

## PARTNER PLAN

# John McCulloch - Israel November 2018

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### A Witness to non-violence & hope in Bethlehem



*Here are God's children on both sides of the wall, and no man-made barrier can destroy this fact. With this faith we will be able to tear out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.*

Martin Luther King, Jr.

*Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter*

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Some weeks back I took the bus from St Andrews Scots Memorial Church in Jerusalem to Checkpoint 300, which is one of four checkpoints that leads into

Bethlehem. The bus drops you just outside and everyone gets off and begins to walk through the metal turnstiles that take you to the other side of the wall. On the other side, a cacophony of fruit sellers and taxi drivers call out to passers-by in the hope of earning a few more shekels.

What strikes me after being here for the last 8 months is how crossing checkpoints and lines of heavily armed soldiers can become so normalised. And yet, in a context of political structural injustice and military occupation, it is important as Martin Luther King Jr once said, to remember that *Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.*

In this partner letter, I give a brief glimpse into four organisations within Bethlehem and the surrounding area, who are working for peace and justice through a strict adherence to non-violence.

Father John Dear writes:

*Everyone is called to live their lives right now in the kingdom of God, to practice now as if they were already in the fullness of the presence of the God of peace. As we do, we will reject every form of violence, from war and executions to racism and sexism to nuclear weapons and corporate greed to destructive behaviour to the creatures and Mother Earth.*

*(John Dear, They Will Inherit the Earth: Making Peace and Practicing Nonviolence in a Time of Climate Change)*



### WI'AM

Wi'am is just a few metres from the separation wall that ring-fences Bethlehem, and sits adjacent to the Aida refugee camp. In a context of military occupation, where the local economy is fragile, families are fragmented and separated and put under increasing stress, and children grow up surrounded by military incursions into Bethlehem; Wi'am offers a space for conflict transformation, restorative justice, and mediation.

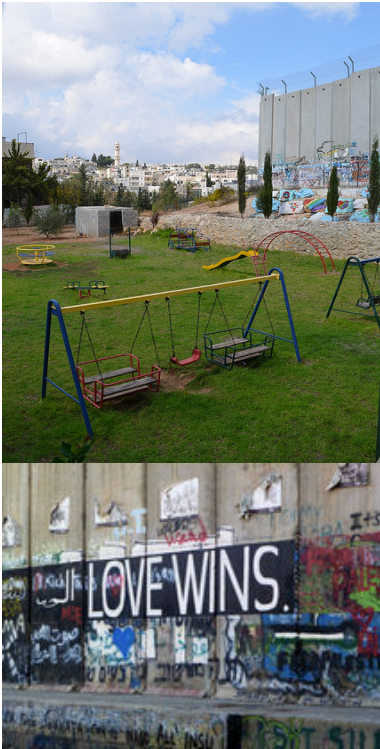
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Within its small space Wi'am has a playground for young children, as there are very few areas for children to play in around Bethlehem. Amongst the many things they do, they provide educational and recreational programmes for children throughout the year.

Wi'am exists within the shadow of the wall, but from within that shadow, it casts a light of hope, affirming as Martin Luther King did, that *Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.*

As I sat drinking coffee with some of the staff there, I heard about the struggle to keep hope alive when the situation in the West Bank is getting so much worse, with ever-expanding settlements and criss-crossed with hundreds of checkpoints. And yet, the staff of Wi'am I spoke with reminded me that Jesus taught us to love our enemies, and to not repay evil for evil. The only way to follow the God of peace is to adhere to lives of non-violence, that embody the kingdom of God here on earth.

For more information about Wi'am, you can visit their website: <http://www.alaslah.org/>

## Tent of Nations



*At Tent of Nations, we seek to embody a positive approach to conflict and occupation. Faced with great injustice, we know that we should not hate, despair, or flee. We can refuse to be enemies and channel our pain and frustration into positive actions which will build a better future.*

(Daoud Nassar)

At the entrance to The Tent of Nations, a hilltop farm southwest of Bethlehem, the Nassar family have painted on the coarse surface of a rock the words, 'We refuse to be enemies'. In a land marked by conflict and violence, their witness to the radical pursuit of peace and justice is deeply moving.



The Nassars have lived for three generations on their farm, harvesting the olives, tending the vineyards, and using the natural resources to sustain their community in a political context marked by conflict, land confiscation and violence.

The Nassar family's struggle is representative of that of many Palestinians. Over a number of years, the government has denied them access to electricity and water. Their main route to Bethlehem has been blocked off by boulders. Their situation is not unique or even unusual. Many of their Palestinian brothers and sisters who once were neighbours have been evicted from their



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lands to make way for Israeli Jewish settlement, illegal under international law. Their story highlights the struggles that many Palestinian families face day-to-day in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967.

What is so inspiring about the Nasser family, is that they embody Christian non-violence towards those who want to deprive them of their land and livelihood. They plant trees, tend their olive groves and take care of the land, even as illegal Israeli settlements expand all around them.

In a land scarred by the injustice of military occupation, where olive trees are uprooted to make way for more illegal settlements, the Nasser family continues to plant fruit trees and harvest the land. They refuse to engage in dehumanising those who are against them. They refuse to be enemies.

The photos were taken during the Summer Club at the Tent of Nations when we visited as a family, where many children were being welcomed and are doing activities such as dancing and art projects.

For more information you can visit their website: <http://www.tentofnations.org/>

## Cooking at the Aida Refugee Camp



The Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem was set up shortly after the 1948 Nakba, when families were forced to flee from their homes in what is now the State of Israel. Over the years, like many other refugee camps across the West Bank & Gaza, Aida has suffered from a lack of amenities, poor housing, and has frequently been subject to military incursions and reprisal. The second generation of children who have been born there have known little else except military occupation and real privation. With the cutting of UNWRA funding (following Trump's announcement), the situation on the ground has become much worse.

A few weeks ago, Annette and I had the privilege of visiting the camp with a group of other foreigners, to learn to cook Palestinian cuisine. This is a great way of supporting the community, as they run cooking courses all year round, and use the funds to run various educational and community-based projects which serve some of the most vulnerable. It is also a great way of practising our Arabic.

Amidst the smell of freshly cut coriander and sliced onions, the women tell us of life in the camp, and long for a better future for their children. As we finish making the dough for the 'Krass' (a kind of pasty filled with spinach and herbs) and put them in the oven, we are given a tour of the camp, and meet some of the

pupils and staff at an educational centre for children with special needs. It is inspiring to see how they are bringing hope to a community which has been forgotten by many, and using their skills and ingenuity to run a wonderful enterprise that is serving the community in so many ways.

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We came away from our time there having made a real connection with the people there. If anyone is planning to visit the Holy Land, I would highly recommend organising to go on one of these cooking courses, which are a lot of fun and sustain a very good cause.

You can find out more about them at the website below:

<https://noorweg.wordpress.com/>

## **Al-Shurooq School**

Set up in 1981 as a school for the blind by St Andrews Jerusalem elder Helen Shehadeh, Al-Shurooq school was founded to offer blind and visually impaired children with equal opportunities and specialist education.



There have been strong links between the school and Church of Scotland churches over the years, and it was wonderful to walk the corridors with the School Principal Ruba K. Aburdeineh, and see the way in which they are reaching out to this vulnerable community with such dignity, love and compassion.

Its work has now expanded, and their three-floor building includes residential rooms for up to 35 children (and 23 staff) who come from West Bank villages which are too far from Bethlehem to be able to commute.

The care and Christian ethos that Al-Shurooq offers is unique in the West Bank, and through their dedication and embodiment of Christian love and compassion, they reach out to some of the most vulnerable children in society.

Please keep them in your prayers, and bring their work to the attention of other organisations you may know of in your parish who work with the blind and visually impaired. You can also visit their Facebook page.

***For more information about Al-Shurooq School, you can visit their website or contact them via email (see below):***

Al-Shurooq School for the Blind, P.O. Box 19924, Jerusalem 9119802, Tel: +970 2 276 7973

Email: [info@nsfvh.org](mailto:info@nsfvh.org)

Website: [www.nsfvh.org](http://www.nsfvh.org)



***John***