

Churches together for Peace and Justice in the Middle East

Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum

Amman, Jordan, 17 – 21 June 2007

Report by Fr. Paul Lansu

1. The wider World Council of Churches' (WCC) constituency held an international peace conference in Amman, Jordan, to launch the "Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum" (PIEF). The aim of the meeting was to broaden the process of new and stronger ecumenical collaboration, commitment and action in advocacy for peace with justice in Palestine and Israel. Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of the WCC, invited Pax Christi International to attend.

2. Pax Christi International was present with H.B. Michel Sabbah, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem and President of Pax Christi International; Dr. Fuad Giacaman, Director of the Arab Educational Institute - AEI (member organisation of Pax Christi International in Bethlehem) and Fr. Paul Lansu of the International Secretariat. Since many years, Pax Christi International has developed collaboration with the WCC on different topics, including on Israel & Palestine.

3. WCC member churches and related organisations from various regions of the world came together with churches from the Middle East in Jordan's capital to inaugurate the Palestine/Israel Ecumenical Forum. The launch conference is an occasion for the Middle Eastern churches to lay out their expectations for a just peace and their experiences of conflict.

4. About 130 participants representing churches and Christian organisations from six continents, including some of the most senior Church leaders from the Middle East, convened to unify their stance on denouncing oppression and finding solutions for the deteriorating situation in the Palestinian territories. Dr. Kobia said that the WCC believes that "negotiating peace while respecting the rule of law is the strongest option for ensuring security for Palestinians and Israelis."

Calling for a Vision of Peace

5. H.B. Michel Sabbah addressed the participants on behalf of the 13 Heads of Churches in Jerusalem and highlighted the daily life experience in the Palestinian territories and its consequences, expressing hope that a "vision of peace, based on justice and mutual recognition, respect, and hence final reconciliation" will come out the conference. "A vision

based on the belief that both Palestinians and Israelis can live together in peace, every one in his home, independent, sovereign, no one superior, no one interior, all equals before God,” Msgr. Sabbah said. The Patriarch stressed that it is the responsibility of governments in the region and the international community to work along with churches to implement a vision of peace. “Churches have to begin a political campaign with world leaders; justice to the Palestinians must and can be done. Security to the Israelis will be a direct consequence of that,” Michel Sabbah said. “Extremism cannot be fought by weapons only. Justice to the poor, food to the hungry, respect to the dignity of the peoples ... is the true fight against extremism and terrorism,” he added.

Christians in Palestine

6. The other key issue of the conference was to highlight the diminishing presence of Palestinian Christians in the Palestinian territories. In the first half of the 20th century, Palestinian Christians represented 25 per cent of the population, but due to migration as a result of the occupation, they now constitute less than 2 per cent of the population of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza.

7. The Palestinian Church Related Organizations (CROs) made a presentation. The Christian Organizations Networks have 12 members in the Jerusalem CROs Network, 23 members in the Network of Christian Organizations in Bethlehem (NCOB) and one in Gaza (The Near East Council of Churches (NECC). The AEI is a member of the Network in Bethlehem as well as other NGOs related to Pax Christi International such as Wi’am Center and the Holy Land Trust. These Networks do have contacts with Christians active on the issue/conflict in Israel, mostly working in a wider pluralistic NGO or Church related organisations.

8. An important input by churches from other regions was by lessons they learned during deeply rooted conflicts, for example in Colombia, Nicaragua, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan or the Philippines as well as on the Armenian Genocide.

Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum

9. The Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum (PIEF) intends to be an instrument to catalyse and coordinate new and existing church advocacy for peace. It will be an expression of churches’ commitment to inter-religious action for peace and justice that serves all the peoples in the region. The Forum will be a participatory group of churches and organisations meeting, interacting and cooperating in order to further a common cause. Pax Christi International is expected to participate in the Forum.

10. The Amman Call is the PIEF’s founding document adopted by the conference, acknowledging the fact that in Palestine/Israel “children of God – Christian, Muslim and Jew – are imprisoned in a deepening cycle of violence, humiliation and despair.” But it also affirms

“the role of the churches is to heal and to bring all sides to reconciliation.” The “Amman Call” has been adopted. Read the Call in English in 07-0639 or in German 07-0646.

11. The WCC will convene a “core group” to begin implementing the conference recommendations, and to report to the next WCC ExCom in September. The core group will base its proposal of an action plan on the outcomes of six working groups that deliberated during the Amman conference. The working groups provided with an opportunity to build on previous or ongoing experiences and commitments and propose coordinated and cooperative action for PIEF. PIEF will work on both immediate action oriented strategies and long term transformative strategies pointing towards healing and reconciliation in the context of a just peace. Three working groups focussed on peacebuilding themes on the long-term and three on peacemaking themes on the short-term, more action-oriented. Fr. Paul Lansu made a contribution in the working group on “International Church Advocacy for Peace in Israel and Palestine: Media, disinformation/information.” Read the contribution in 07-0581. This group had the highest number of participants.

Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel

12. A presentation or testimony was made on the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). Pax Christi International is a co-founding NGO of this programme. The EAPPI is doing four things: protection, monitoring, solidarity and advocacy. The EAPPI programme has been active in six places, mainly in West Bank and Gaza, but also in Israel. So far, participants came from 15 different countries, mostly Europe, North America, Australia and South Africa. At the plenary session, more Catholics and Orthodox have been called to participate in EAPPI. It was suggested to make an effort to attract also participants from the South, for instance Africa and Asia. The witness and advocacy work at home is an essential part of the EAPPI.

13. Pax Christi Germany has the EAPPI high on its Middle East agenda and continues to invite its members to participate. Other Pax Christi members come from the UK, Italy and France. It was concluded that Pax Christi International should renew its commitment and make a new call, for instance at the coming Triennial World Assembly end of October 2007, for a stronger participation of its members organisations in the EAPPI. Website of the EAPPI is <http://www.eappi.org>

Week of Action ICAPPI

14. The International Church Action for Peace in Palestine and Israel (ICAPPI) has also been presented at the conference. ICAPPI is an advocacy initiative convened by the WCC during the 40th anniversary of the 1967 war. Pax Christi International is an active member of ICAPPI. Many member organisations of Pax Christi International developed non-violent actions, give public witness to their hope for peace with justice, and issued statements and press releases,

mostly during the week of 3 – 9 June 2007. The issue of the Week was on “End 40 Years of Illegal Occupation. Negotiate a just peace now!” The goal of the Week is to raise awareness in churches and civil society and to impress upon governments the need for new efforts to end the conflict and negotiate a settlement. Read the overview of actions in 07-0613 or go at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/events-sections/icappi-2007.html>. An evaluation will be made during a phone call conference on 12 July 2007.

Planting Olive Tree and Launch PIEF

15. The launching of the PIEF took place at the site of John the Baptist’s settlement of Bethany Beyond the Jordan during the vespers liturgy. An olive tree offered by Christians from Palestine was planted on the banks of the Jordan River at a place traditionally considered as the site of Jesus’ baptism, to mark the launch of the PIEF. Greek Orthodox Bishop Benedictus of Amman led the participants in a vespers service conducted at the site church. The Olive Tree was planted next to the church. Paul Lansu brought some soil from Belgium (from his little garden) to strengthen the growth and sustainability of the tree, as a symbol for justice and peace. We all prayed for justice and peace in the Holy Land.

16. More information on the WCC and Palestine/Israel is available at: <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/international/regconcerns-palestine-israel.html>

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