

## President's Report

March 13, 2013

Attending the Baptist-Muslim dialogue at Andover-Newton Seminary on the first Sunday of Advent was an enriching experience. Jim Ratliff, Jonathan Malone, June Totten, and I, along with Roy Medley, were part of this weekend of learning. Dan Buttry did an exceptional job of sharing as the speakers alternated between those from Baptist and Muslim backgrounds. We ate together, worshipped together, shared in a meal and evening prayers at the Islamic Center of Boston, and built relationships as we discussed areas of commonality.

The pilgrimage to Israel was one of the highlights of my experiences since we were last together. We travelled with a group from the Church of the Brethren. As we neared Israel after an overnight flight, several Jewish men stood in the aisles of the plane with their prayer shawls to do their morning prayers. It was a good introduction to the journey we were about to make.

We were met by Amy Fisher and Todd Deatheridge of TELOS, the organization coordinating our visit. Amy is Jewish and lives in Tel Aviv after growing up in the United States. Her grandparents are Holocaust survivors. While her mother and stepfather live in Long Island, her father lives in California. She attended Emory University (where she discovered not all people are Jewish) and worked in Washington, D.C. but felt drawn back to Israel. She is the director of TELOS Israel. She has a multitude of cousins as well as aunts and uncles here and is making aliyah (becoming an Israeli citizen).

Todd Deatheridge is a Christian who grew up in Arkansas and went to Washington, D.C., as a chief of staff for Senator Tim Hutchinson before moving to the State Department under Condoleezza Rice. He commutes six to seven times annually to lead groups.

Our guide, Eyad, is Muslim and lives in Jerusalem. He is married and has four children – 14, 12, 10, and 18 months. He studied in the states before returning to Israel at the request of his father. As the oldest son, he has great responsibility for his family.

The intentional mixture of backgrounds helped us understand better the politics and cultures we were to meet in the time we were there. I have been to Israel twice before, once in the early 1980's for a study program based in Jerusalem and in May of 2011 to represent ABC USA and the Board of International Ministries as the Arab Baptist Churches celebrated a century of mission in Nazareth. Neither of those visits prepared me for the immersion we experienced during this trip. All of our travel time was filled with historical background of the places we were seeing – not only from the Biblical standpoint, but also from the more recent history dating from the end of World War I.

Because of our relationship with the Arab Baptist Churches, we asked TELOS to include a meeting with their general secretary, Bader Mansour, at the Nazareth Baptist School on our first morning in Israel. They were so pleased with his presentation that they intend to include him in future visits. Bader introduced himself as a follower of Jesus Christ of Nazareth who lives in Nazareth. He shared about the

challenges of being an Arab in Israel. The Association of Baptist Churches now has 16 churches with about 3000 members, a minority even in the Christian community which is mainly Catholic and Greek Orthodox. They have banded together with five other groups to form the [Arab] Evangelical Convention requesting formal recognition by the government to allow them to do weddings and funerals.

“We love Israel,” Bader said, “but we love Palestinians as well and think they deserve a place and equal rights.” He continued, “It’s a nightmare to live here. Every so often, there is a war. We need peace...for our children and our ministry.”

Driving toward the Sea of Galilee, Eyad (rhymes with Riyadh) explained that it is easy to identify Arab neighborhoods by the black water tanks on the roofs. Since the Israeli government controls the water system, Arab neighborhoods experience regular outages and prepare with the water tanks. Jewish neighborhoods are cleaner because of state-provided services.

The Christian population in Palestine prior to 1948 was 15% and is now about 2%. The majority of Christians were Arab and fled the country after statehood.

When the nation of Israel was proclaimed, 1.5 million Palestinians became Israeli citizens because of where they lived. There are limitations, however. They cannot serve in the military, but can serve as police or border guards. Job discrimination is a major problem.

Israel has experienced 60+ years of statehood and the Palestinians remain stateless. The Israelis have built a giant wall between themselves and the Palestinians in an attempt to halt the terror bombings that have been a fact of daily life since the 1990’s.

As we drove through the West Bank (where licenses are green and white and do not allow access to Israel where the tags are yellow and black), the evidence of lack of peace is clear. Barbed wire fences mark the no man’s land between the Israeli-occupied land and Jordan, even though Jordan and Israel formally ended the state of war between them in 1994.

Jewish settlements, contrary to international law which forbids building settlements in occupied territory, dot the countryside, with good fences and check points as well as evidence of water supply and sanitation help, while Arab villages no longer expect water daily and have debris and rubbish everywhere.

Following a walk through the souk in Bethlehem, we climbed the stairs to the Holy Land Trust where we met Sammy Awad, son of Bashawa Awad, the founder of Bethlehem Bible College. His family came from Jerusalem where his grandfather was killed in the 1948 war and buried by his children in their courtyard before they were evicted by Jewish soldiers. The family moved to Bethlehem where his great-uncle pastored a church, but seven children were too many for his grandmother to manage, and they were sent to an orphanage when his father was 9. His grandmother said there was to be no revenge; faith leads to a need for peace-making. The Lord blessed her and her children.

Bashawa was sponsored through school, then sent to South Dakota before teaching in the inner city in Kansas City. Returning to Palestine, he married a woman from Gaza and returned to Kansas City where

Sammy was born. Called to run an orphanage in Bethlehem, they returned there. "Growing up here was not easy. The war in 1967 meant occupation and operating under Israeli Military Orders." If he had been asked then, "What is an Israeli?" his response would have been, "Soldiers and settlers" both of whom were armed and angry.

Sammy's organization, Holy Land Trusts, is committed to "strengthening the community for the future." They understand that for any real peace to take place requires trust; as trustees, they must realize it is God's choice of sacred land. The goal – to make the Holy Land a model of peace.

There are challenges:

- 1) Occupation with acts of oppression, racism, need for civil rights, recognition of equal rights and equal access to water.
- 2) Missing component of leadership
- 3) What is missing in Israel's society to allow this injustice? To not "see" Palestinians?

Their answers:

- 1) Non-violence, the right and only option
- 2) Transformation through leadership training
- 3) Healing of trauma and fear Jews have experienced

Sammy's story is one that is multiplied all across Israel – Palestine. His goal of peace-making resonated with us and our fellow travelers since the Church of the Brethren is a historic peace church.

We drove by one of the three refugee camps in Bethlehem, Dheisheh, where a sign in Arabic reads, "We will be back." Many of them still have the keys to the homes they left and have passed them down to their children. Having begun as a tent site, some 11,000 residents now call this 1-sq-km refugee camp home. There's one part-time doctor for the camp's population, and the decades have seen restrictive barricades, barbed wire and some of the longest periods of curfew ever imposed by the Israelis – 84 consecutive days during the Gulf War. Palestinian sources also suggest that more than 80% of the youths of Dheisheh have been imprisoned by Israeli forces at one time or another. A change in funding announced by the UNRWA the previous day brought some rioting in the camp overnight and some of our group smelled the tear gas used to disperse the crowds.

We met with Daoud Nassar, Palestinian Christian and owner of a family farm of 100 acres in his family for nearly a century, but unfortunately in the middle of Area C outside Bethlehem and surrounded by settlements. To get to his farm, we had to walk from the bus because the Israelis have blocked the access road with huge boulders. There has been nearly constant harassment since 1991 as the Israelis try to take over his land.

Daoud's message to us: \*Refuse to hate - "There is no military solution. Violence creates violence. Our children are inheriting hatred."

\*Resign yourself – “It is difficult to be a victim. Sometimes we sit and cry. It doesn’t matter who started it, it doesn’t resolve it.”

\*Run away – “We refuse to be enemies! We choose a non-violent response because hatred is damaging.”

“Come and see, then go and tell. People are suffering!”

They have no water, no electricity, 13 demolition orders, no building permits, so...they have installed solar energy panels, water filters, and carved out underground rooms.

“When you plant a tree, you believe in the future!”

“With heart and hand, we will change the land.”

On Friday evening we shared in a home Shabbat experience after a visit to the Western Wall and the nearby Little Wall. It was after that amazing evening without cameras and cell phones that we came back to the hotel and learned of the Sandy Hook shootings. The shock of that news moved us all deeply. I struggled with the idea that we were in a land that knows so little peace, trying to learn how we could help and at home, the peace of so many families had been permanently shattered.

Two days later, we met with two representatives of Circle of Friends, a group for parents who have lost children in the conflict. Rabi, from South Africa, had lost her adult son who was called up during one of the times of tension. Bassam lost his ten-year-old daughter. As they sat side-by-side, a Jew and an Arab, and shared their heartbreaking stories, there were few dry eyes. Amazingly, they told us of their prayers for us in the loss of the children in Sandy Hook.

As we shared in a wrap-up session that afternoon, we were reminded of the responsibility we now share to do something with what we have heard and witnessed. We were encouraged to do what we do about what we’d heard in humility and love.

An authentic Christian response:

- understands the human condition,
- makes partners,
- does not choose a side,
- is both courageous, and
- avoids self-righteousness.

How to move forward:

1. Take key leaders to Israel - Palestine
2. Build relationships with people on both sides here
3. Build ecumenical and inter-faith relationships on both sides at home
4. Listen to the Palestinian church
5. Tell stories, both of people you’ve met and your own experiences

## 6. Write and speak and act

Part of the learning from this experience was sharing in a Love Feast with the COB group, a traditional celebration of singing, food, and foot washing accompanied by communion.

Since then, I have attended our regional Mid-Winter Mission Conference and given an update on what is happening in ABCUSA, spoken for Women's Sunday at the Grace Baptist Church in Kansas City, MO, attended our regional board meeting, and two planning sessions for the Baptist-Muslim Dialogue which will be held at Central Seminary on April 20<sup>th</sup>.

While I was registered to attend the National Association of Evangelicals Washington Briefing last Wednesday, the weather forecast kept me home. I have continued to participate in the task force on writing a code of ethics for churches and anticipate completion of that document later this year.

Finally, I will be attending the National Leadership Council in Green Lake the week after Easter and then going to Birmingham, Alabama on April 14-15 for a Symposium on Race, Faith and Our Future sponsored by Christian Churches Together in response to Dr. King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail.