

An Open Letter To Church Leaders

By The Rev. David W. Good

After the tragedy of September 11, 2001 our church's Board of Deacons met, and we asked ourselves how we should respond. One of the things we resolved was that we needed to redouble our efforts to strengthen our interfaith community. Little did we know then that discussions with our Jewish and Muslim neighbors would lead us right into the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, taking us on nine annual "Tree of Life Journeys" to Israel and the occupied territories in which over 200 have participated. These journeys, in turn, have led to five annual interfaith conferences in which we have tried to amplify the voices of conscience of Israelis and Palestinians – Jews, Christians and Muslims – who have been working for a just and peaceful resolution to what they often refer to as "the American-Israeli occupation."

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About This Issue

The place-name Lyme comes from Lyme Regis, a small port on the coast of Dorset, England, from where the early 17th-century settlers migrated. The picturesque Old Lyme cemetery holds the graves of these original settlers. Today, Old Lyme, situated at the mouth of the Connecticut River, is a community of some 7,500 permanent residents, in addition to several thousand seasonal vacationers.

The first meetinghouse was built around 1665. A new meetinghouse, constructed on the site of the current church, was completed in 1817. This was burnt to the ground in 1907 in what was believed to be an act of arson. The new church—the one that stands today—was completed in 1910.

From 1973 to 1974, David William Good, then a seminarian at Yale Divinity School, served as an assisting pastor at what was now The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme. In December 1975, he became the church's 18th pastor—a position he retains to this day.

What all this has to do with the Middle East is the subject of this issue. So impressed were we by what the Rev. Good and his church are doing, we asked him to share his experiences with our readers and with other local church leaders.

In keeping with that theme, our *Link's* Links interview on page 13 is with Canon Richard Toll, the Chair of Friends of Sabeel-North America. Sabeel is a Christian liberation theology organization based in Jerusalem, with chapters worldwide.

Page 14 features a review of the DVD *Occupation 101: Voices of the Silenced Majority*. As our reviewer, James Wall, former editor of *The Christian Century*, notes, this video offers an excellent—and generally unknown—history of the Palestinian-Israeli issue.

Again, in keeping with our theme, we have added two new books to our online catalog.

“Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?” by Betty Jane Bailey & J. Martin Bailey is now out in its second edition,

with updated information on churches, church leaders, and contacts, ensuring that this book remains a one-of-a-kind resource. “When Religion Becomes Lethal” by Charles Kimball examines the explosive mix of politics and religion in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

These, and other current as well as hard-to-find books are available on our website: www.ameu.org.

John F. Mahoney
Executive Director



The Reverend. David W. Good

That phrasing is important—*the American-Israeli occupation*—for we as Christians and we as Americans need to acknowledge *our* complicity in this injustice. If we have learned anything, we have learned that the fulcrum of change is here in this country, with the enormous financial support the United States provides the State of Israel—\$10 to \$12 million per day—and that our financial support of this injustice is detrimental to all: Israelis, those who live under the occupation, and citizens of this country as well. For this unresolved issue has proven to be a flashpoint for other conflicts in the Middle East that have drawn our country into too many wars.

TREE OF LIFE

Like so many of the biblical journeys, “we set off not knowing where we were to go,” and little did we know back in 2001 what an amazing, sometimes tumultuous, but oftentimes inspiring road this would be. To be sure, there has been opposition—both from inside and outside our church—but I would invite all of our churches to become more actively engaged on this, one of the most critically important human rights challenges of our day.

“Tree of Life” was the name we gave our church’s engagement on this issue, and we have been blessed to have many from other faith traditions as partners—Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, Jewish and Muslim. The theologian Paul Ricoeur said that the symbol gives rise to thought, and as people ponder this universal symbol, my hope is that this will be a reminder that we do not live in an orchard, with a Jewish tree, a Christian tree and a Muslim tree in separate locations. Rather, we are all branches on the Sacred Tree of Life, drawing sustenance from the “Ground of our Being,” dwelling in a state of mutual interdependence. The Book of Revelation tells us that the leaves of the Tree of Life are

for the “healing of the nations.” Note the “s” on the end. It is an important reminder to move beyond our nationalism and to embrace our common humanity.

Each year we organize a Tree of Life journey to visit Israel and the occupied territory of both the West Bank and the Golan Heights. While we have not yet visited Gaza, we have met with former residents of that area. To break down some of the stereotypes that too many Americans have of Arabs and Muslims, we have intentionally visited some of the neighboring countries as well—Egypt, Syria and Jordan. On these journeys, and especially when we are in Israel and the occupied territories, we try to meet with those who have distinguished themselves as voices of conscience, and these we have found in abundance, Jewish, Muslim and Christian.

Sometimes people will ask me how can I keep going back there, in as much as the situation never seems to improve. How can I deal with what seems to be a hopeless situation?

For me, oddly enough, I find I need these journeys.

They remind me that there are extraordinary people and organizations that are working courageously on this issue, and that the spirit, the faith and the fortitude they exemplify renew my hope. For me, what is most difficult is the homeward journey, to see our politicians hopelessly in the control of the pro-Israel lobby: AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee), the ADL (Anti-Discrimination League), and far too many Jewish federations and synagogues and Christian Zionist churches. This is a lobby that ultimately will prove to be detrimental to Israelis, for even as the occupation is destroying Palestinian communities, it is making Israel less secure and corrupting it from within. Why? Because the occupation is a violation of the fundamental principles of Judaism and its time-honored commitment to justice and human rights.



What I find particularly disturbing when I get home is the quiescence and the passivity of the American church on this issue, a passivity that makes the church an accomplice in the injustices being done, injustices that are at the root of the violence that is so destructive for everyone.

Along with 41 participants, I have just returned from our 2011 journey, and it is with a sense of urgency that I write this open letter. Our Christian brothers and sisters in Israel and the occupied territories, inspired by the work of the South African Council of Churches in the struggle against apartheid, have composed a most remarkable document, the Kairos document. I urge my Christian brothers and sisters here in America to read this document and stand in solidarity with Christians, Jews, and Muslims who are working and praying that someday the Holy Land might be a place worthy of its name. [see: <http://www.fosna.org/content/kairos-palestine-document-full-text>]

WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

In this letter I will share with you some of the remarkable people and organizations we have met in our journeys, but first of all, why should you care?

There are several reasons I will offer, but I'll start with a more sectarian one. I hope all of our churches would move beyond this one, but it's a place to start nevertheless.

We should be deeply concerned for the plight of the Christian churches in that region. These are the supposed "Holy Lands" after all, the place where Jesus was born, the place where Jesus lived and taught, the place where the Christian faith has been nurtured and kept alive by the small Christian communities that were first persuaded by Jesus's vision 2000 year ago. How could we possibly turn our backs on these people now, when they so desperately need the love and support of the international Christian community? The Christians who live there are an endangered species. Because of this conflict, because of the 26-foot separation wall that cuts them off from their olive orchards and water resources, because of the checkpoints at which they are regularly humiliated, because of the wanton bulldozing

of their houses by the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces), because of the violence, because of the expansion of more and more Jewish settlements in the occupied territories and because of the economic hardships that have followed from all this, many of them are moving out, and it is easier for Christians to move than it is for Muslims. This exodus from their homeland plays right into the hands of those Israeli extremists and nationalists who have their eye on more Palestinian land and resources. Frequently, the pro-Israel lobby will criticize it critics, demanding that they "recognize that the State of Israel has a right to exist." While I believe Israel has a right to exist, the problem is too many of these staunch defenders of Israel don't know *where* Israel exists, for it hasn't declared its borders, appearing more like an amoeba than a stable state.

In the creation of Israel in 1948, more than 750,000 Palestinians were driven from their ancestral land, many of them forced to live as refugees. Then in the 1967 war, an additional 350,000 were driven from their homes. In 1948, just prior to the establishment of the state of Israel, approximately 18 percent of Palestine was Christian. Today Christians number less than 2% of the population. But these are statistics, and I would urge our Christian communities to move beyond statistical analysis and do what you can to be in solidarity and in friendship with those who represent that shrinking minority. I would like to share a few illustrations of this minority and the spirit they exemplify, and at least by suggestion, I would like to show how the Holy Land would be impoverished without this Christian minority.

In our annual interfaith journeys, we have introduced our travelers to people such as Abuna Elias Chacour, now the Archbishop of the Melkite Christian Church, which is affiliated with the Vatican. At 9 years of age, Chacour and all the members of his community were driven from their ancestral homes in the village of Biram, up near the Lebanon border. I urge those of you in leadership positions in your churches to read his books, "Blood Brothers" and "We Belong to the Land," and to invite your congregants to read them as well.

Despite seeing his village bombed by the Israeli Defense Forces and being beaten as a terrorist and

separated from his family, Chacour has become a prophetic voice of peace and reconciliation in the work that he is doing at Mar Elias, a school near Nazareth in which Christians, Jews, and Muslims are all welcome. He refers to his students as “the Living Stones,” those on whom someday a new civilization can be built. He makes an important distinction between the “living stones” and the “stones of antiquity.” Many of our churches have “Pilgrim Tours” in which congregants go to see the Church of the Nativity, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Garden of Gethsemane, Nazareth and the sites around the Sea of Galilee. Sadly, many of these tours focus little or no attention on the current situation. Indeed, many are persuaded irresponsibly by both Israeli and U.S. officials that it’s unsafe to be in the West Bank, and far too many tours spend as little time and financial resources as possible in the West Bank. And with tourism being one of their major industries, especially for Palestinian Christians, this has had a devastating impact on their economy.

But also, in focusing exclusively on the antiquities, participants in such tours are depriving themselves of the opportunity to see the Living Christ in the Palestinian Christians who have exemplified extraordinary faith and courage under occupation. If you are planning a “Pilgrim Tour” for your church, consider adding Mar Elias to your itinerary. We did so in one of our Tree of Life journeys, and I will never forget how Abuna Elias Chacour said, “I was born a baby.... I wasn’t born a Christian, I wasn’t born a Muslim, I wasn’t born a Jew; if we all realized that, maybe we could affirm our common humanity.”

Our church in Old Lyme has enjoyed a nine year friendship with the Palestinian community of Beit Sahour, near Bethlehem in the West Bank. “Beit Sahour” means “place of vigilance” and it’s a place whose inhabitants pride themselves on being the descendants of the shepherds of 2000 years ago who saw and responded to the angelic vision of “peace on earth and good will to all.”

Beit Sahour is a proud community as it endeavors to raise its children to be the keepers of that heritage. We were first introduced to this community through Dr. Mazin Qumsiyeh, a native of Beit Sahour, when he was a professor at Yale University.

Through him, our church in Old Lyme entered into a beneficial and mutually enriching relationship with Beit Sahour. In each of our Tree of Life journeys, thanks to the leadership of our friend Mr. Jiries Atrash, who is also from Beit Sahour, families from that community have honored us with their amazing hospitality, and they have shared with us their stories, their hopes and dreams for a better future. All of them have family members who have been detained without charge. All of them live within close proximity to Jerusalem and the Mediterranean, but it is a rarity for them to visit such places. Palestinians put a high priority on education, and yet many young people can’t find employment. What many in Beit Sahour can find are bullet holes in the walls of their homes, a painful reminder of how precarious life is under occupation.

There are some who would have you believe that the reason Christians are leaving the Holy Land is because “the Muslims are forcing them out.” This is both wrong and deceitful. During our visits, we have met with many Christians; we have visited them in their homes; we have attended their churches; we have spoken with their community leaders; we have visited Bethlehem University, a remarkable place where Christians and Muslims work and study together, and not once did we hear a Christian blame the Muslims. It is true that Muslim families have more children than either Christian or Jewish families, but these demographics do not account for the fact that so many Christians are moving out. The reality is it is easier for Christians to emigrate than it is for their Muslim brothers and sisters.

With Christians leaving the Holy Land in droves, this is good news for expansionist-minded Zionists. They delight in every Christian family that emigrates. As for the Muslims, some Israeli Zionists speak despicably of the “Muslim womb” as “public enemy number one.” For these extremists, who are becoming more and more powerful in Israel, maintaining a “Jewish State” means maintaining a Jewish majority in all regions of Israel—“Delicate Demographic Balance” as it is sometimes called.

Surely the Christian churches of America must have a moral obligation to that less than 2 percent of the population. Leaven can be a powerful influence

—ask any loaf of bread!—and so I think the Christian presence in the Holy Lands is of critical importance, for in its churches and its families it carries with it the life and teachings and spirit of Jesus. And I want those teachings and I want the spirit of Jesus to be passed on to future generations in the Land of Promise, for I feel it has something very important to offer.

That's not to say that the Muslim faith and the Jewish faith don't also have much to offer, but I am a Christian, after all, and I believe in our Christian faith, and I believe in the important work that all of our Christian churches do, and so we all need to do all that we can to encourage the Christian communities in that troubled place. They need to know that we pray for them and care for them and I ask you to do whatever you can to support them. We are the sleeping giant on this issue. We need to wake up to our responsibilities.

The second answer to "Why should I care?" falls under the category of "enlightened self-interest."

Our church, as I noted, first became involved in the Israeli-Palestinian issue after the tragedy of 9/11, and at least some of us began to see that terrible tragedy and the subsequent war in Iraq and so many other problems in the Middle East as being inextricably linked to the unresolved conflict between Israel and Palestine. Until that conflict is resolved, it will continue to be a flashpoint, it will continue to be a contributing factor that may give rise to even further wars.

While there can be reasonable disagreements over whether the war in Iraq was justified or not, there is one thing about which we all should be in agreement: We as a church, we in all our religious traditions—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Native American, Hindu—have a moral, spiritual, ethical obligation to root out the causes and preconditions of war, to do all that we can in the area of "preventative medicine," to do all in our power to build a very different sort of world.

As a Christian minister, I have presided over the funerals of young members of our church who have died in war. I have visited with those in Veteran's Hospital who still, after all these years, suffer from Post Traumatic Shock. I have met with families who

have suffered the anguish of having lost a loved one in war. Currently, we have several of our church's young people serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. I look at our Sunday School children, so precious, so vulnerable, so beautiful, and call it "enlightened self-interest." Call it whatever you want, but for their sake, I want our church to do all that it can, with all that it has, wherever it can, to build for them a very different sort of world.

My third reason why our churches need to be more actively engaged on this issue is that if we don't, we are depriving ourselves of the opportunity to work together with our Jewish and our Muslim brothers and sisters on one of the great human rights issues of our day. Interfaith community is built not only by dialogue, potluck suppers, Thanksgiving prayer services and other opportunities to learn more about our respective faith traditions—as important as those are. It is also built by working together in solidarity on issues of social justice, peace and reconciliation, and advocacy on behalf of those suffering from human rights violations.

OPPOSITION

There are Christian leaders I know who shy away from engagement on this issue because they are afraid of offending their local Jewish friends and neighbors. While I can sympathize with this and while I can attest to how divisive this issue sometimes is, ultimately, we turn our backs on our Muslim neighbors if we feel we have to stay away from the question of Israel/Palestine because it's just "too controversial." At a time when our Christian friendship and partnership with the Muslim community is of critical importance, suffering as they are from so much "Islamophobia," these friendships and partnerships are superficial unless we listen to the deep concerns of our Muslim neighbors about our American complicity in the violation of human rights in Israel and the occupied territories.

Needless to say, our Tree of Life journeys and conferences have not been well received by all. There has been opposition within the church, but not nearly as much as I might have anticipated. Some have left the church because they disapprove of our "politics," but many more have come to the church

and supported it precisely because we are engaged in issues such as this. And there has been opposition from outside the church from those who feel compelled to defend the State of Israel, right or wrong.

When we brought over a dance troupe from Beit Sahour, they were asked to make a presentation for both our Tree of Life conferences and also for neighboring schools. In addition to their traditional Palestinian dances, they also did dances that described what life is like for them living under Israeli occupation. A local student complained, and then his mother complained, and then the local rabbi called the superintendent of schools who, fearful of this intimidation, cancelled the remaining performances.

Furthermore, and for me this has been the most painful part of our involvement in this issue, there have been accusations of “anti-Semitism.” In much the same way as American and Israeli Jewish Voices of Conscience are accused of being “self-hating Jews,” so have I and our church been on the receiving end of that hateful accusation of anti-Semitism. As such, for me, this makes it even more important to stay in solidarity and friendship with our Jewish neighbors, even those with whom we disagree. They may refuse to be in community with me, but for me this only redoubles my resolve to be in community with them, and in some cases we have agreed to disagree on this issue but work together in common cause on other issues of social justice.

The important thing is to stay in conversation and community, no matter what, to give no opening for the demonic forces that would render us asunder. More than once I have found myself sustained by Rudyard Kipling’s advice to his son, “In being lied about, don’t give way to lies.” As churches become engaged on this tough issue, we should also remember Jesus’s wisdom, “blessed are you when you are reviled.” If we in our ministries are not criticized or reviled, maybe it is because we have allowed ourselves to become too insipid, too irrelevant.

VOICES IN THE WILDERNESS

Furthermore, by shying away from this issue we dishonor the prophetic tradition of Judaism. In our failure to become engaged, we deprive ourselves of

the remarkable opportunity to be with those in the Jewish community who are struggling to honor that great prophetic hallmark of their faith, those who in this day and for our time are “voices crying out in the wilderness.” I would like to share with you a few of these voices. Perhaps you might consider having your congregation read their literature or invite them to speak:

Jeff Halper

We encourage all participants in our Tree of Life journeys to read Jeff Halper’s excellent book, “An Israeli in Palestine.” Born in Hibbing, Minnesota, this Jewish professor and activist has lived in Israel for many years and has founded an organization, the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, ICAHD, which rebuilds Palestinian houses that are destroyed by the Israeli Defense Forces.

Many of our churches are actively involved in Habitat for Humanity, an outstanding organization that uses volunteers to build houses with the poor. The work of ICAHD is similar but different, for they are quite clear that in rebuilding homes, this for them is an act of civil disobedience, and in building a home, they know full well that the new home may be demolished once again. This heroic Sisyphian defiance is worthy of our attention. In our Tree of Life journeys, we have met with those whose homes have been demolished; indeed, one has had his home destroyed and rebuilt ten times. Jeff Halper does an excellent job of explaining to those new to this issue what he calls, “The Matrix of Control” — the systematic use of the Wall, checkpoints, roads that can only be used by settlers, the demolition of homes, detentions and curfews to control all aspects of those who live under the occupation.

Breaking the Silence

In each of our Tree of Life journeys we have had the privilege of meeting former Israeli soldiers such as Yehuda Shaul, Dana Golan, Mikael Mannikin and Avichay Sharon, members of Breaking the Silence, an organization that documents the misuse of power and human rights violations witnessed by the soldiers themselves during their service in the occupied territories. They have courageously shared with our delegations how these violations have been detri-

mental and dehumanizing not only for the Palestinians but for the soldiers themselves. As one soldier put it, *Breaking the Silence* is “an attempt, a very desperate attempt to grab and shake up Israeli society and the world to which it belongs... and show what is happening in our name.”

Rami Elhanan

Early on in our Tree of Life journeys we met a most remarkable Israeli Jewish businessman by the name of Rami Elhanan. Members of his family were survivors of Auschwitz and had come to the State of Israel as refugees seeking a homeland, a safe place free of the anti-Semitism that had so dominated so much of the Western world.

As a young man, Rami had served in the Israeli military, but on September 4, 1997, he came to a crossroads in his life. Smadar, his 14-year-old daughter, was killed by a suicide bomber. He said, “I do not forgive and I do not forget, and yet God has given us not only a heart, and mine is broken, but also a mind, and I have come to see the desperation that leads to such terrible acts of violence.”

He came to understand that his daughter was a victim not only of a suicide bomber, but also of the State of Israel and its oppressive measures vis-a-vis the Palestinian people—the violation of human rights, detention without trial, the 26-foot concrete wall being built in the occupied territories, the killing of innocent people by the Israeli military.

He spoke to us of a “two-state solution,” with the Israeli withdrawal from all or most of the settlements, and with the creation of a State of Palestine and the State of Israel living side by side along the 1967 borders. He went on to say, “I believe that we don’t have to surrender to our basest instincts. We don’t have to act from burning hatred and uncontrollable storms of emotions; it is possible to function according to common sense. After all, we are human beings, not animals. We lost our children, not our heads. We must maintain the hope that there are other possibilities.”

He then urged us to amplify his voice. A member of our group asked how we could be critical of the State of Israel without being or appearing to be “anti-Semitic.” He leaned forward in his chair and said

quite emphatically, “There is nothing Jewish about the occupation. There’s nothing Jewish about the demolition of Palestinian homes. There’s nothing Jewish about the violation of human rights. Please, don’t let those accusations silence what you need to say.”

Rami Elhanan belongs to a remarkable organization, The Parent’s Circle, which is what I like to refer to as a “parable of hope.” For in the work they do, they are a reminder of what the Holy Land should be and could and will be, if the spirit that they exemplify prevails.

Those who belong to the Parents Circle have lost family members in the violence—Jews, Christians and Muslims—and yet they have resolved to be in community with each other as they work toward peace and reconciliation. Over the years of our Tree of Life ministries, we have met a number of the extraordinary members of “The Parent’s Circle”, including Rami Elhanan, Robi Damelin, George and Najwa Saadeh, and Ibrahim Khalil. In my bible, I keep a photograph of Robi Damelin’s son who, while manning an IDF roadblock in the West Bank, was killed by a Palestinian sniper. For me that photograph is a reminder that if those who have lost so much can still be people of hope, then I have no right to be in despair.

Yeela Livnat Raanan

Yeela is a Jewish Israeli activist who does advocacy work on behalf of the Bedouin who live in the “unrecognized villages” of the Negev. In one of our Tree of Life journeys we met her in a large Bedouin tent, and over coffee, she and the Bedouin leaders shared with us how, even though they are Israeli citizens, living in the Negev, they do not receive the same schooling and medical care that other citizens enjoy. They have been forcibly removed from their ancestral lands, and some have had their homes demolished by the Israeli government.

Yeela has been arrested by the Israel Defense Forces when she tried to stand in the way of those who would bulldoze a Bedouin home. She has spoken at our Tree of Life conferences, and she introduced us to the work of a remarkable Bedouin woman, Amal Abu Alkhom, who lives in one of the “unrecognized villages” and who is the founder of

Bedouin Women for Themselves. While we visited Amal and her village and enjoyed a magnificent Bedouin dinner, we had the honor of helping her dedicate a new school in her village by pouring water across the threshold.

Mark Braverman

Mark is the author of "Fatal Embrace: Christians, Jews and the Search for Peace in the Holy Land." He is a frequent speaker at our Tree of Life conferences and has preached in the pulpit of our church in Old Lyme on numerous occasions. I know he would welcome invitations to other churches as well.

After taking part in a Fellowship of Reconciliation journey to Israel and the occupied territories, Dr. Braverman, an American Jew with deep roots in Israel, came to see that the Israeli occupation is a violation of the Judaism that loves. In our Tree of Life journeys, we urge participants to read his book which addresses a most important concern: why churches in America have been so passive on this issue and how, for the sake interfaith dialogue with our neighboring synagogues, we have shied away from being engaged.

Mark urges our Christian churches to be a voice for justice and for peace even if that means challenging our Jewish neighbors who dismiss any criticism of Israel or America's support of Israel as being "anti-Semitic." Furthermore, he urges us to support the growing BDS movement (Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions) for the sake of our Christian integrity but also for the sake of Judaism which, in his estimation is being high-jacked by an idolatrous devotion to the State of Israel.

Mark has helped to establish a non-profit support organization for Tent of Nations, a farming community South of Jerusalem that lives and teaches non-violent resistance to the occupation. Led by Daoud Nassar, Tent of Nations is in a beautiful location, surrounded by illegal settlements. The IDF has blockaded the road leading to their farm, and they have frequently been threatened with demolition. When intimidation hasn't worked, they have been enticed to move by "generous" financial offers. But they have refused to move, for they believe there needs to be a place where people can come and learn non-violent resistance to the forces of injustice. Each year, in our journeys, each of our participants plants

a small olive tree in what is now called "The Tree of Life Orchard" at Tent of Nations. Martin Luther said, "If I knew the world was coming to an end tomorrow, I would go and plant a little apple tree today." We plant an olive tree for the same reason. It's our way of saying, "we believe in the future."

Anna Baltzer

For several years now, this extraordinarily bright young Jewish woman, a graduate of Columbia and the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor, has been circumnavigating the world speaking on all that she has learned as a "Witness in Palestine," the title of her excellent book.

She herself, like other voices of conscience, has paid the price, being called "a self-hating Jew." We encourage those who participate in our Tree of Life journeys to read her book and to see her outstanding DVD, "Life In Occupied Palestine: Eyewitness Stories and Photos." Both are available on her website, www.annainthemiddleeast.com, or from AMEU (www.ameu.org). For those congregations who want to provide their members with a good overview of the situation, showing this DVD would make for an excellent program. Better yet, invite her to your church, as we have on several occasions.

Jewish Voice for Peace

Under the leadership of Rebecca Vilkomerson, Jewish Voice for Peace is doing outstanding work. As a co-sponsor of our most recent Tree of Life conference, we were proud to stand in solidarity with them as well as with our other co-sponsors Sabeel and the Council on American Islamic Relations.

JVP opposes anti-Jewish, anti-Muslim and anti-Arab bigotry and oppression. It seeks an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem; security and self-determination for Israelis and Palestinians; a just solution for Palestinian refugees based on principles established in international law; an end to violence against civilians; and peace and justice for all peoples of the Middle East. That is a mission statement I wholly support.

Amira Hass

I find it ironic and pathetic that one can find more truth-telling about the human rights violations of the American-Israeli occupation of Palestinian

land and resources in Ha'aretz and other Israeli publications than what one can find in the typical American publication, including The New York Times.

One of the reasons the American public is so disengaged from this issue is because they are being misled by the media, but thankfully there are courageous voices of conscience, Jewish Israeli journalists such as Amira Hass who speak the truth about the injustices being done in the occupied territories. She has lived in Gaza and has documented her experiences in her book, "Drinking the Sea at Gaza: Days and Nights In A Land Under Siege." When the Gaza flotilla, as an act of civil disobedience, tried to break through Israel's blockade of the Gaza strip, the Israeli Defense Forces responded with unbelievable brutality, killing innocent civilians on board the Mavi Marmara. While too many in the American media accepted the IDF's explanation of this tragedy, showing the integrity of a true journalist, Amira Hass helped the world to see that the Gaza flotilla was no more militant than was Rosa Park's decision not to sit in the back of the bus.

The Friendship of Yael Kareth and Enas Massalha

These two extraordinary musicians met through the vision of Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said. The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra is an attempt to bring young Israelis and Palestinians together through the medium of music.

Through the offices of Daniel Barenboim I was introduced to Yael Kareth, a classical pianist, who, in turn, introduced me to her good friend, Enas Massalha, a Palestinian Muslim operatic soprano. For many of our Tree of Life conferences, we have felt it important to have musical interludes, opportunities for the participants to journey from one hemisphere of the brain to the other, from the head to the heart. As we have dealt with the tough and sometimes contentious issues that make Israel and Palestine such a difficult subject, our souls have been soothed by the music of Enas Massalha and Yael Kareth. But also, the friendship they exemplify, despite all manner of forces that would render that friendship asunder, has been for us a "parable of hope."

Those who want to lead their congregations to a deeper engagement on this issue would do well to

issue an invitation to these two musicians to share their music and their friendship.

YOUNG BRIDGES OF HOPE

A major emphasis in our Tree of Life endeavors, is trying to involve our young people. Upon visiting the Holy Land, Pope John Paul said that what is needed "are fewer walls and more bridges." As an attempt to respond to that wisdom our church established a "Bridges of Hope" program in partnership with the community of Beit Sahour.

Each year, we have brought over young people from that community as ambassadors of their Palestinian culture and community, to show the human face of those too often dismissed by our media as "terrorists." Sometimes alone, sometimes traveling with their parents, this has enabled them to tell their stories and to share their hopes and dreams for the future. These young people then return to Beit Sahour and share their perspectives on their experiences here in Old Lyme, and that, we hope, may help to break down some of the stereotypes Palestinians may have of Americans. These "ambassadors" have usually been about 12 years of age when they have taken part in this program, and now that they are in college, we have established a scholarship fund to help them with their course of studies at Bethlehem University. Here is a note that we received from one of those students, written in her less than perfect English:

I'm Rawan Alatrash from Beit Sahour. I'm studying social work at Bethlehem University. I'm now a senior, and I would like to thank you for your financial support. It made me very glad, you made a difference in my life, because without the support, I COULDN'T continue my education at the university, because of the economic situation of my family and the siege and difficult situation that we live, thank you very much for help.

During their stay in our community, we have them live with our church families, thus helping to establish a bond of friendship between them and our youth. And on each of our Tree of Life journeys, we

have been blessed by the participation of our youth which we hope will lead them to a deeper understanding of this issue and empower them to become voices of conscience on the role the United States must play in working toward justice and peace. On our last journey, we had 8 young people under the age of 21 who traveled with us. One of them, Eliza, now a freshman at Harvard, wrote a blog about our travels that was published on the website, Your Olive Branch, www.yobo.org. Here is an excerpt:

Based on the observations our group witnessed during our time in the Middle East, the conclusion one draws is that despite years of negotiation and failed diplomacy, the real conflict is being waged on the ground. The State of Israel continues to advance its agenda at the expense of the Palestinian people and of any hope for progress towards an independent Palestinian state. Posturing aside, Israel proceeds along a methodical, pre-meditated path towards control over the land it occupied in 1967—in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention and numerous UN resolutions. Construction and habitation of the settlements, exploitation of natural resources, ongoing development of infrastructure and transportation projects as well as removal of Palestinians from the land and homes is evidence that the intention of the State of Israel is to continue to occupy, annex and control these areas. The United States has supported Israel without question for far too long—the cold war paradigm that we need to support Israel as the only democracy in the area is now at odds with Israeli violations of human rights, international law and UN resolutions. As recently stated by General Petraeus, the lack of progress towards a comprehensive solution threatens our ability to advance our interests in the region and ferments hostility towards America.

To be clear, we are all trying to find ways to help guide the administration and the American people in a direction that is bene-

ficial for peace and justice—for all the people in the Middle East. There is no easy solution, no path forwards which will not require sacrifice from each of the parties. We need to urge the administration to use every means possible to bring the Israelis to a place where they will negotiate in good faith and in earnest.

Another Tree of Life participant, Allison, who had just graduated from college, decided to go back to spend an additional three months in Beit Sahour to learn Arabic and to deepen her understanding of the situation. She also wrote a blog: <http://www.allimccracken.blog-spot.com/>. Here is what she said at the conclusion of her stay:

In only 3 short months I learned so much from the Palestinian people of Beit Sahour, about kindness, generosity in spite of scarcity, extreme hospitality, and family—amongst many other positive things that are almost never included in American media coverage of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. If you couldn't already tell from my previous posts, not all Palestinians are terrorists. Yet because of the extremist minority, the entire population (Muslims and Christians alike) currently suffers from unjust, inhumane collective punishment. That may be considered a controversial claim, but it is true. I was there.

Since I've been home I've talked to many people about my experience in the West Bank. The most common response I get is "Wow, I had no idea! That's not the way it seems based on what I hear in the news!" Yeah, that's because the news isn't always the truth.

With the presence and participation of young people in our Tree of Life journey, for our last conference we decided to put a major emphasis upon the "new generation of peacemakers." So we invited Maya Wind and Gal Lugassi, members of Shiminitim to make a presentation. These are young Jewish Israelis who, as a matter of conscience, refuse to serve in the Israeli army. In this Tree of Life confer-

ence, Maya and Gal were joined by Jane and Maryanne, young people from Beit Sahour and Bethlehem and also young people from our congregation, with Mattie, a 16-year-old member of our church leading us in singing John Lennon's "Imagine."

FOR THE SAKE OF SMADAR AND CHRISTINE

When I think of Mary and Joseph fleeing into Egypt to save their vulnerable child, I think of Rami's child Smadar, and in honor of her, I feel the spiritual imperative to reach out to you, the ministers and leaders of other Christian communities, to plead with you to join me in this struggle.

I also think of the Greek Orthodox family of George and Najwa Saadeh. George is the principal of the Shepherd's Field School in Beit Sahour, and when we met with him in his school, he shared with us his family's tragedy. Traveling home late one night in the streets of Bethlehem, they came across a moving checkpoint, and so they slowed down so as not to startle the Israeli soldiers. When they approached the checkpoint, the soldiers opened fire on their car. George was shot multiple times, as was his wife, Najwa and his daughter, Maryan. They all survived, but sadly, their daughter, Christine, was shot in the head and died almost immediately. Christine's parents are now members of the Parents Circle, and they are friends of Rami Elhanan.

For the sake of Christine Saadeh and Smadar Elhanan and their parents, please join me as we work to make the Land of Promise a promising place for all the children who live there.

Around the ancient walls of Jerusalem there are many gates, Jaffa Gate, Damascus Gate and New Gate to name a few. But if you were standing in the Garden of Gethsemane, looking across the Kidron Valley, the gate you would see is "The Golden Gate." It is completely walled in and some believe it will be so until the Messiah comes. For that reason it is also called the Messiah's Gate.

If we believe as St. Paul said, that "Christ is all and is in all," then that Messianic spirit is present within each one of us and the work that we do in our churches, synagogues and mosques and all other faith traditions as well. If that is the case, then as the Hopi Elders have said, "We are the ones we've been waiting for."

I know it may seem outrageous, but we are the answer to someone else's prayer. We have a sufficiency of God's loving spirit to bring hope and joy to the children of this world. We can be a bridge between the Israelis and the Palestinians. We can be a gate in a place that has known so many walls. We will not sit on the sidelines and wring our hands in despair. We will be a voice for those who think that no one listens and no one cares. We will do all that we can to restore justice and decency and integrity to our human institutions. We will live and work and dream for that day when the streets of Jerusalem shall be filled with boys and girls, Jews and Christians and Muslims playing in the street, no longer divided, no longer afraid. We will do all this because we are God's anointed. We are the answer to someone else's prayer. ■

The Reverend David Good can be reached at davidgood@snet.net, or by phone at 860-434-8686.



The Golden Gate or Messiah's Gate

From **The Link's** Links

<http://www.fosna.org>

The Rev. Canon Richard K. Toll is the Chair of Friends of Sabeel — North America. (FOSNA). The president of Sabeel in Jerusalem, The Rev. Naim Ateek, was his seminary roommate in California. This interview was conducted by AMEU board member Elizabeth Barlow.



Q. What do people find on your website that is important to them? Our site has useful information for activists, providing: historic statements from church leaders and Palestinian Christians; an alternative travel listing for those seeking a pilgrimage that will include witnessing opportunities of life under military occupation; extensive listing of books and films and web links to important Palestinian and Israeli organizations; a recent news area focusing on actions and statements by the mainstream churches; Sabeel and FOSNA publications, such as newsletters and the Cornerstone theological journal; and a place where people can connect to FOSNA groups in their areas, showing events and meetings.

Q. What about the trips and conferences Sabeel sponsors in Jerusalem? Sabeel international presents conferences every two years and witness visits each spring and fall. The witness trips typically include 15-25 individuals who not only hear talks from Palestinian and Israeli peacemakers but also go out to sites in the West Bank to see the unfiltered realities of Israel's military occupation—the infamous apartheid wall, the checkpoints, refugee camps, demolished homes and land confiscation, illegal Jewish settlements on Palestinian land, and much more. Christian activists who attend these programs return to the U.S. on fire with the truth they have seen on the ground.

Q. What activities does Friends of Sabeel-North America sponsor in the U.S.? FOSNA's main program is to sponsor regional educational conferences which are an effective tool for broadening awareness among western Christians on issues relevant to the peoples of the Holy Land. Drawing on a rich pool of expertise in the fields of theology, biblical scholarship, church social justice teach-

ing, regional history, international law, foreign policy and political currents, Sabeel conferences attract wide participation from an ecumenical audience. Our speakers represent the Palestinian Christian and Muslim communities as well as the Israeli Jewish community—religious leaders, scholar, writers and activists. American presenters come from all three religious traditions and from secular strands within the Sabeel movement. Our 33 regional conferences have attracted over 10,000 participants in the grassroots movement toward ending Israel's military occupation.

Q. What about the support that Sabeel provides indigenous Christians in Jerusalem and Nazareth? Sabeel provides programs in Jerusalem and Nazareth for women, youth and clergy. These programs aim to support the dwindling Christian presence in the Holy Land. Women in Nazareth are residents of Israel, while women in East Jerusalem and the West Bank are under Israel's occupation. Our programs help these women support each other in their daily lives. Youth programs enable young people to address issues of growing up under occupation and resisting it nonviolently. Programs for clergy open up a strong ecumenical approach to building the Christian community. A new program aims to bring Christians and Muslims together by offering three-day retreats in which participants can talk about common goals and concerns.

Q. How do your programs tie together Sabeel members of different denominations and from different localities? Sabeel's programs strengthen the historic ties among the various 12 indigenous Palestinian churches. In the case of the two Protestant churches in the Holy Land—Anglican and Lutheran—we are able to make connections with churches in the U.S. Sabeel works to include Orthodox Christians in their local programs but that historic community is not as well known in the U.S. Also, working with the Roman Catholic Church in the U.S. is challenging because of its hierarchical structure. We have made some connections with monastic communities and have worked with Catholic groups like Pax Christi.

Q. Can you give us an e-mail and phone number where you can be reached? My e-mail address is RToll41439@aol.com, and I can be reached by phone at 503-653-6625. The Administrative Officer of Sabeel-North America is Sister Elaine Kelley, whose e-mail is Friends@FOSNA.org.

VIDEO REVIEW

OCCUPATION 101

Directed by Sufyan and
Abdallah Omeish

Trip'ol'ii Productions, 2007,
90 Minutes

List: \$30.00; AMEU price,
including postage: \$10.00
To order, see page 16.



**Reviewed by
James M. Wall**

Occupation 101 opens with this quotation by Stephen Hawking: "The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance... It is the illusion of knowledge."

This documentary is aptly named. Its one goal is to shatter the "illusion of knowledge" about the root causes of the conflict in the Middle East. Narrated by *If Americans Knew* founder Alison Weir, it draws on historic footage from the early 20th century and into modern times, destroying false illusions with the hard facts of history.

It is a perspective rarely heard or seen in mainstream media. For viewers familiar with the issue, the interviews with scholars, religious leaders, humanitarian workers and NGO representatives—more than half of whom are Jewish—are a rich resource of historical data. The film also provides concerned American citizens with an educational tool that persuasively argues that Israel's occupation of Gaza and the West Bank are both illegal and immoral. This reality and its history cry out to be heard.

The film can be seen at one sitting, as a feature documentary or as a tool that breaks easily into teachable sections. For church groups, for example, the film would easily fit into three separate sections. For classroom purposes, there are 24 "chapters" in the film, each short enough to make for more intense study and discussion.

Information on this topic reaches most Ameri-

cans through the secular media. In an earlier, more innocent era, we trusted that media to be a reliable and objective source of truth.

Recently National Public Radio reviewed the new film *Miral*, which tells the story of the Palestinian Nakba (Catastrophe), from the perspective of a young Palestinian girl. Here is NPR's explanation of how *Miral* came to live in a Jerusalem orphanage run by Hind Husseini: "Hind is important because she collects some children whose parents vanish in the 1948 war, taking them to her family home. This becomes the orphanage where *Miral* will later live."

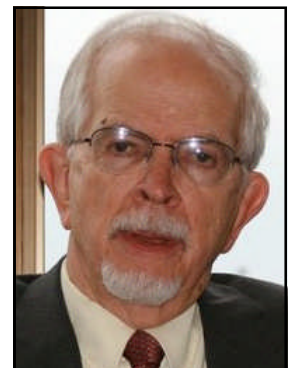
"Collects some children whose parents vanish"?

The NPR reviewer displays a distressing ignorance of, or a willful refusal to explain, the truth of why the orphanage was created. The parents of the orphans did not just "vanish in the 1948 war;" these children were survivors of the notorious Deir Yassin massacre, during which, in a single village, the Israeli army killed more than 100 Palestinian men, women and children.

One ten-minute "chapter" in *Occupation 101*, the "Root Causes of the Conflict," examines the Nakba and the Deir Yassin massacre in painful and evocative detail.

This film educates. It also honors the past and prepares future NPR reviewers to see films like *Miral* from a perspective other than one that provides only the "illusion of knowledge."

James Wall, an AMEU board member, was editor and publisher of the Christian Century from 1972-1999 and is now a Contributing Editor of the magazine. An ordained United Methodist clergy person, he is the National Council of Churches representative to the appeals board of the Ratings Board of the Motion Picture Association of America, and is an honorary Life Member of Interfilm North America. He writes a weekly blog, Wallwritings.wordpress.com.



AMEU's Video Selections: Use Order Form on Page 16

All AMEU Prices include Postage & Handling

- AJPME, **Beyond the Mirage: The Face of the Occupation** (2002, DVD, 47 minutes). Israeli and Palestinian human rights advocates challenge misconceptions about the Occupation and Palestinian resistance to it. **AMEU: \$25.00.**
- AJPME, **Israel: Myths & Propaganda** (2008, DVD, 58 minutes). Israeli historian Ilan Pappé challenges the official Israeli version of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war in Part 1, and responds to his critics in Part 2. **AMEU: \$25.00.**
- Baltzer, Anna, **Life in Occupied Palestine** (2006, DVD, 61 minutes). By the American granddaughter of a Holocaust refugee. This is her powerful account of the occupation. **AMEU: \$20.00.**
- DMZ, **People and the Land** (2007, DVD, updated version of 1997 film, 57 minutes). This is the controversial documentary by Tom Hayes that appeared on over 40 PBS stations. **AMEU: \$25.00.**
- FMEP, **Searching for Peace in the Middle East** (2006, DVD, 30 minutes). A film by Landrum Bolling. **AMEU: \$10.00.**
- Munayyer, F. & H., **Palestinian Costumes and Embroidery: A Precious Legacy** (2008, DVD, 38 minutes). Rare collection of Palestinian dresses modeled against background of Palestinian music, with commentary tracing the designs back to Canaanite times. List: \$50.00. **AMEU: \$25.00.**
- NEF, **Peace, Propaganda & the Promised Land** (2004, DVD, 80 minutes). Excellent analysis of how the U.S. media slants its coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. **AMEU: \$25.00.**
- IHF, **USS Liberty Survivors: Our Story** (1992; DVD; 60 minutes). The truth as provided by the men who lived through it. **AMEU: \$25.00**
- Trip'ol'ii Productions. **Occupation 101** (2007, DVD, 90 minutes). Powerful documentary on the root causes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and US involvement. **AMEU: \$10.00.**

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