

## PARTNERPLAN

# Kate McDonald - Israel December 2018

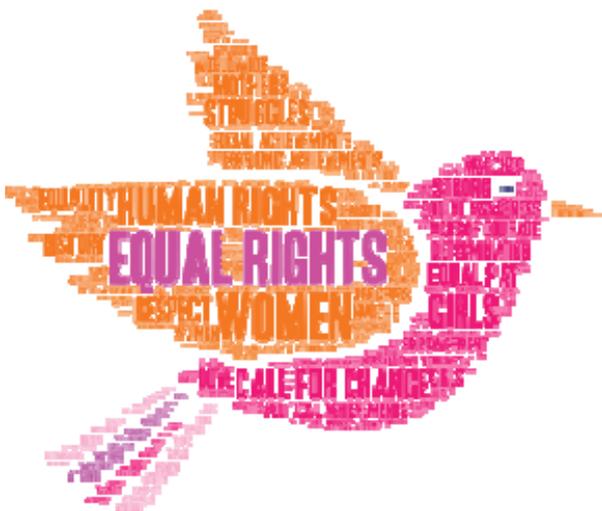
St Andrew's Tiberias  
PO Box 104  
1 Gdud Barak Street  
Tiberias 14100  
Israel

[kmcdonald@churchofscotland.org.uk](mailto:kmcdonald@churchofscotland.org.uk)  
[www.imaginationofpeace.com](http://www.imaginationofpeace.com)

Dear Friends,

I can't believe it is December and the start of Advent. As I write, a gentle warm rain is falling and thunder is rumbling in the distance, a sure sign that winter is here. It's been a long hot summer, and the rains came late this year. Even now, the temperatures in Tiberias are often in the mid-20s, and the sun shines most days.

It's always this time of year that I am most homesick for Scotland. I was recently in Edinburgh for a short break, and delighted in the crisp cold air, the Christmas decorations and the bustle of the German Market. I know that Christmas preparations start earlier and earlier each year and the holy day is overwhelmed by commercialism, but still I miss the sense of anticipation. There is no sign of Christmas in Tiberias, and the only festival lights of the season are those of the giant Chanukkiyah lit downtown.



As we wait and watch for the coming of Christ's light at Christmas, I have been thinking back on the past year and calling to mind the places of darkness where we so need the light of hope, peace, joy, and love to shine.

Sadly, one of the themes that has run through much of the partner work I've been doing this year has been around gender-based violence. Twenty-four women have been killed in acts of gender-based violence this year, and domestic abuse is rising across Israel and Palestine, but particularly in the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish and Arab communities, and most especially in Gaza. Only a couple of weeks ago, two young women were murdered in northern and central Israel.

Last week, thousands of women marched in Tel Aviv to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and today, thousands of women across Israel are striking in protest of the government's seeming complacency towards violence against women. Funding of 250 million shekels was allocated by government ministries last year for programmes to reduce domestic violence and provide support for women who were victims, but only a fraction of that funding has been released.

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Marches get under way, as more than 300 institutions declare their support for the strike.

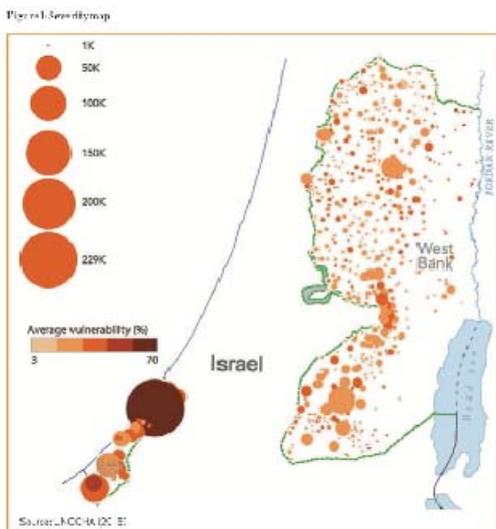
Over 300 municipalities, institutions, and schools are supporting the strike. Yesterday, residents of Haifa, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv woke to see the water of their cities' fountains died deep red, symbolising the blood of abused and murdered women. Here at the Scots Hotel, we have a notice on the tv in the staff dining room, in Hebrew and Arabic, stating the management's support for the strike, its condemnation of all acts of violence, and numbers of domestic violence hotlines.

Yesterday, I dropped by Sindyanna of Galilee, one of our partner organisations here in the north. They produce fair-trade olive oil, supporting Arab olive farmers in the Galilee, whilst providing employment opportunities for Arab women and cultural activities which bring women from Arab and Jewish communities together for dialogue. They will close an hour early today in order to hold a workshop on domestic violence, educating the women about their rights, and providing them with information on women's crisis centres in the area.



Al-Tufula is another NGO in Nazareth that specialises in child development and women's empowerment within the Arab-Palestinian community in Israel. Its director Nabila Espanioly also works in coalition with a number of other NGOs (both Jewish and Arab) in a broad range of local and international advocacy campaigns. Often, when Israel presents a report to the UN on women's rights, it focuses on the Jewish women of the country, so she is involved in presenting a shadow report to reflect the

experiences of Arab women. Arabs make up 20% of the population of Israel, but 50% of the women murdered in Israel are from the Arab community.



In October, when I visited Gaza with a delegation from the Church of Scotland, every organisation we spoke with talked to us about the sharp rise in gender-based and domestic violence as a result of the high rates of unemployment (60% amongst young men under the age of 25, rising to 65% for young women) and desperate conditions under which the people are living.

This infographic from the UN Population Fund illustrates the severity of the situation. Each centre we visited — from family health centres, psychosocial

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programmes, vocational training centres, and hospitals — is trying to raise awareness and address both the violence itself and the underlying issues of unemployment and poverty which often lead to an increase in abuse. For example, in the waiting room of one of the Near East Council of Churches' family health clinics, a woman was giving a lecture about GBV to the mothers who had brought their children for medical assessments. NECC's vocational training centres also work with the young men to reduce instances of violence within the home, and posters about domestic violence hang in each of its centres.

The start of Advent marks the start of my fourth year here (which is hard to believe!). And as I learn more about the complexities of the context, I become ever more convinced that we as a Church cannot talk about liberation for one group of people without working together to liberate all people. We cannot point our finger at the injustices of occupation if we don't also address the other forms of oppression and objectification we see around us.



I know this makes for pretty grim reading. But this is what is on my mind as we light our Advent candles symbolising hope, peace, joy, and love each Sunday at St Andrew's. I watch the dancing flames and I think of the promise of the words from John's gospel, 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.' This year, I am lighting candles not only *in* the dark, but as an act of protest *against* the darkness that is in our world.



As I do, I think of the women Christ encountered throughout his life: the woman accused of adultery, the Samaritan woman at the well, the Syrophenician woman, the 'sinful woman' who washed his feet with her tears, the woman with the haemorrhage, Martha, Mary, Mary Magdalene ... women whom Christ did not turn away on account of their past sins or their present failings or their marital status or their religion or their impurity ... women whom Christ touched and healed and welcomed.

In this season, I pray for all the women today who have their #MeToo stories ... those who bravely speak out and are not believed ... those who cannot yet put words to the trauma they have experienced ... those who have been made to feel so unworthy or ashamed or unloveable that they think they are outside the bounds of God's grace.

And I also pray for those who bring hope, peace, joy, and love into their communities, those who strive for justice, those who show compassion, those through whom Christ's light shines in the darkness. There are so many like the women at Sindyanna, Al-Tufula and the women's programmes in Gaza whose work makes a real difference in this land of the Holy One.

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Friends, in this season when our hearts turn towards Bethlehem, please remember the women who live and work here. I thank you for your continued support, your correspondence, your prayers. And I wish you a blessed Advent season, a joyful Christmas, and a New Year filled with renewed hope.

Every blessing

**Kate**

In September 2019, I will be back in Scotland for deputation to speak with churches, schools, guilds and groups about life in Israel and Palestine and the work of some of our partner organisations. I will be with Dundee Presbytery from 5th to the 15th and then Dunfermline Presbytery from 16th to 25th. If your church is planning to host an event, I encourage you to invite congregations of other denominations in your parish. I look forward to being with you!

If you are interested in receiving more regular and informal updates about my life and work in Tiberias, please do consider subscribing to my blog, [www.imaginationofpeace.com](http://www.imaginationofpeace.com). To receive new posts by email, simply follow the link, scroll to the bottom of the page, and enter your email address in the field that says 'Follow blog via email' (you can unsubscribe at any time).