

Justice Peace Links

Justice and Peace Committee – Churchwide Coordinating Team – Presbyterian Women

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Palestinian children are seen through holes made by Israeli rockets and bullets during an Israeli attack on Khan Yunis.

Image credit: Mohammed Omer, Rafah Today 2007-10-22. Courtesy bbsnews.net

the interior of the West Bank, isolating thousands of Palestinians. According to the United Nations, if the barrier is completed, 60,500 West Bank Palestinians living in 42 villages and towns will reside in closed areas. Residents will need a permit to pass through barrier's gates, in order to access health and education services, jobs and markets in the West Bank.

In addition to the wall, the Israeli military, which has full control and authority in the West Bank, has set up a series of other barriers: 537 road blocks and checkpoints, "flying" (or random) checkpoints, huge earth mounds, trenches and electric fences. Many miles of new highways have been built, but only Israelis are allowed to use them.

Crossing Borders in Israel and Palestine

By Shirley Nichols and Rick Ufford-Chase

Background

Many Presbyterians, like most other people in the United States, feel both anxiety and concern when we think about Israel and Palestine. We read daily news reports about the violence, but the names of the places and the people affected are difficult to pronounce and hard to place. And we sense in some vague, undefined way that our destiny is tied to Israelis' and Palestinians' ability to work out their differences. But if we have more than a passing interest, we quickly learn that the issues are complex, the situation changes rapidly, and it is difficult to express interest in the conflict without appearing to choose sides.

One of the ways the situation has changed is that the borders between Israel and Palestine are no longer lines on a map; they are very real walls, checkpoints and fences that are intended to keep people on opposite sides. In 2002 the Israeli government began implementing a multi-faceted security strategy in the West Bank that includes a 437-mile barrier around the perimeter of the West Bank. There is growing controversy about the wall, because it weaves into

The Challenge of the Wall

Rick encountered the wall when he traveled to the area in January 2006. His experience was informed by his visit to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, and visits with Israelis who have lost family members in the violence. As Shirley wrote after returning from her May 2007 trip: "It's not about being pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian—it is a matter of being pro-justice, pro-equality, pro-life and pro-peace for all people." For both Rick and Shirley, the challenge has been to translate their experiences of the suffering of Palestinians and Israelis into the kind of passion that Jesus and his disciples felt as they crossed boundaries and responded to human suffering in their own time.

Shirley and Rick offer everyone a challenge: "We have much to learn and little to offer until we do the hard work of crossing borders and experiencing the walls of division for ourselves. Perhaps as we do so, God will open our eyes to the ways in which we participate in building walls of mistrust and misunderstanding that take us inexorably further and further from God's dream of peace for all of God's people."

Learn more about the background of the conflict at www.pcusa.org/worldwide/israelpalestine.

Resources

- Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) resources related to Israel and Palestine can be found at www.pcusa.org/worldwide/israelpalestine/resources.htm.
- *Costs of Conflict: The Changing Face of Bethlehem*. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and Office of the Special Coordinator for the Peace Process in the Middle East, United Nations. (New York: United Nations, 2004). The free downloadable PDF is available at http://domino.un.org/pdfs/Beth_Rep_Dec04.pdf.
- The Coalition of Women for Peace, a mix of Jewish and Palestinian women (all citizens of Israel), brings together independent women and nine women's peace organizations, some newly formed and others promoting coexistence since the founding of the state of Israel. Visit <http://coalitionofwomen.org/home/English>.

Biblical/Theological Dimensions

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (*John 15:12*).

“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (*Psalms 13:1–2*).

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. . . . If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (*1 Corinthians 12:12–13; 26*).

PC(USA) Position

Our dilemma as Presbyterians is that our church's position historically has been to learn and tell the story of both people's narratives, and to insist that the task is not to choose sides, but instead to balance two passions that grow out of strong theological convictions.

- First, the Israeli occupation of Palestine must come to an end and there must be a viable future of self-determination for the Palestinian people.
- Second, the people of Israel must be offered a future of security. We cannot allow our work (to end the occupation) to become another in a long history of abuses that have been committed against the Jewish people.¹

What Can Presbyterian Women Do?

- Pray for the situation.
- Stay informed about the situation. Study the resources available from the PC(USA). For a list of the resources, go to www.pcusa.org/worldwide/israelpalestine/resources.htm.
- Start a Women In Black vigil in your area. For information, go to www.womeninblack.org.
- Consider making a trip to the region yourself. Presbyterian Peace Fellowship (PPF) is planning a visit, May 10 to 25, 2008. Visit PPF's web site to learn more about the Pentecost Delegation, www.presbypeacefellowship.org.

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Rick Ufford-Chase is a lifelong Presbyterian, an elder and the executive director of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship. He served as moderator of the 216th General Assembly of the PC(USA), and became a huge fan of Presbyterian Women during his term.

¹ Adapted from the *Resolution on Israel and Palestine: End the Occupation Now*, approved by the 215th General Assembly (2003). A complete summary of General Assembly statements can be found at www.pcusa.org/worldwide/israelpalestine/gastatements.htm.

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Bethlehem, with more than 20,000 residents, has one gate, controlled by Israeli soldiers, for Palestinian use. There is one way in and one way out, if you are Palestinian. It is opened for a specified period each day. In order for workers to get to work, they must assemble hours before the gate opens. Reportedly there are days when it does not open at all. If an emergency happens and it's not at the specified time, it's unfortunate; allegedly, people suffer and even die because of the restrictions.

As armed Israeli soldiers opened the gate in the wall that surrounds Bethlehem, we slowly exhaled and began to prepare ourselves for the journey ahead. It was 4:00 A.M. and we were on our way to the Tel Aviv airport to return to the United States. Only moments earlier, we sat anxiously at the gate, awaiting the final decision of the armed guard, who ultimately determined whether we were permitted to pass or we would be detained for further questioning. As I heard the screeching sound of the gate lock back into place, I couldn't help but feel some sadness and shame. We, as Americans, do not have to live behind the wall, but we do have an obligation and a responsibility to speak the truth about what we have seen and heard. We have a duty to report the gross injustice that is being done to God's children. We must share the stories we've heard and relate what we've seen, on behalf of those who may never have a chance to tell their stories for themselves.

Shirley's reflection, excerpted above, shows how her perception of the plight of the Palestinian people changed as she traveled in the region.