



An Open Letter to Mennonite Church USA Congregations

Becoming Peacemakers in Israel/Palestine
June 2007

For more than 60 years, Mennonites have witnessed to the good news of Jesus Christ in Israel and Palestine. In recent decades the human rights situation for Palestinians has deteriorated dramatically. Today, a power imbalance of Israelis over Palestinians distorts the lives of everyone living in the region and fails to provide the longed for security. A system of forced segregation and oppression imposed by the Israeli government, which some have called apartheid, and the resulting spiral of violence calls for urgent collaborative action by all Mennonites including the agencies currently working in the region.

In response to the discernment of the Peace and Justice Partnership Council of Mennonite Church USA of the need for a common conversation among various parts of Mennonite Church USA, a delegation of ten persons (see below) traveled in Palestine/Israel, May 11-24, 2007. We visited many important centers in the region and engaged in dialogue with Christians, Jews and Muslims. During the visit we listened to our partners, talked with leaders of other agencies and heard from ordinary people as well as co-workers of Mennonite-related agencies.

We affirm that

The situation in Israel/Palestine today confronts us with profound theological issues that challenge the roots of our faith.

Our experiences confront us with new questions about our understanding of God and what it means to be peacemakers in this context. Throughout the Bible, God calls the people of Israel to express care for "the other" and the stranger and to work for justice for everyone living on the land. The prophetic tradition repeatedly emphasizes that the people of God are accountable for exercising justice and compassion. The current

situation in Israel/Palestine calls us to reject the temptation to reduce God to a tribal god who cares only for the well-being of one people.

The biblical witness testifies that God chose a particular people for the purpose of bringing blessing to "all the families of the nations." We did not find blessing between peoples in Israel/Palestine. Rather, the situation we encountered impressed upon us the urgency for rediscovering God, as revealed in both the Old Testament and in Jesus, as the One whose compassion and care extends to all people, all of whom have been created in God's image.

Christians have inflicted horrific suffering upon the Jewish people through the millennia, including the Holocaust. Tragically, Christian anti-Semitism continues. It is reprehensible. It cannot be reconciled with the biblical message, nor is it consistent with our vision of anti-racism.

We renew our commitment to God who disavows human vengeance, calls us to love our enemies and requires us to pursue reconciliation and peacemaking with all people. We understand this to be the essence of God's nature and healing purpose in the world. Questions about the connection between financial investments and God's call for justice challenge us to reexamine our understanding of Christian stewardship in light of the realities of life in Palestine and Israel.

We became keenly aware of our need as God's people in Mennonite Church USA to recognize that true security can be found only in God. Both in this region and in North America, people have tried to find security through military power. The result has been the needless destruction of human lives that we have seen in Iraq and Palestine by occupying armies. In both places the senseless response of suicide bombers adds to the death and suffering.

We observe that

- The continuing Israeli military occupation and the dispossession of Palestinians is sinful, responsible for unjust suffering and the major cause of the ongoing conflict.
- The Israeli government has consistently violated international law; the United States government has supported violations of human rights and international law by Israel.
- The Wall of Separation being constructed through the West Bank segregates Israelis from Palestinians and separates Palestinians from each other, causing undue hardship. This wall, 30 feet high and 436 miles long, will not ultimately satisfy Israeli security needs.
- The Israeli economic strangulation of Palestinians by Israeli military restrictions on the free movement of goods and people and the international sanctions imposed on Palestine are causing great suffering and deprivation.
- Christian Zionism has undergirded the occupation, reinforcing sentiments that have resulted in grave injustices for Palestinians.
- The Christian community in Israel/Palestine, the birth place of Christianity, is being eroded by the hardships created by the occupation.
- Suicide bombings by Palestinian extremists cause fear, insecurity and death for Israelis and work against possibilities for peace.
- In spite of the challenges, we heard the hearts of many Israelis and Palestinians still longing for peace.

In light of these disconcerting realities, in congregational education we encourage

1. Mennonite Church USA pastors and leaders to visit both Israel and Palestine and to deepen their understanding of the current situation in this region.
2. Congregational groups and Sunday school classes to use study courses like *Under Vine and Fig Tree* (Herald Press/Cascadia) to counter the distortions of land and promise in Christian Zionism.

3. Intentional and continued initiatives to meet with and listen to a range of Israeli and Palestinian voices.
4. Use of resources on Mennonite understandings and responses to the Middle East and Israel/Palestine for further study and reflection (see www.MennoniteUSA.org/peace).

In economic engagement, we encourage

5. Groups visiting Palestine/Israel to consider staying in Palestinian communities including Bethlehem and Nazareth for at least a part of their time in the region to encourage economic development in Palestinian communities.
6. Church institutions to gain greater understanding of their investments in this region and to avoid investments which violate international law and promote violence. We encourage exploring ways our investments and our role as investors can be used to provide hope and promote peace in this region.

In peace building (political advocacy, public witness and accompaniment) we encourage

7. Mennonite-related agencies working in Israel/Palestine to coordinate their work in the region.
8. Congregations and agencies to challenge U.S. military and economic support for the Israeli occupation of Palestine and to advocate for justice and protection of human rights for all people in the region.
9. All parts of the church to strengthen our commitment to bridge-building between the alienated factions in this region.

Delegation participants

Daryl Byler (MCC Washington Office), Ron Byler (Mennonite Church USA Executive Leadership), Ed Epp (MEDA), Kim Vu Friesen (MC USA Executive Board), Stanley Green (Mennonite Mission Network), Rachele Lyndaker Schlabach (MCC Washington Office), Rich Meyer (Christian Peacemaker Teams), Mark Regier (Mennonite Mutual Aid), Carol Rose (Christian Peacemaker Teams) and Lee Schmucker (Mennonite Mission Network)



Resources for understanding the conflict between Palestine and Israel

Organizations

Mission Network/Canada Witness, Glenn Witmer, office@mennojerusalem.org (through October 2007)

Mennonite Central Committee, www.mcc.org/Palestine

Christian Peacemaker Teams, www.cpt.org (sign-up for news releases)

Study materials

"Christian Zionism and Peace in the Holy Land" MCC Peace Office Newsletter, 35(3). July-September 2005

"Another Round of Dangerous Optimism" Timothy Seidel, Peace Development Worker, Mennonite Central Committee—Palestine. February 06, 2007. How should advocates for justice, peace and real security for Palestinians and Israelis respond to current reality? www.palestinechronicle.com/story-020607183518.htm

"Peacebuilding in Palestine/Israel: A Discussion Paper" MCC, May 2005.
www.palestinechronicle.com/story-020607183518.htm

"Children of the Nakba" MCC DVD Grade 10 to adult. For Palestinians, the events between 1947 and 1949 are remembered as a time when Israeli military forces destroyed over 500 Palestinian villages and expelled between 700,000 and 900,000 Palestinians from their lands—about 85 percent of the Palestinian population at that time. www.MCC.org

Socially responsible investing at MMA: Stewardship investing is a philosophy of financial decision making motivated and informed by faith convictions. It is a philosophy based on balancing social and financial considerations. http://mma-online.org/stewardship_investing/index.html

In Good Faith: MMA's socially responsible investing blog. <http://blogs.mma-online.org/ingoodfaith/>

For many additional resources, see

Mennonite Church USA www.MennoniteUSA.org/peace

MCC Washington Office www.mcc.org/us/washington/index.html



**Cascadia Publishing House and Herald Press
New Resources
on Current Events in the Middle East**



Under Vine and Fig Tree: Biblical Theologies of Land and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

Alain Epp Weaver, editor

While addressing complex and contested topics, *Under Vine and Fig Tree* is straightforward and highly accessible. Discussion questions and suggestions for action and advocacy, along with maps, a chronology of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and a list of resources for further learning, make this book an ideal introduction for anyone who has wondered about how the Bible relates to current events in the Middle East.

Paper, 204 pages, \$19.95

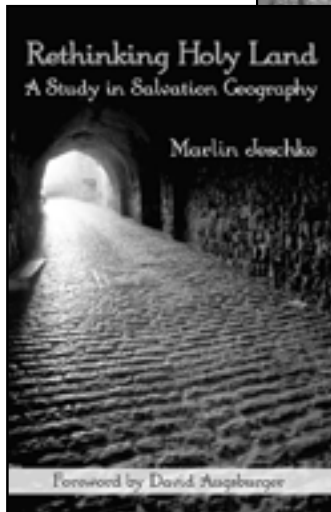


What is Palestine-Israel?

Answers to Common Questions

The combined name Palestine-Israel only hints at the deep fissures dividing this land. An introductory book like this one can only offer a brief glimpse of such a complex conflict. **Sonia K. Weaver** presents some of the questions Mennonite workers in Palestine regularly receive from supporters in Canada, the United States, and beyond, along with straightforward answers.

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Rethinking Holy Land

A Study in Salvation Geography

Marlin Jeschke's vision for possessing land is a fresh alternative to the historical pattern of conquest and displacement of terrorized populations. Jeschke's careful reading of the biblical narrative offers a redeeming view for stewarding space on God's earth, a way we might call "salvation geography."

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- Under Vine and Fig Tree
- What is Palestine-Israel?
- Rethinking Holy Land

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