

THE JOURNEY TO A NATIONAL UCC PALESTINE ISRAEL NETWORK

by Angelica Harter

The first person I met upon arriving in Jerusalem in 2006 was Cathy Nichols, at that time our UCC/DOC Global Ministries mission partner at Sabeel Ecumenical Institute. I was on a spiritual journey with fellow Daughters of Abraham members, and we were led by Henry Carse, Program Director at St. George's College. It was thrilling to walk where Jesus walked, to stand on the spot where He cooked breakfast for his disciples, to rub shoulders with Christian pilgrims from all over the world and hear them speaking in many tongues. But it was equally disturbing to be awakened to the present reality of political life in Palestine/Israel: to hear that our Arab Israeli driver could not marry a woman from the West Bank because she could not live with him in Jerusalem, to learn that the number of indigenous Christians with whom Cathy ministered was dwindling by the day, to experience the arrogance and entitlement of the American Jews who had made "alia" although they had been living comfortable lives in the US or London, to be confronted by the concrete barrier of the Wall which reminded me so much of the prisons I had visited in the US.

I returned from that trip a changed person and starting reading and attending Sabeel conferences in the US. The more I learned, the more heart-broken I became, the more I wanted to stand in solidarity with Palestinian Christians and to change our own government's unquestioning support of the Israeli government and its policies. In 2007 I participated in planning the Sabeel Conference that brought Archbishop Tutu to Boston and labeled the Israeli government's policies as "apartheid". In 2008 I returned to Palestine/Israel for the Sabeel International Conference, another deeply memorable experience, in which we visited the sites of four Palestinian villages within Israel which had been obliterated in the 1948 war. The first had been turned over to a dairy farming kibbutz, the second contained only a ruined mosque, the third was the site of a park commemorating a Jewish victory in the war, and the fourth held shells of churches and a Muslim shrine which religious folks were not allowed to repair or use. We also met many courageous Israelis from the organizations which are constantly working for peace with justice.

I felt a strong call to tell others what I had seen and to organize for peace with justice within the UCC. With others I started a Task Team within First Church in Cambridge. We prayed, educated, held study sessions on the Kairos document, attended local actions, cosponsored actions with local Jewish groups, and attended CMEP conferences. At General Synod 2009 I met Branwen Cook, and we discovered we had the same passion for this issue. She had already approached others about forming a Mass. Conference Task Team. The two of us brought some folks together under the auspices of the Mission and Justice Commission. We started giving workshops at Super Saturdays and attending and then sponsoring Tree of Life conferences which had originated at the UCC church in Old Lyme, CT.

Last summer when we became aware of the Resolution “In Support of Effective and Constructive Peacemaking Between Palestinians and Israelis Through Positive Investment in Palestine” which was being brought before the Synod, the Task Teams at First Church and the MACUCC felt we needed to make delegates aware that the resolution presented a one-sided view of the economic situation under Occupation. Although it said many positive things about the Palestinian economy, nowhere did it acknowledge that the Palestinian economy is completely controlled by Israel or that Israel illegally extracts resources from the West Bank for the use of its own people. It condemned the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement which had been called for by a large segment of Palestinian civil society in 2005 and endorsed by the signers of the Kairos Palestine document. The two Task Teams organized to put another view before the delegates to General Synod and with the help of many the Resolution was tabled.

Inspired by the courage and hope of the Palestinian Christians in the Kairos Palestine document, completely disillusioned with the ability of the US government to stand up to Israel after the veto of the settlement vote in the UN, wanting to stand in solidarity with Palestinians suffering under the constant cruelty of the Occupation and with Israelis and American Jews and Muslims who are calling for a new order of justice and peace in the Middle East and following the lead of our brothers and sisters in the Methodist, PCUSA, Episcopal and Lutheran churches, we determined that it was time to start a UCC national Palestine Israel Network.