

Report on Sabeel—Puget Sound Conference

February 19-20, 2010

The 2010 Seattle Sabeel Conference, held at Saint Mark's Feb 19 & 20, was a success by any measure. The attendance was double that expected, close to 450, with participants coming from 19 states and 3 Canadian provinces. The evaluations of the Sabeel conference are affirmations of the deep level of engagement and good will that was evident to the participants for both days of the event. One comment reads:

Thanks to the organizers, volunteers, speakers and attendees for a beautiful 2 days. I attended the last Seattle conference in 2004, learned a lot, and continue to support Sabeel. Saint Marks is a great home for the Sabeel conference. The organization, space for tables and exhibits, rooms for eating and workshops (+ great weather) made for a very cohesive event. There is the perfect combination of diversity of presenters and unity of focus. The specific question What Does Justice Require of US was addressed over and over in each of the presentations. Things have changed considerably since 2004 and the commitment to coming together and working on solution building, realistic thinking, in an atmosphere of hope, will have an enduring affect on all of us. We have created a community here this weekend. And we will continue to work together. Thank you for the service.

From Veterans for Peace: *Impressive Organization! Every major city in the US needs to host such a conference.*

Another comment was especially rewarding: Insightful. Willing to take off polite gloves. Yet sensitive, caring and passionate. Practical steps we can take as individuals.

The program was all that the organizers hoped and more. Each speaker built on the previous speaker's information to draw a whole with intellectual and moral clarity. This can be inferred from the fact that, according to the evaluations, all of the learning objectives were met. The tone had been set by the opening panel when Bishop Greg Rickel quote Dr Bernard Sabella, sociology professor at the Bethlehem University. *"The issue is not religious,"* according to Dr. Sabella. *"It is political. The solution will be political. But to get there, we must activate the core beliefs of all religions"*

Canon Naim Ateek, Christian priest, Dr. Mark Braverman, scholar and therapist, and Sheik Jamal Rahman talked about their personal experiences encountering what sustained them most, framing the two days to come. Then the talks began with the largest and deepest contest and ended with our individual roles. Bill Christison talked about the dangers of the US policy toward Iran. No country can be prevented from building an atomic weapon is they fear attack, he said, predicting imminent war with Iran if we don't change to a policy of talking about US and Israeli disarmament first. Kathy Christison picked up on the US/Israel policy by tracing the history of relationship with Israel going back to Wilson and the beginning of our acceptance of Zionism along with ignorance of and prejudice against the Arab and Muslim worlds. She quoted Mondoweiss to say we need a two-state solution. Israel and the United States. She and Bill give the lobby more credit than the military industrial complex for our symbiotic relationship. But the Christisons take both realities very seriously.

Neve Gordon said he woke up recently to find Netanyahu in his bed! He had been supporting two states until he understood more deeply that Netanyahu's two-state solution, with no water-rights, helicopters flying overhead, and checkpoints at the border, is about continued occupation. He challenged us to agree on ending the occupation. Inside and outside Israel. And he proposed that this big-tent approach can be supported with BDS (Boycott. Divestment. Sanctions.) BDS can be tailored to be as broad or narrow an action to which as an individual or groups can commit. But we need to begin, he says, conveying the urgency. Governments aren't acting to make progress.

At the evenings keynote, honoring Amin Odeh's work in Seattle together with Naim Ateek's talk grounded it all in the reality of those doing the work on the frontlines, here and in Israel/Palestine. Naim brought greetings from Jerusalem and tried to convey the importance of a recent gathering of Muslim and Christian religious leaders. He described a deeper commitment by Palestinians to make a sate work, with his own ongoing commitment to doing that in the context of his faith. He closed saying he thought we are in the process of moving from education to action. His message was one of hope.

The next morning Jeff Halper jumped in as a man of action. He made the occupation more vivid as he described the terrible escalation in Jerusalem. His descriptions of the efforts to destabilize the Al Aqsa mosque caused the collective group to catch its breath. His made the crisis of the expulsion of Christians and Muslims immediate. And that went on to say that we needed to focus on Congress. And to keep that focus on ending the occupation. Moving the conversation away from "one state- two states".

Workshops followed each speaker, and when Mark Braveman spoke, it is safe to say that most participants felt that something needed to be done. But many still felt constrained about speaking out against Israel. Mark sketched his life

story because it is the life story of many Americans who have grown up conflating Judaism and Zionism. He shared his heartbreak at discovering what is being done in his name. And urged us to speak out for justice. “You can’t wait for us (Jews)” he challenged the group. The need for us to move ahead while Jews are involved in their own internal dialogue about Jerusalem was a clear call to action. J Street he described as an internal organization. Not a group committed to full equality for Palestinians. He urged Christians to hear Jesus radical message of inclusion. And apply it to Palestinians. “You don’t need our permission,” he said. Ironically giving many participants permission to speak out.

Steve Niva was the final speaker, following Mark’s challenge and Jeff’s images with a summary of actions that are being taken now. And that we can take. He said to bring about change we needed to focus on the target, which is the Israeli government. That de Klerk had to decide to end apartheid in South Africa. And Israel would have to decide to end the occupation. Israel is vulnerable to pressure in three ways, he said. Their national image is important to them. “Brand Israel”. As is their economic vitality. And they fear loss of American support. So much so that a program has been designed to attack BDS campaigns, including using “sabotage”. BDS, he proposed, is one way of trying to reach the Israeli government. He described examples that are underway in Europe. And said that we each need to think about the networks of which we are the center. And to use those networks.

As always Steve did this with outstanding objectivity, completing a platform that was in place for each of the workshops on actions that followed. We heard good things about all of the workshops, but especially about BDS, Lobbying, and The Media. It was not surprising that the speakers received mostly marks of “excellent”.

Half of the participants rated themselves as having “considerable knowledge of the issues. Twice as many of the remainder considered themselves somewhat familiar and the rest knew very little. The level of knowledge to begin with had no correlation with the evaluation of the speakers or the level of learning at the conference. So the committee met it’s goals of having different levels of information available and people finding the workshops that were right for them.

At the last minute, when the numbers outgrew Bloedel for dinner, University Presbyterian offered their space and staff free of charge, working hard to welcome us for dinner and a puppet play with music that poked gentle fun at all three faiths. The event was co-sponsored by a broad array of Jewish, Muslim, Christian and activist groups and that was evident in the mix of participants and the richness of the resource tables.

The work with Kadima resulted in successful bookend events for the Jewish community, which were a first in the country, and with more Jewish participants at the conference. Thursday night there was a debate on BDS with Neve Gordon and the head of Jewish studies at the UW. Saturday night there was a private dinner for Naim to meet rabbis. Which turned out to be a good experience even though only one rabbi attended. On Sunday there was a debate at Hillel with Mark Braverman and Rabbi Johanna, whose prejudice against Arabs shocked the Kadima folks present, leaving the Stand With Us students present puzzled by their challenges.

Because of personal events, the connections that would have developed in an increased Muslim presence didn’t happen. It is clear that we need to develop more depth here. We also did not have the presence of any Black congregations. We have been told that we need to be working with them on their issues. (Most of them don’t know how much many of us did in the 60’s and 70’s.)

Neve Gordon taught at Evergreen, Mark Braverman at Seattle Pacific and Jeff Halper at Fairhaven., maximizing use of speakers in the larger community. This was effectively a Sabeel contribution because the honoraria usually available just weren’t there in this recession. We also had over 20 students on scholarships and 37 attending for class credit. (We gave out so many scholarships that we didn’t make a profit on the conference.) There was some TV and radio coverage. More than previously. And there will be DVD’s available. Talks will be posted on the Sabeel site. We have, in Neve Gordon’s words, made the tent larger. There was every expectation at the end of the conference that the foundation was laid for action by a greatly expanded group of people.

Rev Naim Ateek said he felt this is the moment that has moved from education to action. And that is so. There will be a regional (Portland to Vancouver) all day workshop on BDS at Saint Mark’s Cathedral in May. A series of discussions on the talks has been scheduled. The local ministers have begun to meet to talk about how they might support each other and work together. And the campaign for billboards has gained traction. We believe we have broadened and deepened the foundation for action here.

Brenda Bentz
Conference Coordinator