theology. Mercy is *not* simply leniency, choosing to give evil a pass by God staying God's hand of wrath. Instead, mercy is an active choice to pursue restoration through "acts of mercy that undermine evil by enabling a better alternative" (111). Clarke removes mercy from the metaphorical courtroom and places it back in the community of *shalom*. Rather than suspending justice, mercy weaves community back together, opening the possibility for justice too to be restored.

However much Clarke succeeds in reframing mercy as a response to suffering, his account does not quite escape the gravity of Christianity's long habit of viewing mercy as God's solution for sin. Chapter 5, "Mercy and Justice," reads like a long refutation of such frameworks where mercy serves primarily as the antidote to God's judgment. But even when Clarke over the next four chapters positions mercy as a response to "brokenness," the language of sin and wrong, mistakes and failures continues to push its way back into the conversation.

Following Marcus Borg, Clarke traces three biblical macro stories for mercy's response to suffering, devoting a chapter each to sin and forgiveness, bondage and liberation, and exile and return. Each offers a robust exploration of the meaning of mercy, but the first of these runs nearly half again as long as either of the following chapters. Similarly, when Clarke "puts mercy to the test" in chapter 10, examining how mercy might be enacted (as a subheading has it) "toward *really* bad people" (204), his restorative account still focuses on the problem of moral offense, here in the case of those who perpetrate modern slavery. Even within Clarke's restorative vision, the central challenge to mercy remains "how mercy can be directed toward perpetrators of awful abuse without negating justice" (210).

Perhaps the work of *re*defining mercy necessitates ongoing engagement with previous, sin-centric frames. But, for me, reading *Disrupting Mercy* has me dreaming of mercy beyond sin. What might mercy mean if God's heart is the driving

concern of the story, where sin appears only as a convoluted subplot? Clarke offers hints, particularly in reflection on *racham*, one of the prevalent Hebrew terms rendered in English as "mercy." Pointing to the term's shared linguistic root with *rechem*, "womb," he observes that a mother's care is bodily—a feeling and a yearning. Beyond the problem-solving of atonement or the calculus of covenant and conditionality, how might mercy be defined as tangled in the feeling of God, just as "womb-like love" originates purely with "the nature of being a mother" (44)? What might mercy continue to mean in a world after sin, in *shalom* fully restored?

Publishing with an independent press allows *Disrupting Mercy* leeway to approach mercy from many angles, interrupting exposition with personal stories, close readings of moments in novels and films, or (in one instance) quiet, blank space to hold the grief of the millions displaced from their homes. Clarke prefaces each chapter with an "initial thought to ponder," often guiding the reader to search online for a recording of a musical performance or work of art to be a silent conversation partner in the chapter's discussion. Each chapter closes with a prompt for reflection and space to journal reflections.

Disrupting Mercy invites readers to conversation about the many ways we meet God's gifts of extreme kindness. (It would make an excellent selection for an adult education class.) The text also invites us, as we are restored to God's ecology of love, to become participants in extending God's mercy, accepting the "invitation to flourish within a community of grace" (88).

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Amanda McBaine and Jesse Moss, directors, *The Mission*, National Geographic Documentary Films, 2023. 103 minutes.

I was sad as I left the theater. The film had portrayed a tragic story, with its main character dead and the key supporting characters feeling the weight of a young life wasted. There was, however, more complexity to the story than that and therefore more to my sadness. The value of the film, to me, was its underlying invitation to be self-critical about *the mission*, especially in regard to our methods of engagement with peoples who value their isolation.

The Mission is a documentary film about the life and death of John Allen Chau, a young American missionary who was killed in 2018 at the hands of the Indigenous peoples of North Sentinel island in the Andaman Sea, whom John was attempting to reach with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There are disparate voices to be heard in this film, through which the filmmakers not only tell the story but also help viewers reflect on its meaning and

significance. One of the voices is John Allen Chau himself, based on his personal journal entries that his family made available to the filmmakers. These excerpts are delivered to the audience by a voiceover actor (Lawrence Kao) and are often accompanied by animated scenes that recreate critical points in John's life, including his fateful trip.

The same approach was utilized by the filmmakers to include the perspective of John's father, Patrick Chau (voiceover by David Shih), a voice that acts as key counterpoint to John's. As such, these two voices represent the central tension of the story, typographically portraying the reckless son and his restless father. Generally, on the one side is John's sincere devotion and his adventurous spirit; on the other is Patrick's grave parental concern and his ideological questioning. For those who are willing (me included), there is ample opportunity to identify with each of these characters at different times throughout the film, especially as complexities surface in both: John is not without his doubts and Patrick is not without faith.

The color commentary in the film is delivered by a select group of interviewees, including several who have close ties to John and his story: close friends, co-workers, and classmates, as well as former professors, pastors, and mission agency personnel. Their voices are a mixture of sympathy, support, admiration, and doubt.

The film's thematic core is a simple question of whether John's mission (and maybe more specifically his method) was a good idea or not. Clearly, the filmmakers are inviting viewers to engage the voices as they provide varying levels of acclaim or disdain.

Along those lines are two key interviewees who feature prominently in the narrative, neither of whom knew John personally but nevertheless have ties to his story: first, historian and journalist Adam Goodheart, another American whose fascination with North Sentinel island took him there some twenty years earlier; and second, former missionary Daniel Everett, who gave thirty years of his life among a tribal people in the Amazon and then gave up his mission and his faith.

Interestingly, it is the voices of these two men that, by the end of the film, become dominant. They are, in fact, the last voices that are heard, and so they carry significant weight in terms of the filmmakers' communicative intent. It is in these voices that the filmmakers' verdict is heard as the voice of triumph is silenced and the voice of tragedy endures.

That conclusion, however, only follows the one story: a critique of the evangelical mission. Ideologically, this film critiques at least two kinds of sensationalism: *evangelical* sensationalism on the one side, in the form of its narrow and cavalier missionary strategy, and *anthropological* sensationalism on the other side, in the form of exploitative exploration. Both are aligned with the colonial quest and a fascination with the remote and unreached.

It is important, however, to remember that this film was made not by evangelicals but by National Geographic, and in so doing, they made themselves vulnerable. They are, after all, well known for exoticizing the uncivilized in a way not too dissimilar from how evangelicals have exoticized the unreached. By holding up a mirror to themselves and being self-critical, National Geographic seems to be exposing their own version of sensationalism. Yet, by doing this, they are also delivering a counter critique of evangelicalism. The film is indirectly asking if evangelicals are willing to do the same, to embrace a similar humility and learn from past mistakes.

Those who share a disdain for evangelical sensationalism—John's father, Patrick, among them—will say that it was obviously a mistake to send John to North Sentinel island. Though Patrick considers himself a believer and a proponent of Christianity, he clearly blames fundamentalist extremism for his son's misguided mission, and he furthermore holds All Nations responsible as the agency that sent his son to his death. So, the question emerges, *Is there a non-evangelical, Christian perspective on the mission that the film provides, other than Patrick's heavy-laden fatherly voice?* If there was, I think I missed it. Without it, the film seems to be more a study of extremes.

Even John's most honest friends seemed to be trapped in a narrow evangelicalism. One of them makes this statement in the film: "John was doing exactly what Jesus told him to do." This is the typical certainty of which evangelicals are often guilty (or praised, depending on where you stand). Does it not lead to presumption? Certainly John was acting in accordance with his understanding of the Great Commission. But is John's understanding of the Great Commission the only measuring stick? He was faithful to his convictions, which we should applaud, yet John's actions are also his own. He is accountable, as are we all. None of us can say that everything we do is aligned perfectly with the heart and mind of Jesus. There is always an element of subjectivity, always the reality of limitations. We are human, after all, as was John.

I do not doubt John Chau's sincerity. He was stalwart in his faith and determination. But I do doubt his certainty. Because John himself doubted it. His journals make it clear that, as he took his big risk and faced the prospect of death, John was faithful *and* doubting. He knew in whom he believed—Jesus—to whom he entrusted his soul in meek surrender, yet he questioned the outcome of his mission and also the method. Faith can be beautiful and naïve at the same time. John faced his doubt, which is simply a sign of his humanity.

In that way, every viewer of this film is like John, a believer (in something) who is struggling to align actions with beliefs, whatever the cost. That faith perspective is true to the human condition, not just for religious humans but for all. Even the atheist acts in accord with his or her beliefs and chooses to live with the consequences. Every one of us exists within that epistemological framework, yet we are all free to choose and adjust our beliefs.

John was free, and he chose to act on his belief that Jesus was calling him to the North Sentinelese. Did he absolutely need to go at that particular time and in that particular way? Were there perhaps other ways that John could have been faithful to Jesus instead of going on *this* mission? It's easy to ask questions like these from afar. In the end, John answered them by doing what he did. And he paid the price willingly, heroically.

The question remains for the viewers: What would we have said to John? If we were among his friends and advisors before he made his fateful trip, what questions would we have asked him?

Because of the covert nature of his mission, John chose a select few to be his advisors. Did no one encourage him to wait and pray, to perhaps continue his research and preparation until a more opportune time? How exactly was All Nations involved in John's mission? Did they only encourage John, or did they question him? In the end, who was with him? Who said, *Now is the time?* Who said, *This is the way?* Was it only John?

That's why I used the word "cavalier" earlier to describe John's mission strategy. It was drastic, narrow, if not arrogant. Certainly, it was adventurous, but was it wise? The other obvious element was that he was noticeably alone. Where was the community? Where was the support team? All of this contributes to the sensational nature of John's mission, and it aligns with the all-too-familiar perspective within evangelicalism that says, "It's up to us—we are the hope of the world." And "we" means evangelicals, or at least it means those who believe like evangelicals believe.

John clearly embraced this perspective and a strategy that put the elite missionary (himself) in an exaggerated role. It is what some people call a "Messiah complex." The filmmakers even talked with All Nations personnel about this self-identity in regard to John, but the agency leadership ruled it out (perhaps too quickly). In the bigger picture, it is simply unconvincing that John's chosen mission was the only outlet for his missionary drive, or the only directive from above. For those of us who believe in a God of love, we are still curious about God's plan for the North Sentinelese, but we do not presume to know it exactly.

Is there room in the evangelical heart and mind for self-criticism in regard to mission strategy? I would think that many evangelical mission agencies, even those that share much in common with All Nations, would *not* have sent John Chau to North Sentinel island, at least not in the way that he was sent.

Upon watching this film, my sadness, therefore, is not simply over John's death, though I do grieve that. Mostly, I was sad with Patrick who lost a son, without the hope of reconciliation. But I was also sad for those who could only see John's death as martyrdom and who leave no room for self-criticism about the methods of their mission. That perspective is simply too narrow. I was also sad for the likes of Everett, who lost his faith in God in the midst of his own mission and who now sees no good in the missionary efforts of others. That is a harsher

judgment than I am able to bear and also too narrow of a perspective. I am much more comfortable believing that we can be full of faith and courage, yet also self-critical. We can be bold and strong, yet also weak and humble. This complexity, I believe, is true to the human experience and true to the story of John Chau.

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