

A TIME FOR *Truth*

A TIME FOR *Action*

PALESTINE/ISRAEL AND THE U.S. AT THE CROSSROADS

A Major Regional Conference



"Imagine" by Sandy Eastoak

First Presbyterian Church of San Anselmo
72 Kensington Road, San Anselmo, CA 94960

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closed. The local daily ran a well-placed profile of a committee member and touted the conference, and now the concern was that we would disappoint readers who tried to sign up online.

Friday, March 5th, dawned, the clouds cleared, the sun came out, the patio, the sanctuary, the balconies and entranceway filled with milling volunteers and registrants. Participants gathered in the sanctuary of the First Presbyterian Church of San Anselmo to sing "Bearers of Peace," and Rev. Naim Ateek spoke from his heart and to our hearts about the Nakba and occupation, comparing the situation to a banyan tree that sends down more and more roots as it strangles the life from its unwilling host, a once healthy palm.

We heard from witnesses to the occupation, both Palestinian and Jewish, and in the workshops, activists spoke on Christian Zionism, the media, Palestinian politics, anti-Semitism, liberation theology and the needs of children and youth in occupied Palestine. We heard calls to boycott and divest from Israel and learned how to educate our communities and deal with hostile opponents. Mohammed Alatar showed his film "Jerusalem: The East Side Story" and answered questions.

On Saturday morning spring sunshine filled the patio, and in spite of our apprehensions, the fake "Women in Black" who had sowed confusion at the Berkeley Sabeel conference in 2007, made no appearance. The 8:30 a.m. session opened with Dr. Mads Gilbert bringing to life his experience in Gaza's Shifa Hospital during Israel's slaughter in the winter of 2008-2009. His

Conference Report

In the final days before the Marin Sabeel Conference "A Time for Truth, A Time for Action," the forecast was disturbing: Zionist groups had sent smear-filled letters to sponsoring churches and local bishops, rumors were afloat of their plans to disrupt workshops, and the weather service was predicting rain.

Our planning committee went into proactive mode, meeting with diocesan officials to counter the hate mail, spending a morning in non-violence training - where we acted out scenarios with shouting protestors - and alerting local police. By mid-week, as forecasts continued to speak of damp weather, we had arranged for the delivery of a crowd-covering tent and canopy for the entrance and patio.

But at the same time, other signs were hopeful. Registrations streamed in, passing 400 by Thursday, and the web site announced that enrollment was

photos of wounded children, Palestinian health workers, ambulance drivers and stunned families, his recordings of drones and bombs and mortar fire, made a searing impression that moved many to tears.

Dr. Gilbert's images sent a message: the situation is critical; we have no time to lose. The audience was ready to listen as panelists spoke of religious extremism and the prospects for change in U.S. policy and then gave their attention to Omar Barghouti's appeal for nonviolent action in the form of boycott, divestment and sanctions.

From the opening moment, music punctuated the program, and Jim McFadden's singing to piano accompaniment was a signal to gather in the sanctuary after breaks. Local poets shared their work, and "down time" offered a chance to take in Middle Eastern music and food. And at the end, before the final dismissal and prayers, there was Remi Kanazi, a Palestinian hip-hop artist reciting his impassioned lines about oppression and hope.

Well over 500 people attended the conference, and from the beginning at least a few Zionist opponents were in the crowd. At one point they included an official from the Israeli consulate, but although they took notes, no one disrupted workshops or plenary sessions. Our detractors were keeping a low profile - for the moment.

But we gained many friends, and they have been sending their comments via email and blog. Here are some of the things they have written: "The most powerful and educational conference I've ever been to." "The people who came from our church were totally impressed with the speakers and the content. It couldn't have been better." "I know you changed people's thinking and their lives."

Best of all, many of them are saying in various ways: "We're getting involved from now on. Count on us!"