



**Brief Summary of Highlights from the  
Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) Middle East Fact Finding Trip  
October 14-31, 2004**

**DIFFERENTIATION OF PRESBYTERIAN POLICY FROM AMERICAN RELIGIOUS ZIONISM**

In every country we visited (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Egypt), we heard deep appreciation for the balanced policy of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) supporting negotiated peace, with safe borders for Israel and Palestine, rejection of all forms of terrorism, the right of self determination, and self defense, the end of the occupation, removal of The Wall, and praise for the planned, selective, phased economic divestment action of the General Assembly. Christian, Muslim and some Jewish leaders praised General Assembly courage.

**MEETINGS IN BEIRUT, LEBANON – PRAISE FOR PRESBYTERIAN PARTNERSHIP**

ACSWP met with leaders from the Evangelical Synod of Lebanon and Syria, Faculty of the Near East School of Theology, The Metropolitan Maronite Bishop (Catholic) of Beirut, the General Secretary of the Middle East Council of Churches. From all these people we heard appreciation for historic Presbyterian partnership; praise for the courageous Presbyterian General Assembly action for planned, selective economic divestment, and gratitude for our coming to meet with and listen to all parties and voices involved in the Middle East regional struggles for peace with justice.

**POWERFUL WORSHIP AND EXPERIENCING THE BODY OF CHRIST GLOBALLY**

In South Lebanon at the Ebel Al-Saki Presbyterian Church in the small village of Marjiyoun where every family has lost one or more members to the long war of Israeli occupation--here we saw how Presbyterians and Muslims live, cooperate, and work together to rebuild their region. In Damascus, Syria we worshipped in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of St. Paul and the congregation of over 100 came out into the street to welcome us; we shared in prayer, scripture, song and preaching, testimony, food and fellowship that moved us to tears. In Jerusalem at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer inside the old city we prayed with Arab Christians, Mennonite peace workers, Israeli Jews, and many others receiving communion together and making many new friends. In Cairo, Egypt we joined in worship with brothers and sisters from the Synod of the Nile who shared their vision for growing mission, church outreach into Muslim communities through acts of love in health care, schools, and economic development. They challenged us to new partnerships.

**LISTENING TO FIVE IRAQI CHURCH LEADERS – A CALL TO COMPASSIONATE PARTNERSHIP**

We met for a full day with five national level leaders from Iraq: the Armenian Orthodox Bishop of Baghdad; the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Baghdad; the Syrian Orthodox Bishop of Baghdad; the Senior Presbyterian Pastor from Baghdad; and the Pastor of the Evangelical (Presbyterian) Church in Tikrit. They all spoke of the lack of safety, lack of police security, fear of people to venture out to church, lack of dependable water, electricity, and basic public services. However, they emphasized that their churches, schools, health care clinics are struggling to reopen and serve the great needs of their members and the general public. They gave detailed lists of ways in which Presbyterians could engage in partnership with Iraqi Christians. It was a clear call to compassionate partnership. There are real mission opportunities here.

**BETHLEHEM – A DYING CITY**

ACSWP spent a day in Bethlehem meeting with staff of the Center for Palestinian Residency & Refugee Rights, visiting a refugee community, the Bethlehem International Center, talking with people in the streets and shops, and later that evening meeting with leaders from the Palestinian Authority. In Bethlehem we found that many shops and local businesses have been closed. Many have gone bankrupt. Local residents travel only with great difficulty. The Wall of Separation runs in such a way as to limit access to the surrounding area. Tourism is almost dead. The large Jewish settlements are visible from Bethlehem as well as the limited access highways that connect them. These roads cannot be used by Palestinians. They must endure slow travel with long delays at Israeli military checkpoints.

### CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH THE WALL OF SEPARATION

The group spent a full afternoon touring regions of Jerusalem and surrounding communities through which the newly constructed Wall of Separation has been built. We saw firsthand how the Wall divides Palestinian sections of East Jerusalem. We witnessed how Palestinians must travel for several hours to make necessary detours to reach schools, jobs, health care, and other facilities. We learned that a simple mile-long trip that would have taken fifteen minutes before The Wall now takes over one hour. We passed through the three Israeli military checkpoints between Jerusalem and Bethlehem—a short eight-mile trip—that now can take two hours for Palestinians to travel. We also heard some Israelis indicate they felt safer since The Wall went up. Others indicated they thought The Wall was a barrier to real peace and stability.

### JERUSALEM RECEPTION BRINGS OUT 100 PEOPLE

On the evening of October 23, ACSWP hosted a reception in Jerusalem at the Notre Dame Conference Center for about 40-50 invited guests representing all viewpoints on the Middle East. Over 100 people turned out and stayed until 11:30 p.m. People were hungry for the opportunity to have open conversation in a safe place with no strings attached. Who came? Jewish Rabbis, human rights workers, pastors, priests, NGO staffers, Quaker and Mennonite peace leaders, Muslim, Jewish and Christian religious leaders, a real mix and cross section of the Middle East peoples. Existing partnerships were strengthened. New opportunities for collaboration were discovered. Listening and learning. Ideas for future partnerships emerged. Bridges of communication were opened.

### CAIRO, EGYPT – MEETING FOR INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND WITH THE SYNOD OF THE NILE

We met for dialogue with a group of over 50 Coptic Christians, Evangelical Christians, and the Islamic Brotherhood. Conversation began with the Grand Mufti (highest religious official of Islam in Egypt) putting hard questions to us about U. S. foreign policy with focus on the war in Iraq and perceived lack of serious leadership for peace processes between Israel and Palestine. We shared General Assembly policy actions which were well received. There was great interest in General Assembly action toward a planned, selective economic divestment. As the evening moved ahead, there was a warming trend and dialogue led toward friendship and future communication.

A great point of learning came in several meetings with representatives of the Synod of the Nile. The PC(USA) has longstanding partnerships in Egypt. The Nile Synod has a new Moderator who spoke with passion for their new vision of expanding mission including creating five new centers of health, education and social service for people in large and growing communities in and around Cairo. Each center will seek to create a new Christian congregation at the center of its outreach services. Education, health care, and economic development are seen to be avenues of doing the gospel of Christ. The moderator challenged us to take back the invitation to Americans to join with energy in the emerging initiatives through which they believe God is doing a new thing.

### CONVERSATIONS WITH MUSLIM LEADERS AND SCHOLARS

We met with Muslim scholars, government representatives and imams in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt. The delegation had private interviews with President Lahoud of Lebanon, President Assad of Syria, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Egypt and the Grand Imam of Al Anzhar University in Cairo. We also engaged in dialogue with The Islamic Institute for Interfaith Relations in Damascus and The Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo. There is great interest in continued dialogue between Christians and Muslims, a deep respect for the Arab Christian community as a stabilizing influence in Middle Eastern societies, and a desire among moderate Muslims to engage evangelicals and Christian Zionists in conversation. Muslim leaders expressed a deep reverence for Jesus Christ and were eager to discuss questions of justice and peace in the Middle East from the perspective of the teachings of Jesus. It was a moving experience to hear sincere expressions of concern for the suffering of Israelis. We heard several clear statements that acts of terror committed against civilians are a violation of the teaching of the Koran. Some of the Islamic leaders who spoke against terrorism have done so at great personal risk.

*Dianne Briscoe  
Sue Dickson*

*Gordon Edwards  
Esperanza Guajardo*

*Nile Harper  
Ronald Kernaghan*

*Ronald Stone*