

## **My journey towards working for a national UCC Palestine Israel Network**

**By Rev. Cynthia Willauer**

One Tuesday in late summer of 2003, Rev. David Good, Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme (FCCOL), invited me to join a staff meeting to hear a yet-to-be-identified concern of a visiting Episcopal Priest, the Rev. Bruce Shipman.

Shortly before this meeting, Rev. Shipman had attended an evening program at the FCCOL honoring a choir from the Central Methodist Church of Johannesburg, South Africa, a church with which the FCCOL has had a close relationship. Hearing of the work the FCCOL had undertaken against the system of apartheid in South Africa, Rev. Shipman thought it would be open to hearing of Israel's gradual but systematic incursion of an Israeli settler and military presence into Palestinian life and the oppression suffered by the people as a result of this occupation.

He opened a map that oriented those gathered to a situation that I immediately knew I have repressed knowing about for years. (The blockage to my knowing about, caring about, the plight of Palestinians I think of as a "stumbling block" buried in my psyche, and coming to light in this moment.) He oriented us to the "green line"-- Israel's internationally-recognized border; the trespass into Palestinian territories of illegal "settlements"; segregated roads that connect "settlements" one with another and with Israel proper; checkpoints; the "separation wall" then in early stages of construction. He told of the effect the Israeli-only roads have on Palestinian lives. He said that we, as U.S. taxpayers, fund in great part the building of the Israeli-only roads, the "separation wall", the military force that "guards" the settlements.

I was horrified by the story the map told.

I knew I couldn't just absorb the shock and go on as if I didn't know what was happening, as if I had no part in the suffering brought to Palestinian families by invasion, division, confiscation, bulldozing over and paving over of their homes and lands and lives.

I came home, told my husband of my shock and said I would phone my good friend, Rabbi Alan Lovins. My husband warned me I risked ruining a

beautiful friendship. “Don’t do it. The issue is too divisive.” In spite of the warning, I called Alan, and with great relief I learned that he and a Christian friend, a Roman Catholic layman, Peter Nagel, had for some months been leading groups to Israel/Palestine to learn what was happening in the land Alan so dearly loves.

This proved propitious for my husband and me, for as the 1<sup>st</sup> Journey to Israel and Palestine of the FCCOL grew from the conversation with the Rev. Bruce Shipman, it was organized as a closed covenant. It gathered only the various partner organizations of the church and representatives of the Jewish Federation of New London.

So it fell to my husband and me to take our first trip to the Holy Land with our friend, a Jew who has taken on the painful task of opening the eyes of fellow Jews to the reality of Israel’s failure to heed international law regarding its boundary, illegally extending itself into Palestinian territory to appropriate land, violating the human rights of its neighbor in multiple ways.

Our week-long visit to Jerusalem was framed in a beautiful way by two Shabbat dinners celebrated with Alan’s hosts and their friends. In the course of the evenings those gathered around the table spoke of work in which they were engaged to counter the violations of the occupation, with Rabbis for Human Rights, for one, and with Machsom Watch, an organization of Israeli women who monitor soldier-abuse of Palestinians at checkpoints as people seek to enter Israel for work, medical attention, visits to family or for other reasons.

These dinners were significant for me for another reason, in that our host and their friends discussed my preparation for ordination with interest, erudition and passion. The support of those gathered around the table and the conversations we shared continue to guide my call.

As our trip progressed, we met with Yitzhak Frankenthal, an enormously courageous man who in 1994 had lost his 19-year old son to criminal abduction and murder by Hamas but with painful deliberation had chosen to respond not with violence but by founding the Bereaved Parents Circle. This is a group wherein Israelis and Palestinians--Jews, Muslims and Christians-- meet with one another, with those perpetrating the violence and with community groups on both sides of the conflict to seek passage to a just peace. In our meeting with the Bereaved Parents we were joined by three other Israeli men

who have lost children to violence but who come together to refuse hate. This part of our visit moved us more deeply than any other.

But going through the checkpoint from Israel into and back from Bethlehem on foot put us “on the ground” with inconvenience, fear, waiting, search, incredulity, anger. This is an experience most visitors to the West Bank don’t have, as most tour busses move through the checkpoints on Israeli-only roads with relatively ease, with little disruption of schedule, little knowing that the same passage for a Palestinian can take hours and is often in the end denied.

In Bethlehem we spent a day with the Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, a Palestinian Lutheran minister who in 2003 was building and who directs the International Center of Bethlehem. He told parts of the story of the oppression which at the time Israel was inflicting upon his people, referred to a recently-bombed nearby house, showed us traces of bullets and remnants of racist graffiti in the wall of the Center, and he showed us, too, work he and others were undertaking to build a refuge from the pain of daily life—a multi-cultural school, a clinic for the hearing impaired, artisans’ workshops, gardens within which families could walk to gain respite from trauma, theatres, a communication center—all constructed with an extraordinary eye for beauty. He told us the work expressed “the Bethlehem that could be,” created as an antidote to the Bethlehem that was visited upon Palestinians by the violence of the occupation.

The gift of our time with Mitri was experiencing this pastor’s love for and fidelity to the tenets of Jesus’ teaching. He was kind, patient, impassioned with the search for peace with justice for Palestinians, clear with a Jewish member of our group who challenged his view at every turn, wise in counsel in every way. He assured us he was working for a just peace in concert with many Muslim and Jewish groups in both Palestine and Israel.

The second and third time my husband and I travelled to Palestine-Israel, we were part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Tree of Life Journeys, organized by the FCCOL. (This is the church from which I serve a semi-autonomous extension of its ministry: the Union Chapel, South Lyme.) On these extraordinary Tree of Life Journeys, organized and led by the Revs. David Good and Carleen Gerber, with organizational support from Jirius Atrash, the group met with numerous individuals and groups who work not only to expose as unlawful Israel’s

military and governmental policy and practice regarding Palestine but to support non-violent resistance and to nurture hope for a bright future. At the time of our visits, most people believed fervently that America was in a position to bring about positive change, if only we communicated the need to our President and our Representatives with sufficient passion.

A great pleasure of the TOL trips was to get to know the people among whom we stayed, particularly in Beit Sahour and Bethlehem. The first night of our first visit to Beit Sahour, as we walked the streets and dusk fell, we discovered with a measure of relief, we had no reason to fear, even though we weren't exactly sure where we were. People were universally friendly. And when we were welcomed by families into their homes for meals and the chance for conversation, friendships were profound.

Again we met with a member of the Bereaved Parents Circle, now Ibrahim Khalil, a Muslim olive farmer living south of Nablus. Again we were deeply moved by the story he told of the loss of a child to settler violence, of the collapse of family health, uprooting of olive trees, diminishment of a livelihood, and of steadfast refusal to hate.

We met with Abuna Elias Chacour, a Melkite priest and Israeli citizen living and working in Ibillin, near Nazareth, a man whose autobiography, Blood Brothers members of the TOL Journeys are asked to read before embarking on the trip. We visited on one trip the ruins of the village that Elias Chacour had grown up in, noting with pain that its identity as a Palestinian Christian village has been erased by the planting of an Israeli sign that claims the ruin the result of border war. Abuna Chacour, meanwhile, builds Mar Elias, a multi-cultural school dedicated to the furtherance of building sound community and a just peace. He steadfastly refuses to hate.

In Hebron some of us encountered physically the overflow of anger of an Israeli-army guard as we left the offices of the Christian Peacemaker Team to accompany Palestinian children from school to home through the closed-off, settler-befouled, formerly- bustling market street. As we moved through the steel gate of a checkpoint, the guard clanged shut the multiple bars of the gate, caging us, one by one, to teach us, as if we didn't know, "You are on dangerous ground."

All this remembering holds pain, especially as we know the situation for Palestinians has grown ever more desperate since the dates of our visits. And there is pain in knowing many fellow-Americans don't want to know of America's complicity in the plight of the Palestinians.

For each year of the Tree of Life journeys, the FCCOL organizes a day-long teach-in together with an evening cultural event and meal, provided in recent years by the Islamic Center of New London, and though the events are well attended, little interest is paid them by clergy and congregations of area churches.

Because I, myself, until 2003 had been blocked from taking an interest in Israel-Palestine relations, with the "stumbling block" of unknown origin that I identified earlier in the way, thus am a relative newcomer to knowledge myself, I celebrate the initiative launched by lay and clergy leadership of the Massachusetts Conference of the UCC to develop a UCC Palestine-Israel Network. That two persons saw the need for congregations of the UCC to engage with courage in the struggle for peace with justice in the Holy Lands and reached across the nation to act upon their conviction, and that from this initiative sprang the UCC Palestine-Israel Network—this gives reason to hope. This gives a structure within which to learn, especially when to do so takes courage. This gives faith for the journey.

May the UCCPIN serve clergy and congregations of our church as the map of Israel's incursion into Palestinian Territory that I was shown in 2003 served me. May the UCCPIN, through education, build a constituency that can speak up for and effectively support a U.S. political process that will build a just peace for Palestine-Israel. And may our working together bring us joy.

Rev. Cynthia C. Willauer

Minister to the Union Chapel of South Lyme

First Congregational Church of Old Lyme, UCC