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## SABEEL CONFERENCE IN BETHLEHEM: JESUS CHALLENGED EMPIRE

Bethlehem, Occupied West Bank -- About 200 international participants have come to Bethlehem for the Eighth Sabeel International Conference. The group gathered at the Bethlehem Hotel under the theme, "Challenging Empire: God, Faithfulness and Resistance." Sabeel is the ecumenical liberation theology center based in Jerusalem.

Dr. Richard Horsley told participants, "Jesus was a Palestinian under imperial rule. Just as the modern state of Israel and other states in the Middle East were the creation of Western colonialism, so the ancient temple-state in Judea" was set up by foreign powers.

Horsley described Jesus as a community organizer working to renew in village communities a commitment to the covenant laws of God. He said, "... all of the Gospels ... portray Jesus as having the same basic agenda, the renewal of the people of Israel in opposition to the Jerusalem and Roman rulers of the people." Jesus' program "tapped into the people's deeply rooted cultural traditions," he said. Horsley is Distinguished Professor of Liberal Arts and the Study of Religion, University of Massachusetts, Boston, USA.

Jesus' commitment to renewal in village communities was strategic, Horsley said. It was "a key component in a strategy of resistance to the rulers, a confrontation of Empire. By restoring their mutual cooperation and solidarity, villagers could resist the further disintegration of their communities." Vulnerable families could be encouraged "not to succumb to the outside forces that would turn them into share-croppers or force them off their ancestral land and out of the village community," he said. "By mobilizing people power and building community solidarity, Jesus' renewal of the covenant also became a form of resistance to the predatory pressures of the Empire," he said.

Horsley pointed to "a new form of Empire, global capitalism." He said, "The transnational megacorporations that constitute this dominant imperial apparatus are far beyond any attempt at regulation (...). The U S still is, or has, an Empire. But it is now interlocking with the new Empire of global capitalism (...) while the US military serves as the enforcer of the New World Order which aids and abets the operation of global capitalism."

Ambassador Hind Khoury told the group Wednesday that they could not be meeting at a more interesting moment in history, "a historical moment for us Palestinians and Arabs, for empire and for the world. While the situation in Palestine has been dramatic for too long, events are now snowballing in front of our eyes planting the seeds of change for the region and forever." Khoury is the former ambassador to France from the Palestinian Authority. She serves on the Sabeel Board of Directors.

Khoury described “the hegemonic grip of the global American empire, with Israel constituting an integral and essential strategic partner” in the Middle East. Disregard for “the human factor” is both shocking and consistent, Khoury said.

“People and values simply do not matter, you walk over them, you crush them, you bombard them, you assassinate them, you deny them a present and a future, and all is legitimate on the altar called the security of the state of Israel,” Khoury said.

Dr. Mazin Qumsiyeh described “the 13 percent of Bethlehem that is the concentration camp we (Palestinians) are allowed to live in,” while the remainder is either zoned restricted or is “illegally annexed.” He said, “Israel continues building its Wall, which in Bethlehem is 60-70 percent complete.” Qumsiyeh, a professor at Bethlehem and Birzeit Universities, addressed “Mapping Empire Today in Palestine and Israel.”

“Shedding fear is the most important part of people-power resistance,” Qumsiyeh said. “State power requires fear,” and it employs “unimaginable” tactics such as demolishing homes six and seven times.

As for “empire,” we have to ask who is behind all this, Qumsiyeh said. “Greed and interests of greed that cannot be ignored. We must understand the biology of the disease we are facing so that we can treat it.” Palestinians are facing world powers, not just another state, he said.

“Justice, peace, truth – these are not just words. Leaders blurt them unconsciously. I say as a Palestinian Christian, look to Jesus Christ. He was the first Palestinian martyr. He spoke Aramaic, a precursor to Arabic, and he was killed for acting, not just for saying these words,” Qumsiyeh said.

The Rev. Christopher Ferguson, United Church of Canada, said the gospel message “has been grabbed and imperialized, the message of liberation made to destroy and oppress.”

Ferguson said, “Freedom is the message of the Jesus movement. Where we stand is resisting empire with the Palestinian people. It is not an optional extra but at the core of our faith and our relationship to God.”

The Rev. Mitri Raheb preached at the Wi’am Center, located next to the Separation Wall in Bethlehem. He spoke to the familiar text from the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth,” saying it would more correctly be translated, “for they shall inherit the *land*.” Raheb is the pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church and president of the Diyar Consortium in Bethlehem.

“We really think empire will last. Jesus says it will not,” Raheb said. “How wise Jesus was. No one of Jesus’ time would have imagined that Herod was not here to stay. Jesus tells us through this verse that we are released from the power of empire. Jesus speaks and empire has lost its power over us. We see it in the Arab world in these recent weeks. Young people saw that empire could be shattered. God

won't do it alone, only with us.”

The Rev. Alison Tomin and Deacon Eunice Attwood, president and vice-president respectively of the Methodist Church in Britain, discussed the process that led to adoption of an important report and resolutions on justice and peace for Palestine and Israel at last summer's Methodist Conference in Portsmouth.

Methodist people should take seriously the deepening of their understanding of issues (here), said Attwood. “They should examine their understanding, though it will bring some discomfort into established Methodist-Jewish discussion groups. The vast majority have decided to face discomfort and face these issues, bringing the possibility for more discussion with other Christians as well as with Muslims,” she said.

“Methodists are committed to listening to every voice, but particularly the poorest, the most vulnerable, the oppressed and the most needy,” Attwood said.

Thanking the UK Methodists, the Rev. Naim Ateek, director of Sabeel, said Wednesday, “Today if you stand for justice and truth, you will be attacked. Churches suffer from weakness of the prophetic. Israel wants you silent, then you are okay. Once you speak out, immediately you will be attacked. Then the question is: Can you stand? And I thank God for every person who does that.”

The Sabeel International Conference continues at the Bethlehem Hotel through Monday, 28 February.

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