

From the Rev. Dr. Richard K. Toll of Friends of Sabeel--North America, Dec. 4, 2015

This inspirational message by the Rev. Dr. Richard K. Toll, Secretary of the Board of Trustees of Friends of Sabeel--North America, was written in conjunction with his current service as a member of the Education Task Force of the Palestine/Israel Network of the Episcopal Peace Fellowship. Rev. Toll wrote these reflections upon his return from a November (2015) trip to Palestine/Israel. Rev. Toll also visited Gaza recently, in April of this year.

The Rev. Canon Richard K. Toll, D.Min., D.D., a retired Episcopal priest, served as the board chair of Friends of Sabeel--N.A. (FOSNA) from 2000 to 2011. He received his M.Div. from Church Divinity School of the Pacific and his D.Min. from Virginia Theological Seminary. Ordained to the diaconate in 1967 and the priesthood in 1968, he has served in various positions from chaplain to rector. He was the canon pastor of St. Mark's Cathedral in Seattle, and the honorary canon in the Diocese of Olympia, Wash. Rev. Toll, who resides in Portland, Ore. was awarded two honorary degrees for his effective commitment to justice and peace in the Holy Land.

The occupation of the Palestinian people in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza must come to an end, and soon, for the sake of the State of Israel and the Palestinians. I have been a part of watching the developments in the region for over thirty years, having made my first visit to Bethlehem in 1983. Since then 87% of Bethlehem has been confiscated for settlements, bypass roads, the separation wall and military checkpoints. Every major church in the USA, including the Episcopal Church, has adopted major resolutions over the past 48 years regarding the end of the military occupation, to no avail. Why? The major obstacle has been the United States in its veto of over forty resolutions that have paralyzed the international community, which has tried unsuccessfully to end the occupation. The occupation is against international law, as are also the 250 settlements in the West Bank that house 650,000 settlers on Palestinian land.

Following are some reflections on my own recent experiences of being in Gaza with the Episcopal Church Fellowship in April and on a Sabeel witness trip to the Occupied Territories in November. Enough is enough is enough. The suffering caused by the occupation is beyond our imagination. Delay for whatever reason is not the answer. Delay only adds to the burden of the Palestinian people, and allows the State of Israel to make the occupation more permanent and oppressive and to take more land and resources.

I am raw from a recent three-day visit to Gaza in April and a recent two-week visit to the Occupied Territories in November, observing and living with the military occupation.

When you meet with 25 women in Gaza who have lost their husbands, children and homes, it leaves an impression.

When you meet with 25 young people who have lost their mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters, and also their homes, it leaves an impression.

When the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem cannot or will not use the word occupation because he fears his travel privileges and permit to live in East Jerusalem will be revoked by the State of Israel, it leaves an impression.

When 6,000 missiles are dropped on Gaza in 51 days--missiles provided and paid for by our tax dollars--and you see the result with 18,000 homes destroyed, it leaves an impression.

When on my recent visit you hear the story of 10-year-old children who have come home from school to find their homes confiscated and demolished, it leaves an impression.

When Jeff Halper, director of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, shows you a map of a future East Jerusalem with very few Palestinians, it leaves an impression.

When you observe five settlers on the top of Temple Mount surrounded by six Israeli police officers protecting them with their assault rifles, it leaves an impression.

When two 13-year-old children are killed two blocks from your hotel and their bodies allegedly have knives on them, it leaves an impression.

When you observe land being confiscated in the Cremisan Valley of East Jerusalem, land belonging to the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches and to individual Palestinian people--all within a half a mile where you attend worship services at an Orthodox church on a Sunday morning--and go with a priest and members of his congregation after services to protest the wall that is being built to separate the people from their land, it leaves an impression.

When you see their olive trees being uprooted, the people weeping, and you offer prayers and sing "We Shall Overcome", and all the time you're feeling helpless with the giant bulldozers crushing the trees and the land being torn up, it leaves an impression.

When a Muslim woman comes out of her home and thanks you for the prayer because her land is being confiscated, it leaves an impression.

To hear the people of the region end their prayers with "How long oh Lord, how long?" it leaves an impression.

The military occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem is affecting four million people of all ages, including at least 70,000 Christians from all denominations including our own. There is a prayer in the Book of Common Prayer that reminds us "to make no peace with oppression." The question each of us must ask and answer is: who is the oppressor and who are the oppressed?

Jesus was clear as to his own audience, and did not feel the need to give in to the intimidation and humiliation of the Roman occupation of his day, or to that of the Temple collaborators in Jerusalem who went along with the occupation forces.

We as a community of faith must act, and not only with our words and prayers. The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement is nonviolent, and is making an effort to bring the State of Israel to its senses in order to end the military occupation of the Palestinian people.

-- The Rev. Canon Richard K. Toll