



Special Report of the General Secretary

WCC Delegation to Israel/Palestine

21-26 June 2007

for information

It seems there were two stars to guide the World Council of Churches' delegation to Palestine and Israel, 21-26 June, 2007. One was a bright star, a star of hope. The other was a star that flickered as if from despair and resignation.

Both lights kept appearing, often in juxtaposition. For example, local Christian organizations from the Bethlehem area held a barbecue for the delegation at the traditional site known as Shepherds Field. The hosts – parish and municipal leaders – were salt-of-the-earth citizens. To talk with them was to meet people deeply engaged in community and church life. Yet these are all residents of an enclave already greatly weakened by 40 years of occupation and now being cut off from the outside world by the march of a nine-meter-high (nearly 30 feet) concrete wall with tall watchtowers.

Nevertheless, these people were like stars of hope. Among the many conversations that evening, one man spoke with evident commitment of spending his days earning a living and his nights devoted to a community, church and youth work. Despite the situation, half his topics were about plans accomplished and half were about plans that lay ahead. His words were like a star of hope. Then, as if there was no contradiction, he gestured past his shrinking Palestinian community to a nearby Israeli settlement flooded in lights that burn night and day. With an air of resignation he said, "You know, I feel like we have nothing left to struggle for now."

The star of hope had grown brighter just prior to the trip when WCC member churches and related organisations from six continents meeting in nearby Amman, Jordan, had launched the new Palestine-Israel Ecumenical Forum. There were 130 participants at this international peace conference, including senior church leaders of the Middle East. First, the churches of the region shared their hopes for peace after so much war. Then other churches related their experience in addressing endemic conflict in places like Sudan, Colombia, Nicaragua, Sri Lanka and South Africa.

The conference issued the 'Amman Call' to shape the new forum's work. On the one hand will be peace-making activities directed at ending the conflict. On the other will be engagement in peacebuilding to prepare for the day when conflict is over and societies must heal. The call lays out three concepts to guide the forum: the ethical imperative for a just peace, the ecumenical imperative for unity in action, and the Gospel imperative for costly solidarity. Each reflects a kind of hope.

The new forum was inaugurated with a worship service at the Jordan river and the planting of an olive tree donated by Palestinian Christians at the traditional site of Christ's baptism.

From there the WCC general secretary Rev. Dr Samuel Kobia led a four-person delegation to Jerusalem. Members were Metropolitan Emmanuel (Adamakis) of France, who is from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople; Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, head of the Church of

Norway's Council on Ecumenical and International Relations; and Ms Christina Biere, an academic from the Evangelical Church in Germany.

The group met with the heads of local churches, Jewish and Muslim religious leaders, government officials, and representatives of international and local civil society organizations.

They found churches much encouraged by the conference in Amman, with many looking in hope to the wider WCC fellowship to play a stronger role in supporting local struggles for a just peace. The Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem, Torkom Manoogian, told the delegation that peace and justice are necessary, but are not the churches' final goal. Rather, they are necessary so both peoples may live together side by side. Churches helping to achieve that would be giving a gift to the whole world, he said. .

"We, as a suffering church of Arab Christians, need churches of the world to help us to keep the hope," said Bishop Munib Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran of Jerusalem and the Holy Land.

"If I had ten hours to spend on inter-religious relations, I'd spend nine hours with young people and one with adults," said Archbishop Paul Sayah of the Maronite Archdiocese of Haifa and the Holy Land. "In Jerusalem and beyond, we have to be loving enough to tell each other the truth."

"There is one focus for all of us – the education of our children," Israel's Sephardic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar said [see photo]. "We teach them a lot but...there cannot be anything in it that causes hatred. A nation that does not ensure respect for others but allows incitement, is actually doing harm to its children."

The WCC delegation met with international volunteers of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel. After seeing them at work in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron and the West Bank village of Jayyous, Kobia called the ecumenical accompaniers "the eyes and ears of the ecumenical family in the midst of the conflict".

The delegation also visited Christian, Jewish and Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem, Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Hebron.

"We must not be fearful of known challenges [in addressing prejudice and hatred] compared to the overwhelming blessing [of reconciliation] for all peoples and for the world at large."
Sephardic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar.

At each stop the other star, the one of lost hopes, was never far away. One place it appeared was in a community that has lost all of its wells, most of its land and much of its livelihood to the separation barrier. When a visitor mentioned Lebanon, a child responded by proclaiming the name of a militant Lebanese leader. This thumbs-up affirmation was evidence of what happens when those with power to resolve conflict through negotiation choose violence instead. It was a fresh reminder that violence begets more violence.

Where children admire resistance fighters and a hard-working community leader feels there is nothing left to struggle for, what must churches do? "Together we will act and pray and speak and work and risk reputations...to end these decades of injustice, humiliation and insecurity, to end the decades of living as refugees and under occupation", the Amman Call promises. "Time has not served the cause of peace but has served the cause of extremism. The Palestine-Israel Ecumenical Forum will depend "on the many churches looking with expectation to what we have begun in their name", the WCC general secretary told the Amman conference. As the forum gets underway, more churches will likely become involved in the challenging work of advocacy.

Joint and coordinated action is a central part of what is needed. The forum will be a "participatory group of churches and organizations meeting, interacting and cooperating in order to further a common cause", Kobia said, adding, "Wherever it is made, a united and credible witness of churches together changes the course of events".

Delegation members, reviewing a journey that followed the forum's launch, identified five points to guide further action:

- Churches need to use a common message for advocacy if they are to reach their potential as peacemakers and peacebuilders in relation to this conflict. This echoed a call from the Amman conference.
- Inter-religious relations and collaboration must take account of advocacy for peace, and vice versa. The Middle East is a region where inter-faith relations have a rich history and an essential role to play in future. Christian-Jewish dialogue needs to address theological and political questions raised by the conflict.
- There is a clear need for increased international support for the local churches. Support is important in terms of the continuing Christian presence in the region (survival, in some cases) and in terms of the church ministries.
- Peace education is on many minds in the different religions. It is seen from a variety of angles but more and more people in church, mosque and synagogue support it.

Reflection by a delegate: Start peace education with children; bring together churches that have overcome walls

By Christina Biere, member of the WCC Central Committee, the Commission on Youth in the Ecumenical Movement, and the WCC delegation to Palestine and Israel, June 2007.

I would like to focus on the ecumenical response to the situation in Palestine and Israel based on our visit there and the calls to action made by the Amman conference on peace.

When the conference's 'Amman Call' recommends "furthering...Christian education resources around those issues central to the conflict", it is very much in line with the requests from churches and religious leaders that we heard in Jerusalem. We found great concern among them about starting peace education for children and for young adults. We saw programmes of international, inter-religious encounter which could broaden the Decade to Overcome Violence.

Misuse of religious education to foster violence instead of peace is also a serious concern in the region. Young participants at the Amman conference noted that interfaith initiatives are necessary between religious communities in neighbouring countries, not only in Palestine and Israel where some groups on both sides have come to know each other rather well. Member churches must involve young people in creative programmes that educate parishioners for peace.

Amman also calls for "strengthening existing efforts and identifying new models of church solidarity in action". This call became very clear to me seeing the daily accompaniment work of EAPPI. Coming together for ecumenical action is important for those who take part, for local people and for visibility. Member church participation and funding could make EAPPI stronger, but the programme also strengthens member churches and their advocacy capacity. One could also imagine EAPPI offering short-term exposure visits for journalists, delegations from member churches and church volunteers working in Palestine and Israel.

The 'Amman Call' mentions the need for "cooperating with all efforts of Israeli and Palestinian civil society" that accord with the goals of the new forum. "Christians and Muslims and Jews have, can and will understand one another and live together as neighbors," it says. My experiences in Jerusalem underline the need for more cooperation between the WCC's advocacy and interfaith engagements. There are different faith-based interpretations of the conflict in Palestinian and Israeli civil society and I believe that member churches' experiences and insights in Christian-Jewish and Christian-Muslim dialogue are relevant to WCC peacebuilding initiatives. Critical comments that we heard at the chief rabbinate in Jerusalem and the deep engagement of the heads of churches in interfaith dialogue supports this impression. Trust gained through years of dialogue may be tested by political stands for peace. It is not about doing the one and leaving the other, but about understanding mutual sensitivities and listening with the ears of other side. If we call for "economic measures", Christian peace advocates in Jerusalem pointed out, we have to be sensitive to the legacy of the Nazi period and the slogan they used, "Don't buy from Jews! "

"Help us to tear down walls and build and rebuild bridges among all peoples in the region", Palestinian church representatives said in Amman. I believe that the WCC could bring together member churches with experience in overcoming walls that separate countries – Cyprus, Germany, Korea are just three examples. This should be done in close cooperation with DOV and with the 2011 International Ecumenical convocation on Peace in mind. In fact, I would propose a DOV team visit to this region. On our delegation there wasn't enough time to listen to the voices of youth, women, parishioners and church-related organisation – groups with much to offer in the search for peace.

Links to further information

The delegation's visit to Palestine and Israel began directly after the WCC international peace conference in Amman, Jordan, that launched the Palestine-Israel Ecumenical Forum with the 'Amman Call' (see <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/middle-east-peace/20-06-07-the-amman-call.html>)

WCC news stories about the delegation:

- WCC photo essays form the visit
 - Life under occupation <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/photo-galleries/palestineisrael-visit-2007/life-under-occupation.html>
 - Holy Places on Holy Land <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/photo-galleries/palestineisrael-visit-2007/holy-places-on-holy-land.html>
 - Religious Leaders <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/photo-galleries/palestineisrael-visit-2007/meeting-religious-leaders.html>
- Churches in Jerusalem welcome WCC's new advocacy initiative for peace in Palestine/Israel (25/06/07) <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/news-management/all-news-english/display-single-english-news/article/2141/churches-in-jerusalem-wel.html>
- WCC to strengthen churches' peace efforts in Palestine/Israel (27/06/07) <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/news-management/all-news-english/display-single-english-news/article/2141/wcc-to-strengthen-churche.html>

"The conflict in the Holy Land is one in which every Christian has a part – as a partner not for fighting but for reconciliation."

Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Michel Sabbah