



**PALESTINE ISRAEL
ECUMENICAL NETWORK**

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REPORT ON THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES (WCC) CONSULTATION ON FIFTY YEARS OF ISRAELI OCCUPATION OF PALESTINE

INTRODUCTION

The consultation was held in Beit Sahour from 20th to 22nd June 2017. I represented PIEN (I was the only Australian present) at the consultation and I circulated to the gathering a paper I had prepared. The paper gave some background to PIEN, listed the activities we have undertaken in the last five years and suggested some issues facing PIEN. I received more comments about the paper than I expected. If anyone would like a copy of the paper they can contact me fhrainger@gmail.com and I will email it to them.

PURPOSE

- To examine the nature of the present occupation
- To reflect on Biblical thought about some of the issues and prayerfully reflect on them
- To review WCC policies and some of its projects
- To make recommendations that might help the WCC to develop a better co-ordinated and enhanced ecumenical response to the occupation

EVENTS

Keynote inputs

1. Welcome by Patriarch Michel Sabbah, Pat.em. This speech is on the WCC website www.oikoumene.org go to resources and then documents
2. Introduction by the Secretary General Rev Dr Olaf Fykes Tviet. The introduction was titled
“The cloud of witnesses to hope” – this is also on the website
3. A reflection by the Lutheran Bishop of Jordan and the Holy Land, Rt Rev Dr Munib A Younan. This was a personal reflection.

The Bishop related how as a young boy an American missionary brought food to his house and later told his family that it was in God’s word that the Jews should have the holy land. He then related how when he was studying theology he found out that this is false. He said that after the first intifada and after OSLO there was a positive atmosphere. He remembers young Israeli and Palestinian men in the same cars waving palm branches. He said, “Today there is no hope”.

4. The National Coalition of Christian Organisations in Palestine presented and read an open letter. In commentary, the authors said the Kairos Document was one of hope. The letter is one of despair. The letter is on the WCC website. The Vice Moderator of the Central Committee of WCC, H.E. Metropolitan Prof Dr Gennadios of Sassima responded

Australian Christians who seek lasting peace for the people of Palestine and Israel.

We aim to equip and inform Australian churches, inspired by Christ's vision for universal reconciliation.

positively to the letter and undertook to guide it through the decision making processes of the WCC

5. A further presentation by the Secretary General titled "Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace". He made the following points,
 - A pilgrimage is more than a journey – it is a vision
 - Why is the idea of pilgrimage relevant for Palestine?
 - An imaginative journey
 - A mobilising movement
 - A challenge for our faith eg
 - Use of Biblical texts – we need to expose this
 - Church history in Europe in relation to Jews
 - We are together with other religions – potential for +ves and -ves
 - Presence of Christians in Palestine – important for the worldwide church. It is shrinking and needs solidarity.
 - Other theological issues eg
 - Idea of chosen people
 - Doctrine of discovery= lands often seen as unoccupied or people disregarded
 - Doctrine of mission
 - Doctrine of racism – related to others – how do we deal with the other
 - Many come to the Holy Land as pilgrims – there is a struggle – where do they go – what do they hear? We should promote such pilgrimages as pilgrimages of justice and peace.
 - We also call on people of good will outside of the churches. We should be open to ideas with the objective of justice and peace
 - Share and communicate with each other and share our lives
 - Pilgrimage is an attitude of hope and resilience
 - Pilgrimage is about prayer – mobilising ourselves, churches – can change people
6. Reports from project teams, Jerusalem Inter Church Centre (JIC), EAPPI, Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum (PIEF) and the World Week of Prayer for Peace
7. Workshops to develop recommendations to the governing bodies of WCC

DOCUMENTS TABLED

1. The open letter from NCCOP mentioned above – on the WCC website
2. WCC statement on 50 years of occupation (11 June 2017) – WCC website
3. Half a Century of Occupation – What next? www.sabeel.org
4. 17,898 Days: Almost Fifty Years of Occupation, 5 June 2016 (The Israel Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories) www.btselem.org
5. WCC Policy on Palestine and Israel 1948-2016 (summary). This is an unofficial work in progress document. I can send a copy to anyone who is interested in reading it fhrainger@gmail.com

THEMES

The themes that I discerned are:

1. Palestinian Christians (and they often said their Muslim friends) **feel a sense of despair**. Fifty years on and it seems that churches don't care very much and the international community is complicit in the occupation.
2. Palestinian Christians want **urgent action** and less "Christian diplomacy" from the WCC, churches and individuals. (Of course, the question remains what is this action?)
3. **Immigration**: Palestinian Christians are very concerned about the rate of Christians emigrating or wanting to emigrate. The Christian population is shrinking and immigration is a prime reason for this. A Lutheran priest related how he would discuss immigration with a family on average once a week. Significant issues are if the Christian community is continuously depleted how can the struggle be maintained and when the occupation ends how many will return to Palestine?

The driver who took me from the airport to the venue and back was moonlighting because he is getting married next year. He commented that all his friends have migrated. He was awarded a full scholarship to study in the US after high school but his father wouldn't let him go because his father thought he would never return

The driver also illustrates another aspect of the occupation. After he marries he can only afford to live in Bethlehem. If the Israeli authorities know this he and his wife will lose their Jerusalem resident permits so his parents are going to take the risk and set up their home to indicate that the driver and his wife are in fact living in their house – clothes, mess etc

Of course, during the drives, the disturbing separation wall was obvious.

4. **Tourism**: a lot of tours do not mention the occupation let alone its implications for Palestinian people. The Israeli government is more and more discouraging tour groups from going to the West Bank which means that local economies are put under more stress let alone local people not being able to tell their stories.

THE MAIN THEMES FROM THE WORKSHOPS

1. The WCC needs to respond to the open letter and to include Palestinian Christians in its deliberations and statements. National church bodies and individual churches should be made aware of the letter and asked to respond to it by action and advocacy.
2. BDS should be more explicitly supported by the WCC and by churches
3. PIEF needs to be maintained but it needs to be thoroughly evaluated and possibly restructured.
4. The advocacy aspect of EAPPI should be emphasised more
5. The WCC should develop a statement on religious states

6. The WCC should give more prominence to the UN ESCWA report (the one that says that Gaza will be uninhabitable by 2020)
7. The WCC should do what it can to ensure that seminaries and theological faculties include the issues faced by Palestinian Christians (and indeed Muslims) in their curriculum
8. The Balfour issue needs to be addressed
9. Peter Povey, Director Commission of the Churches on International Affairs within the WCC, told the gathering that the WCC would examine the recommendations and make decisions about them

(If anyone would like to read the reports from the workshops contact me and I will forward them (fhrainger@gmail.com).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PIEN

1. PIEN should renew its sense of urgency and continue to explore avenues for action. Perhaps it could issue a press release on the open letter to mainstream media and to church media.
2. PIEN could authorise me to explore whether it can be affiliated with PIEF. At the moment, it is unclear who are core members of PIEF and who are members and what constitutes a member. Peter Povey, Director Commission of the Churches on International Affairs within the WCC, led me to believe that he would help in establishing a link between PIEN and PIEF. This would enhance PIEN's knowledge of what is happening internationally and it might give some weight to our applications for funding.
3. PIEN should consider Omar Haramy's suggestion to me from Sabeel Ecumenical Theology Center. Omar's suggestion is that PIEN regularly advertise that we can help groups with itineraries and with meetings with Palestinian Christians – eg talks, prayers, Bible studies, services, a reflective walk along the del a Via Dolorosa etc If people contact, say Tim or the President then they can put them into contact with Omar.

Maybe it would be simpler to put advertisements in updates pointing people to Sabeel (JIC).

4. PIEN should continue to and perhaps give more emphasis to the Balfour Project in Britain – the Balfour report is crucial in understanding the modern situation in Israel and Palestine and the Project has produced some very good material including an 18 minute film.
5. PIEN should be alert to ways that it can facilitate EAPPI returnees to carry out their follow up advocacy work. This could be done by regular notices and contact details in our updates.

F.Rainger 1st July 2017