

Living Stones: The Christians of Palestine

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The local church in the land of Christ

For Ramzi, a Palestinian tour guide, meeting new people from around the world is all in a day's work. But he is still surprised at how often he has to explain his faith to his clients. Ramzi* is a Christian from Bethlehem. He says many foreigners are shocked to find that there is a local, indigenous church community here – right in the land where Jesus lived and preached.

“Once, I took a tourist family to the Nativity Church in Bethlehem (the site where Jesus is believed to have been born),” he says. “When I announced that we were close to the church, the man corrected me – ‘the mosque!’ It took me a long time to convince him that there was a church in Bethlehem to commemorate Christ's birth.”

“Living stones”

Palestinian Christians have long been ignored or misunderstood by the West. As Professor Abe W. Ata, a Christian academic from Bethlehem, has written:

“We are treated as a non-people. Few outside the Middle East even know we exist, and those who do, conveniently forget.”

Yet the Palestinian church remains a vibrant community. Christians here call themselves “Living Stones,” an affirmation that they are remnants of the first Christian communities in the Holy Land, with roots here since the Pentecost.

“Few outside the Middle East even know we exist, and those who do, conveniently forget.”



Sunday morning at a Palestinian church in the West Bank. (Photo: EAPPI)



Israel's separation barrier and other restrictions against Palestinian movement severely disrupt the religious life of all West Bank Palestinians. (Photo: EAPPI)

West Bank Christians and Muslims suffer together from the same abuses under the 43-year occupation of their land by Israel: military invasions and arrests, land and water confiscation for illegal settlements, a system of separate roads for Jews and Arabs, and crushing restrictions on movement and economic life.

In addition, Israel's authorities are depriving thousands of Christian and Muslim Palestinians from Jerusalem of their right to reside in the city, in a campaign to shift the demographic balance there in favour of Jews.

These ongoing violations have prompted many Palestinian Christians to emigrate. When the State of Israel was established, fifty to sixty thousand Palestinian Christians - over a third of Christians in the Holy Land at the time - fled the fighting and left for good.

Since then, the number of Palestinian Christians has steadily fallen due to emigration, mainly to Australia, Canada and the USA.

It has been claimed that this emigration is due to the rise of militant Islam, but in most emigrants say they leave to seek better economic opportunities. The occupation has destroyed the economy of the West Bank, and as Christians tend to have a relatively high level of education and income, they are among the first to emigrate.

Sources: Reuters; Prof. Bernard Sabella (Bethlehem University),

www.religioustolerance.org. *Names have been changed throughout.

Life as a Palestinian Christian

Nora, a retired teacher, is a pillar of her congregation in Nablus. She is the only member of her family left in the city, and her social life revolves around her church and her Muslim neighbours.

“I have always been active in my congregation,” she says. Nora also gives English and Math lessons to her neighbours’ children.

“I am a Christian and all around me are Muslims. They help me and look after me. I am very thankful for their support.”

Nora acknowledges that there are sometimes difficulties between Muslims and Christians, but says the root problem is the occupation.

“I want to tell you that there is no problem among well-educated people, Muslims or Christians,” she says.

“We face some problems from Muslims who do not know anything about Christianity, because they think that Islam is the solution for every problem.”

But she adds: “Israel has made a big gap between Muslims and Christians which did not exist in the 1960s.”

“I want the people in Europe, America and the Arab countries to see the suffering of the Christian here in our country, and to contribute so we can stay in Palestine.”



Sunday morning at an Anglican church in Nablus. (Photo: EAPPI)



An EAPPI volunteer with Naim Ateek, a Palestinian pastor and theologian. (Photo: EAPPI)

A moment of truth - and a call for justice

In December 2009, a group of Palestinian Christians released an important document calling for an end to the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, echoing a call by black South African theologians at a crucial stage in the campaign against Apartheid.

“A moment of truth,” also known as the Palestine Kairos document, represents a historic moment of unity among Palestinian Christians. The group of theologians who wrote it called for Christians worldwide to stand up for justice in order to “give back to the Palestinians their violated humanity (and) liberate the Israelis from the violence of the occupation.”

The document has been endorsed by all of the Heads of Churches in Jerusalem and over 2,300 Palestinian Christians. It emphasizes co-existence among Christians, Muslims and Jews, calling on Christians worldwide to revisit interpretations of the bible that attach “a biblical and theological legitimacy to the infringement of our rights.”

The document affirms that the Holy Land belongs to everybody and should be open and shared by everybody. It expresses the authors’ appreciation for the support of their Christian brothers and sisters throughout the world, and appeals for further acts of solidarity.

“The Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is a sin against God and humanity because it deprives the Palestinians of their basic human rights, bestowed by God,” says the document.

“The injustice of one people towards another is an evil that must be resisted.”

To read the Kairos document in your language, please visit

www.kairospalestine.ps

Further reading...

The Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum (PIEF)

Helping churches work together for a just peace in Israel/Palestine.

Website: <http://bit.ly/WCC-PIEF>