

Special Report Israel and Palestine – General Assembly 2019

This Report comes at a time when it is difficult to know whether a Christian presence will survive in the Middle East as a whole, and in Israel and Palestine in particular. The facts on the ground are that the Christian population in Israel and Palestine is now as low as 1.5% of the total population. And in Gaza there is now a minute Christian presence perhaps as few as 700 in a population approaching two million.

We have congregations, personnel, partnerships and presence on the ground and we need to use them to continue to work for God's Kingdom and justice - in the place where Jesus lived, died, was resurrected and ascended, to bring hope and resurrection to our troubled world.

So, this report begins with the conclusion that this is no time for the Church of Scotland to walk away from its history and involvement in the Holy Land.

There is that old story of the person who stops a stranger on the street to ask for directions and gets the reply, "If I was going there, I wouldn't start from here."

We might prefer not to have a Memorial Church in Jerusalem or a Guest House or a Hotel which have to be run as commercial ventures, and maybe the General Assembly of 1912 should have taken the advice of the Jewish Mission Committee who said, "that in the present state of funds" the Assembly, in spite of its "long and interesting history," should decline the offer to inherit the Tabetha Mission School. The Assembly rejected that advice and the rest, as they say, is history.

The General Assembly has asked for a review of the Church of Scotland's continuing presence in Israel and Palestine, with particular consideration being given to how our assets could be best used in the pursuit of a just peace. If we were starting out from scratch, we wouldn't necessarily want to start with our existing footprint, but that is precisely where we are.

A major focus of this report is that of our properties and in that regard, with the exception of recommending the sale of a surplus piece of land at Safed high in the hills above Tiberias, the Council, with the concurrence of our partners in Israel and Palestine, recommends the retention, for now, of all of the land and institutions to which we currently hold title. With regard to St Andrew's Jerusalem and the attached Guest House we recommend going ahead with work to keep the fabric in good shape, and we encourage the widest possible

spiritual, inter-faith and social development within its walls. We have no doubt that this asset and the people who work there can and do contribute to the building of a just peace.

In the case of the Hotel in Tiberias we set out in section 9.3 the options which were considered and the case for continuing to operate the Hotel as at present. The Assembly of 1912 gave us the Tabeetha Mission School and the Assembly of 2000 gave us a Hotel in Tiberias. Now, that hotel delivers outcomes which contribute to our wider work in the region. We report that the working profit from the hotel, now gives the Council a similar income to what its capital would generate if it was invested in the Investors Trust, and it is the profit made by the hotel which helps to sustain the work of the Council including the work we do in Israel and Palestine.

More importantly, however, our presence in the land is not just about property it is about people and, in particular, it is about working with people and organisations committed to supporting:

- the dwindling Christian community within the region
- non-violent means of ending the conflict between Israel and Palestine and
- opportunities for interfaith dialogue to break down the scourge of mutual dehumanisation which is the result of oppression and occupation by one side - exacerbated by rockets and rhetoric from the other side.

The proceeds from the Hotel in Tiberias are making some of these things happen. The Special Commission's report points to an accounting deficit of £1m last year associated with our Israeli entities, the Assembly, however, should be reassured to know that the Hotel and Guest House and school at Tabeetha are not being subsidised nor are they leaking a million pounds a year. It is not uncommon for a business to be cash positive, while, because of currency fluctuations, depreciation and tax accounting the balance sheet may be negative.

The operating profit of the hotel and guest house over the last 10 years amounts to more than £2.4m. Moreover, these establishments are run to the highest ethical standards and where they are able – they purchase fairly-traded and ethically sourced goods.

In Tiberias we also hold title to St Andrew's Church which stands on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. We recommend that the space above the sanctuary should be converted into low cost accommodation for volunteers or those on sabbatical.

We want to extend the opportunity for volunteers (especially young people) to experience some time in Israel and Palestine – perhaps working with our partners, learning about life in this conflicted setting and maybe even contributing to the building of peace.

The final piece of the property jigsaw is Tabeetha School in Jaffa. It is one of the few schools in Israel where Christians, Jews and Muslims work and learn together.

Tabeetha School directly and actually breaks down barriers and fosters positive relationships and conversations between faiths that are too often separated and consequently suspicious of one another. An example of this was seen at a recent conference here, in Edinburgh University it was about the desperate and deteriorating situation in Gaza; it was shocking to hear an articulate young man from Gaza say that in his lifetime he had only ever met three Jewish people and one of them he had met that very day.

The problem, however, is that Tabeetha School needs investment beyond the Church's means, so the Council has appointed a specialist group to explore options for the future which might include partnering other institutions or bodies who have an interest in cross-faith education as way of building and understanding peace.

In any other part of the world we would not make such recommendations about the retention of buildings and institutions, but this is not any other part of the world.

There is a context to our continuing presence in the land of Christ's birth, it is the context which we articulate in Appendix 8 which lists decisions of this General Assembly stretching back 30 years. It is this context which provides the moral grounding for our property recommendations.

It is because we have journeyed with the people of Israel and Palestine throughout many years of conflict that we are compelled to continue the journey. It is because we have had a real human and institutional presence in the land, with Mission Partners on the ground, that we have been able to strike up relationships which make a positive contribution to the search for peace and which offer real advocacy and encouragement to those who, after years of struggle, are on the verge of giving up hope.

Our commitment is to:

- accompany those who are yearning for a just peace,
- to support those who want to bring an end to hostilities and
- to work with all those who remain committed to a day when two States – Israel and Palestine - can exist within secure, internationally recognised legal borders.

In the grand scheme of things the work in which we are engaged is a drop in the ocean, but our partners tell us that it makes a difference to them.

- Sindyanna of Galilee led by Palestinian and Jewish women work to create social change from the ground up. All of the Olive Oil used in the hotel is produced by Sindyanna. Their olive oil is not labelled “extra virgin” it is labelled Extra-Hopeful, Extra-Peaceful and Extra-Unified and some of it comes from the Scots Olive Grove which we helped to establish. If anyone knows of a major outlet that would stock this in their Fairtrade range, then please speak to me before the end of the week!
- We work with L’Arche in Bethlehem, Sunbula in Jerusalem and the Atfaluna Society in Gaza.
- We support Physicians for Human Rights and we work with Rabbis for Human Rights and
- Through our partnerships we seek to accompany the Bedouin communities whose land, within the occupied territory, is now targeted for the building of further Settlements.

A recent pilgrim on one of our World Mission Study Tours said, “The Church of Scotland does amazing things in Israel and Palestine with its limited resources.”

The importance of the Christian presence is its commitment to non-violence, peacemaking and reconciliation. Make no mistake about it, violence on the part of those who are at the heart of this seemingly unending conflict, is only bringing more suffering and despair to the vast majority of people who simply want to live in peace. The General Assembly, as far back as 2002, condemned the attacks by Palestinian suicide bombers as unacceptable to all civilised people; today rocket attacks across the Gaza border fall into that same category. Occupation, indiscriminate attacks and then crushing reprisal, is a cycle - that does not make for peace. This is the failure of leadership on all sides.

Sadly, there continues to be an awful asymmetry about this conflict and that is why the role that we, as a church, find ourselves playing is that of the advocate for the poorest, the most marginalised and the vulnerable.

The internationally agreed borders continue to be breached, Palestinian land continues to be annexed and the Palestinian people continue to live under the longest military occupation in modern history.

So, as well as calling for an end to acts of terror and violence, we reaffirm our call for our own Government to join the 137 out of 193 member states of the United Nations to recognise and help to establish the State of Palestine. This would bring to reality the second part of the Balfour Declaration; the first part being realised by the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

We continue to see the Settlement expansion programme as a devastating impediment to a lasting, just and secure peace; so, we call, once again, for this to end.

But there is another context too to our engagement in Israel and Palestine, and that is our engagement with the Jewish community here at home. They need to hear that we are rigorously opposed to antisemitism in all its forms. We know that much distress can be caused to our Jewish friends by some of the rhetoric which can infect conversations about peace and justice in Israel and Palestinian.

Our business is to avoid such careless talk and our Jewish friends should know that we do not buy into the extremes of expression which do not serve the purposes of the non-violent, peaceful pursuit, of justice, peace and security for two peoples who must find a way of coexisting.

We are not, however, inhibited from reporting the lamentation of those we accompany in Israel and Palestine who seek a just resolution to this conflict.

Recently we met with Rabbi Michael Melchior who is one of the leading interreligious peace builders in Israel. When the Oslo Accord was signed he doubted its success; because he felt that, "it excluded the religious aspects of the conflict, and it excluded the religious leaders themselves." He has said, "on both sides it was these excluded groups who blew up the conflict."¹

It was to excluded groups that Jesus devoted most of his ministry, so perhaps this accident of history, which has left us with a unique legacy of PROPERTY, PRESENCE and PERSONNEL in the land of Jesus is more than anything else to be used to enable those who feel excluded to become a part of the conversation about the future.

John McCulloch, our minister in Jerusalem, reminded me of the words of Henri Nouwen who said, 'One of the main tasks of theology is to find words that do not divide but unite, that do not create conflict but unity, that do not hurt but heal'. Our PROPERTY, PRESENCE and PERSONNEL in Israel and Palestine must be placed at the disposal of those who are searching to realise these words.

Moderator, I submit the report and move the deliverance.

¹ <http://fathomjournal.org/doing-god-or-the-importance-of-religious-peacemaking-an-interview-with-rabbi-michael-melchior/>