

PARTNERPLAN

Stewart Gillan – Israel July 2024

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Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

from Jesus' farewell discourse, John 14.27

I greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ from the Holy City of Jerusalem at the beginning of July. I write on the 271st day of the war, amid ongoing fighting in Gaza, the looming threat of a larger war on the northern border, and rising settler violence against Palestinians on the West Bank and in Bedouin Communities. Attritional and traumatising, the war has entered its ninth month and there is as yet no end in sight.

I continue to be restricted in my movements. It is a small point in the vast disaster of this war, but a telling one in terms of our presence here. As Bassem Thabet, Director of Operations for the Evangelical Lutheran Church, our partner, said two weeks ago in his office in the Church of the Redeemer in the Old City, 'Yours is a ministry of accompaniment, and you must be allowed to meet people and be with them.' Though there is plenty to be getting on with in Jerusalem – including the Old City and East Jerusalem – lack of face to face contact with people on the West Bank takes its toll on relationship building. That said, breakfast at Bassem's is most restorative, his table renowned for its hospitality.

To back up a little, upon my return from General Assembly I have been dividing my time between interfaith initiatives within Israel, visits to Palestinian partners in East Jerusalem, and the life and work of St Andrew's Jerusalem & Tiberias. Distinct highlights have been the Interfaith March for Human Rights and Peace at the beginning of June, and the Graduation Ceremony of Tabeetha School at the end of the month. Distinct low points have been the news of the demolition by the Israeli Defence Force of one third of the homes at Umm Al Khair on 26 June, and, though a lesser matter, a fire on Bible Hill that threatened the fabric of St Andrew's Jerusalem. In what follows I offer several updates and then an extended reflection something that surprised me at the end of the Interfaith March: an affirmation of holiness.



Umm Al Khair

The residents of the Bedouin village Umm Al Khair continue to sustain attacks by settlers following the IDF raid at the end of June. The very future of the village is at stake; its permanent destruction, and that of others like it, the goal of the settler movement. Calls for pressure to be put on MPs and MSPs to call for an end to housing demolitions and settler violence have gone out from diplomatic missions and human rights and faith-based organisations, including the

Church of Scotland. With a new government taking office, now is the time to write letters and make representations.

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From the Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/.../israel-destroys-11-homes...>



Gihan, Daoud and Daher Nassar on Tent of Nations, summer 2023.

Tent of Nations

Our friends at the Tent of Nations, the Nassar family, are also under far greater pressure now than has been the case for some time – from settlers, a new road through their land, and individuals from the local Palestinian village. The sitting of the Military Court scheduled for this week was cancelled with no reason given, and no new date set. After over thirty years of legal contestation, there is real fear now that this is the moment of truth. The link will take you to Daoud's latest statement and call for action.

<https://www.facebook.com/tentofnations>

Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees (DSPR)

Likewise, Nader Abuamsha, Executive Director of the DSPR of the Middle East Council of Churches, is calling us to raise our voices. It is through the DSPR, a longtime partner of the Church of Scotland, that money given by CoS folk for humanitarian aid in Gaza finds its way to the people who need it. That said, Nader, is keen that we lift our voices with as much prophetic strength as we can muster. 'If you do not have a lot of money these days,' he said in a visit a week ago, 'we understand. But you do have voices, we need your voice.'



With Nader Abuamsha, DRSP Office at Augusta Victoria.

Tabeetha School

On the brighter side of life, though embedded in the reality of a land at war, it was a joy to share in the Graduation Ceremony of Tabeetha School in Jaffa on the evening of 27 June. Speaking for the Class of 2024, which has been through the challenges of a pandemic and the trauma of this war, two students, Adi and Amiee, made a major statement of their values, vision and vocation, saying:

We are not merely graduates, we are ambassadors of unity and peace.



Tabeetha School Director, Mona Ashkar, with the Class of 2024.

This before hats were thrown into the air and corks were popped. I so wish us to join them in it! Tabeetha needs our support like never before.

Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI)

It was again my honour to participate in the latest EAPPI Handover Ceremony, from Group 93 to Group 94. Three teams, up from one team three months ago, are at work: Jerusalem, Jordan Valley and Bethlehem. We have yet to return a team to Hebron. Following a greeting by Pastor Ines Fischer of the Church of the Redeemer (our host), two members of the Jerusalem team (G93), led us in singing, 'There's

something inside so strong.' I had not heard in many years and its opening lines are with me still: 'The higher you build your barriers, the taller I become.' Amid prayers for peace, protection empowerment, Group 93 lit candles and passed on the light to Group 94. There was then a passing of words back and forth.

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Taken during a handover ceremony in 2023.

All Group 93: We pass on to you the calling to walk in the Light with the people of Palestine and Israel. May you walk with kindness hope, patience, and love so that you are blessed and are a blessing to all.

All Group 94: We accept the challenge to live and witness as EAs. And we thank you for your work, your love, and the commitment you have given to the people in Palestine and Israel. Now take the gratitude of the people, the encounters and experiences you had, and the love of God back home with you, and tell your stories boldly!

It is the passing of an ecumenical torch of no small distinction and challenge in which we might ourselves hear a call to service in Jesus' name.

Interfaith March for Human Rights and Peace, 3 June 2024

'Thank-you for being here. You bring holiness.'

So said Rabbi Tamar as we entered the Great Hall of the Shalom Hartman Institute, following the Interfaith March for Human Rights and Peace in Jerusalem on 3 June. I replied saying we had, all of us together, brought holiness as we made our way through the city. 'We are glad you are here,' she said, reinforcing her affirmation, before moving on to greet others.

It was a wonderful yet unsettling experience. I had made a fitting reply, but did not know in the event how to hear her reference to bringing holiness. It sounded a strange thing in my Presbyterian ears. I wish to relate what my journey has been with it thus far. Though it will not make for the usual kind update, it allows us to explore the question of holiness in the Holy City.

We were about to begin the final act of the day, an evening Blessing in prayer and music, with voices – Jewish, Muslim and Christian – raised in testimony to the presence of God in the struggle for justice and peace in Jerusalem in a time of war. Chairs had been set out in concentric circles in the Great Hall, with musicians and leaders seated in the centre. I found a seat and, having greeted my neighbours, replayed the conversation in my mind.



The scene inside the Great Hall of the Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem.

Lurking somewhere in my long-term memory was a feeling that it was somehow wrong to allow that I had brought holiness. What would my Presbytery of Cape Breton (Nova Scotia) mentors have said, I wondered? Calvinists, many of them in the Seventies, the decade of my teens. People for whom the doctrine of total depravity loomed large. Was it possible for a sinner to 'bring holiness'? What might that even mean?

I imagined a scene (it never happened) from my formative years, in which I saw myself answering, 'Was it not Jesus who said, "Be holy as your heavenly father is holy?"' In the Sermon on the Mount, no less. With the word of the Lord to Moses providing a reference and precedent, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." A verse quoted by Peter in his first epistle, moreover.

I confess it had received little attention in my early formation, the call to be holy. Oh, we had been treated to a series of lectures on the doctrine of sanctification, but it did not set us on fire. The one

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saving grace, speaking in retrospect, was a bible study at a summer youth camp that presented holiness as a work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, to which we could open ourselves and thus participate in the inner life of God! It went over our heads, of course, but the possibility of holiness beckoned. We were miles away from thinking it inhered in us by virtue of being human – from God, of God, for God.

When I shared my post-march experience with my colleague Muriel Pearson the following morning – redoubtable Glaswegian that she is – she said something that did indeed help: ‘I think we were looking for the holiness in each other, made in God’s image.’

This served to put a human face on holiness, and to bless the search for holiness in all of God’s children. In this we took a different approach to difference from that of those who would, in three short days, march down the same street, asserting the aggressive, exclusionary nationalism of Flag Day, as Jerusalem Day is called by many. The holiness we sought in each other was marked by a deep commitment to the sanctity of life and the equal right of all to live and be honoured, with the dignity of all persons respected and intact in the city.



The opening rally, Jaffa Street Jerusalem.

Four weeks down the road, am I any further ahead? I feel slightly easier within myself with Rabbi Tamar’s words of greeting. There is the holiness of the journey and the holiness of being set apart by God for service in the name of the Lord – be it an individual, a congregation of disciples and seekers, or an interfaith community dedicated to prayer and practical action taken in compassion and courage, to cite three examples. It is the holiness of vocation, the call to live a life of sacrificial love, offered in praise of our Creator. A life that answers the call of the Apostle Paul that we present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God,

which is our reasonable service of worship. An everyday holiness, a matter of course holiness, the human face of holiness, which we bring in the power of the Holy Spirit.

For all that, our human holiness remains unsettled and shaken, a holiness lived in the fray ... in Gaza, on the West Bank, in Zone 3, in Israel north and south. It is perhaps integral to our holiness that it be so. We do not bring it perfectly. Which might be the best answer I can give to the questions of my younger self.

Prayer

With so many prayer points throughout the letter, I leave you with the words we prayed together at the EAPPI handover – a going out prayer, having spent time within:

As we go out into a broken world bearing peace ... O God of many names,
Lover of all nations, Source of peace: We pray for peace in our hearts, our
homes, our nations.

Amen

Thanks,
Stewart