



Issue 40 - Spring 2006

THE FORGOTTEN FAITHFUL

WHO ARE THEY?

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by Naim Ateek

Sabeel's Sixth International Conference (November 2-9, 2006) will focus on the theme of Palestinian Christians. Why did we choose this theme that seems to be provincial and parochial? As we anticipate our November gathering, I would like to offer the following points in order to raise our readers' awareness, stimulate their expectation, and attract their participation.

FIRST: One of the most frequent statements that we hear: I did not know that there are Palestinian Christians! Who are the Palestinian Christians then, where did they originate, and where are they today? **Palestinian Christians are the offspring of those first disciples and apostles whom Jesus called and who followed him.** They are the offspring of those who, on the Day of Pentecost 2000 years ago, experienced the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and responded to the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

Palestinian Christians are our ancestors who lived in Palestine even before it was officially known by that name. Many of

them were Jewish, others were not. They were a mixture of many ethnic and racial groups that were members of the first small Christian communities of faith, the Church. By its very nature, the Church knew no ethnic or racial boundaries.

Jesus started his ministry in Palestine within a Jewish nationalist and ethnic context. Yet he came in contact with many who were not Jewish. In fact, Palestine was never a monolithic country. Its geographic location made it a corridor for



traders and armies who moved from north to south and vice versa. At the time of Jesus, Palestine was not populated exclusively by Jews. Some historians have

estimated that approximately fifty percent (50%) of the people of Palestine were not Jewish. It was always a melting pot of many racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. From its beginnings, the church became a multi-ethnic and multi-racial community in spite of much resistance from some of Jesus' disciples who wanted to keep it bound within a Jewish context. The Book of Acts depicts the struggle between those who insisted on the "Jewishness" of the Jesus Movement and those who affirmed its universal scope. This was one of the most difficult struggles that faced and threatened the nascent faith. Thank God, the "universalists" won.

From the beginning, the church in Palestine included people who comprised the population of the land of Palestine, namely, Jews, Romans, Greeks, and Samaritans as well as Arabs, Phoenicians, and others. After the coming of Islam in the 7th century, Palestinian Christians as well as other Christians in the Middle East gradually became Arabized. It is important to note that some of the Arab tribes had become Christian several hundred years before the coming of Islam, but all of them

became Arabized in culture and language later on. Today, there are approximately fourteen million Arab Christians in the Middle East. Palestinian Christians are living in Palestine (the occupied Palestinian areas) and Israel, and many of them are living in Jordan, and in practically every country in the Middle East, in addition, they are scattered and dispersed throughout the world. They are found in every continent of the globe.

SECOND: The presence of Palestinian Christians is threatened because of the continuing political conflict. The number of Christians in the land has been decreasing at an alarming rate. The propagandists say that Christians are leaving the land due to Muslim persecution. The facts, however, are different. They are leaving because of the unstable political situation. They are leaving because of the illegal Israeli occupation of their country. Moreover, political instability carries with it economic and social ramifications. People emigrate to look for employment so that they can care for the welfare of their families and the education of their children.

The largest number of Christians was displaced during and in the aftermath of the 1948 and 1967 wars. Thousands were forced out of their homes or fled in terror from the Zionists. Their emigration has continued wherever and whenever political instability was greatest. Today, as an example, very few Christians are emigrating from within the boundaries of the state of Israel, i.e. the 1967 borders, while it is still alarming within the occupied territories. The main reasons due to the oppressive occupation of the Palestinians – both Christian and Muslim – and the humiliation to which they are subjected.

Statistics have shown that the number of Christians inside the state of Israel is growing rather than decreasing. Although Israel is not a state for all of its citizens, and its form of democracy is only experienced and enjoyed fully by its Jewish citizens, while its Arab (Palestinian) Israeli

citizens experience discrimination, there is still enough political stability to allow the Christian community to remain in its homeland.

The situation in the Gaza Strip, West Bank and East Jerusalem is different. Here the desire to emigrate is due to the injustice,

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The truth of the situation is that the occupation of Palestine was not about religion nor was it a conflict between religions. It was and is, in essence, a political conflict.

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the oppression, and the humiliation of Palestinians living under occupation. It is clear to many that the presence of checkpoints, the building of the wall, and all the suppressive measures which the Israeli government practices against the Palestinians are part of a policy that aims at forcing people to emigrate. This has been the Zionist policy from the beginning, and it has become even more conspicuous these days.

Sabeel is conducting a survey of the Christians of the land which will be presented at the November conference. There will be a number of scholars who will analyze the various aspects of the survey and help us discover possible trends and projections for the future of the Palestinian Christian community in the land.

THIRD: We need to dispel myths about the Palestinian Christian community. Due to the political conflict over the land of Palestine, many myths have been invented.

Some Western Christians think that Palestinian Christians were originally Muslim and then, by the wonderful evangelizing zeal of British, American, French, or German missionaries, they were converted to Christianity. Some propagandists have claimed that Christians and Muslims are recent comers into Palestine in the last few hundred years. These are myths born out of ignorance or out of intentional policy to weaken and undermine Palestinian claim to the land. The coming conference will dispel many such myths.

FOURTH: Another myth that requires special attention is one that presents the political conflict over Palestine as one between Muslims and Jews. In other words, the Christians in Palestine are totally marginalized and negated as if they have nothing to do with the conflict. Moreover, it presents Israel as more benevolent towards the Christians, because the real enemy is the Muslims. Such a presentation has a great advantage for Israel in the West. For if the conflict is perceived as one strictly between “Jews and Muslims,” then most Christians in the West would stand on the side of Israel. This is a very clever approach. Due to the common biblical heritage between Jews and Christians and the growing “demonization” of Islam, it is conceivable that many Western Christians find greater affinity with Israel and Jews than with Muslims. In fact, this attitude goes beyond the boundaries of Western Christians. I recall an experience a number of years ago when I was speaking in an international conference in Europe, a few Pakistani Christians came up to me and confessed that their natural inclination as Christians was to stand with Israel.

The truth of the situation is that the occupation of Palestine was not about religion nor was it a conflict between religions. It was and is, in essence, a political conflict. The Zionist Jews wanted to wrest the land of Palestine even if that meant the expulsion of its indigenous population. They wanted to create a Jewish state. The indigenous people of the land were targeted as Palestinians and not

as Muslims and Christians. Christians were forced out from their villages and towns with their Muslim neighbors at the same time. Both lost all of their possessions. The ethnic cleansing was carried out regardless of religious affiliation. Since the war of 1967, however, the religious dimension started to play a very sinister role. Both Jewish Zionist and Western Christian Zionists have been using the Bible to support exclusive Israeli claims to the land of Palestine and have, therefore, become an obstacle to peace.

FIFTH: Palestinian Christians have played a significant role in resisting the Zionist project from the early 19th century and have been involved in the pursuit of justice and peace. The coming Sabeel conference will highlight the contribution of some of them. Palestinian Christians are by and large Arabs. When one considers the role that they have played in the political, historical, literary, social and other fields, it becomes obvious how valuable and effective their contributions have been. Several months ago, a Muslim writer from Abu Dabi wrote a short article which he entitled, "The Christians are the Salt of the Arabs." It was published in several newspapers throughout the Arab world including Al-Quds newspaper in Jerusalem on January 23, 2006. Muhammad Khaled mentions the names of a number of Arab Christians such as Edward Said, Henry Cattan, Emil Habibi, Silvador Arnita, and others who have been prominent in their contributions. The writer ends the article with the words, "Our beloved Christians, you are our salt, and salt does not lose its flavor."

SIXTH: As Palestinian Christians, we would like to help our brothers and sisters in various areas of the world to understand our concerns as well as the challenges that face us today. In addition to the above-mentioned concerns, the conferees will have a personal experience in meeting and spending time with fellow Christians in the towns and villages in Israel and Palestine. In addition to the academic lectures, the conference will provide the existential and experiential dimensions of everyday life.

There is no substitute to a first-hand experience. I have heard many people say after a personal visit, "We didn't know. Why didn't people tell us?"

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SEVENTH: Palestinian Christians are in a unique position. They are at one and the same time Palestinians that belong to the Middle East and Christians that can relate to other Christians in different countries of the world. Very few people in the West understand Islam and Muslims. We have lived with Islam for 1400 years with ups and downs. We can help build relations with them and work together for peace. We have a commitment to peacemaking and reconciliation that stems from the essence of our Christian faith. We can contribute to greater understanding and respect between Christianity and Islam. We can be a bridge between East and West. We have a role to play in bridging the gap between peoples of different religions. We have a rich experience of living together with other religions, and this is an important part of our calling.

EIGHTH: Last but not least, there is a theological dimension to the conference. **Palestinian Christians are an integral part of the Body of Christ.** Throughout our long history over the last 2000 years, with its joys and sorrows, tolerance and intolerance, good times and bad times, by the grace of God we have remained faithful to Christ and maintained our witness and

resilience. We would like to re-introduce ourselves, through this conference, to our brothers and sisters in Christ in other areas of the world. Christians everywhere need to be aware of the predicament of this small and hurting member of Christ's Body that seeks justice and liberation. We hope and pray that the bond between Palestinian Christians and Christians abroad would be strengthened as the various aspects of Palestinian life will be addressed through the lectures, panels, as well as the experience of being with and meeting the living stones of the land.

Bible studies will be a very important feature of our November conference. They would be given by the Rev. Dr. Kenneth Bailey who is world renowned for placing the parables of Jesus in their Palestinian cultural setting. It is our hope that the participants would be spiritually uplifted by the relevant message of the parables for our lives today.

A FINAL WORD FOR REFLECTION:

Every new day presents us with the opportunity of inventing and establishing peace. Sadly, however, we are experiencing the invention of more deadly technologies that are used to further control, oppress, dominate, and humiliate the Palestinians – both Christian and Muslim. The conference will issue an appeal to all people of integrity and conscience to multiply their endeavors for ending the occupation and inventing peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

When opportunities for peace are real and within reach, when there are millions on both sides that long for truth and liberation, when many of us know what makes for a just peace and can actually imagine a life of security and prosperity for Palestinians and Israelis, it is, indeed, insane to continue the occupation and the oppression, and it is incredible and tragic that the international community lacks the political will to implement and enforce International Law.

The Rev Naim Ateek is Director of Sabeel

FROM THE WILDERNESS

by Maria C. Khoury

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?”
(Psalm 13)

As a mother living in the middle of the wilderness, raising my children in a small Christian village, I often reflect if peace and freedom for Palestine will come during my lifetime. My father-in-law, Canaan Daoud Khoury, who was so proud to be the son of a priest, did not flee into the refugee camps in 1948 when he lost his job at the post office and place of residence in Jaffa. Instead he returned to the small village of Taybeh, where his father was the Orthodox priest, to start life over. My father-in-law, Abu Daoud, was very instrumental in influencing us to return to Taybeh and helping invest in Palestine after the Oslo Agreement, because he had great hope that Israelis and Palestinians can live side by side and have a prosperous future together.

These beautiful dreams of a two state solution were shattered for so many of us during the reoccupation of the Palestinian

Territories in the second uprising when we experienced the worst of the worst in our daily lives. Thus, Abu Daoud passed on to the Lord spiritually hoping and believing that peace and freedom could come to Palestine. But the rest of us were left behind feeling that it has been a long time since 1948 and seeking basic human rights for Palestinians. Psalm 13 reminds me of the great hope that many Palestinian Christians hold on to as we are baptized in Christ our Lord and are called to be witnesses in the very land where he revealed his plan for salvation to humanity. The daily struggles, however, sometimes bring us thoughts of despair. Palestinian Christians cannot help but feel forgotten in our desperate need to create bridges between our communities in the holy land and Christian communities across the globe. The connection with Christian communities can be our life-line not to be forgotten and to reinforce that we have a sacred mission to keep our Christian presence in the holy land.

I held on to the false dream that if wealthy Palestinians returned from abroad and invested in their beloved homeland, truly a great economy could be developed for better job creation. If my children learned Arabic and were raised close to a loving

extended family, we could establish in them a deeper sense of identity in their life, so they could grow up to achieve their fullest potential knowing they had deep roots in Palestine as Christians for thousands of years. In the last six years we have seen nothing but the opposite, since investors cannot survive a collapsed economy and children are traumatized going to school under Israeli guns.

Nevertheless, there is something fundamentally unexplainable about walking the footsteps of the Lord. We pray it is the will of God that some people will remain in the precious land of Christ's birth to worship Christ our Savior and to witness to his love and peace to others. It is thrilling living in Taybeh, known as biblical Ephraim in the Judean Mountains, knowing that before His crucifixion, Christ came into this area, the place of which the gospel writer said,

“Jesus therefore walked no more openly among the Jews; but went thence unto a country near the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim...” (John 11:54)

With 1300 residents living twenty minutes outside Jerusalem, our village of Taybeh is the only entirely Christian village that

Ruins of the Church of St. George in Taybeh



remains in Palestine. The village is located between Jerusalem and Jericho in the biblical land of Judea known as the West Bank of Jordan and unfortunately does not exist on any modern map. Following the 1967 Israeli invasion of the West Bank, thousands of people from Taybeh have emigrated to Australia, America, and Europe due to the difficult political and economic situation, and the daily suffering faced under military occupation. For me personally, Taybeh reflects the democracy that should continue to exist in Palestine but hopefully with the end of the brutal military occupation. Pray with us that the Lord will not forget the faithful.

In Taybeh, the emperor Constantine built the first church in the Holy Land named after St. George, the patron saint of this village. We have been blessed not to have seen the destruction and bombings that have happened in nearby Ramallah and other parts of Palestine during the Israeli reoccupation. For two thousand years this tiny little village has had the blessing to maintain a Christian presence in the Holy Land. We must transcend the bloodshed and terror and wait with faith in God. At the end, our final destiny is the Kingdom of God, so we pray for God's mercy as we live under Israeli guns. In the meantime we must walk with the cross that Christ offered us and preserve our Christian roots in the land of Christ's holy resurrection.

Dr. Maria C. Khoury is the author of Christina Goes to the Holy Land and Witness in the Holy Land.

From Her Diaspora

El Almuerzo de Tía Habiba

by Nathalie Handal

Half past six in the morning
 the kitchen is wide awake,
 no time for many cups of coffees
 for Tía Liliana, Tía Mercedes,
 Tía Rosette, Tía Esperanza,
 Tía Josefina, Tía Margarita,
 Tía Layla and Tío Wadie
 Are coming for some of Tía Habiba's
 tamalitos, lamb, hummos, laban, and grape leaves.
 "Dios mío niña, you are not dressed," Juanita tells me.
 Her Indian features recite poems her ancestors tell her
 the way Tía Habiba's deep curved eyes
 tell me about the holy land.
 "Por favor, it is not morning yet," I respond.
 These are what my Friday mornings
 are like when I visit my relatives in Torreón, Coahuila,
 a little ciudad in México.

By noontime, everyone has arrived,
 voices crowd every room.
 Before I go downstairs, I stand
 at the top of the staircase looking
 at those people below as if I were
 on the Mount of Olives looking
 at the Old City, and I wonder
 how these people got here,
 so far from the Mediterranean sea,
 the desert heat. How they are caught
 between Abdel Halim Hafez and Luís Miguel,
 jelabas and sombreros, lost in the smoke
 coming from the arguileh.
 I start going down the stairs, hear
 them say, Habibti, que tal?
 and know that all has changed.

From *The Lives of Rain* (Northampton, MA: Interlink, 2005).

Nathalie Handal, of Bethlehem, is a poet, writer, playwright, director and producer.



THE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY OF THE FAITHFUL

by *Munir Fasheh*

Christians of Palestine form the only indigenous Christian community in the world. We are the only community that carried and manifested the faith, the spirit, and the tradition from generation to generation—starting with the generation that walked, talked, and interacted with Jesus, face to face. Although this is true about Palestinian Christians in general, it is particularly true about illiterate Palestinian Christians who carried the tradition and spirit, not through texts and words but in their ways of living, perceiving, relating to and treating others.

I am talking about faith, spirit and tradition as aspects that I experienced while growing up within my family at home, with relatives, and in the community. At the same time, however, I was exposed since I was a young boy to formal institutional, professional forms of Christianity, mainly through missionaries and churches. Although I always felt tension between the two “Christianities”, I was made to believe that they are the same because they use similar words and symbols. Gradually, however, I realized that they embody two worlds that have little in common: one that is convivial and communal (where people say what they mean and mean what they say) and another world that is “mechanical” and organized (where actions are governed by the values of control and winning). In 1992, I wrote a small booklet in Arabic with the title “Christianity of my mother vs. Christianity of the West” to explore the differences between these two types of “Christianities.”

Palestinian Christians form a very special Christian community in the world. We are special not in the sense of having special privileges or a better understanding of Christianity, but in the sense of having a special responsibility for contributing to an authentic dialogue concerning Christianity and its role in the world today, and for freeing it from the monopoly of dominant conceptions, perceptions, and practices. The fact that we are also a community that has been in daily interaction for many centuries with others, especially Muslims and Jews, adds to our status as a special group, crucial in contributing to an authentic dialogue concerning Christianity in the world today—a dialogue that takes pluralism, wisdom, and the well-being of people, communities, and nature as fundamental values. One very important way of exercising this responsibility is by looking at ourselves as “co-authors” of the meanings of words that have been part of Christian traditions. In other words, we are special as potential “co-authors” of how

the spirit of Jesus is embedded in our daily lives, and of what it means to be a Christian in the world today, building on contemplations about our lives and experiences, and sharing our meanings, perceptions, and ways with others.

One aspect to which I think Palestinian Christians can contribute is distinguishing between faith and beliefs. Living both in Palestine and the United States, I believe it is easier for a person like my mother to feel that she shares a common faith with others (especially Muslims and Jews) and to realize that that common faith is manifested in different belief systems. She embodied the subtle difference between faith and beliefs through living and interacting with others. It was manifested in her perceptions and in how she treated others. I never heard her, for example, belittling beliefs of others, and I never felt in her attitude and behavior that she was looking at others as if they belonged to a different faith. Never in my life have I heard her say a word of hatred towards others or degrading other beliefs and religions. This attitude, in my opinion, is the basis of authentic dialogue. Dialogue is lifeless if it is mainly verbal, if it is built only on texts, words, and concepts. My mother would not be fooled by differences in expressions, words, and beliefs, because it seems she realized that the difference is more in manifestations than in faith. Like many other Palestinian Christians, she never discussed beliefs outside how people



treat others. When Mohammad [the Prophet of Islam] was asked, “What is religion?” he said: the way you treat others. [*Ad-deen howa al-mu'amalah*]. This is a beautiful way of perceiving religions for our troubled times.

One aspect that I believe is common to all religious faiths is that every person is special and precious. Another aspect is that every person is a searcher for what fulfills his/her life, a searcher for a way to reach salvation. Thus, a good way of starting a dialogue is by every person telling how s/he lives faith including how s/he perceives and treats others. There is a saying in Arabic (which probably has equivalents in other languages): “May God help everyone understand and live his/her own religion” (*Kul wahed 'ala deenoh, allah ye'eenoh*). Beliefs bind members of each group together. Faith makes dialogue possible between various groups. One aspect of modern living is the fact that it is becoming easier to live by beliefs with no connection to faith.

In spite of being special and crucial in the possibility of contributing to what Christianity can do in today's world, the Palestinian Christian community seems to be forgotten. I do not know of any Western group that came to Palestine to learn from us. At best, some came to learn about us—that is, to understand us through their concepts and categories. All came to convert us, each to his or her denomination. What makes things worse is that many Palestinian Christians do not seem to realize that they form a community of special “co-authors” of what Christianity means in the world today. In this sense and within what is happening in the world today, Palestinian Christians in particular can help Western Christians see Islam as embodying the same faith but with a different belief system. This is crucial to the sanity of today's world and to the survival of humanity on earth.

This special community of the faithful—the Palestinian Christian community—is made invisible and forgotten. We are visible and remembered only as potential converts to this or that denomination. We

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are forgotten as a community that embodies a “world” that no other Christian community embodies. We are forgotten in the sense that Western Christians seem to be unable to see that we are worth learning from and entering into dialogue with. They look at us as Christians of a “lesser quality” and thus need to be “improved” or “developed” or “reformed” or converted. At best, they can learn about us—mainly for purposes of control and conversion—but not from us. This is a handicap that the vast majority of Westerners seem to have in relation to other civilizations (think, for example, of the British who stayed in India for over 200 years and boasted that a British library has more to offer than the whole Indian civilization). I never heard a missionary—not once—express that s/he learned some inspiring insight from Palestinian Christians. Devaluing our experiences and our ways of living (by both religious missionaries and secular ones, such as educators) is a loss for us, for them, and for the world.

Several factors, which I will mention here very briefly, led to the inability of Westerners to understand and learn from others, and to their difficulty in distinguishing between faith and beliefs. First, anyone who thinks s/he is smarter than others, in some absolute sense, is handicapped to learn from others except what helps in controlling the others. Second, the belief in a single, undifferentiated path for progress, which is the path taken by Europe the past 500 years, puts serious limits on the ability to learn from other civilizations. Third, disrespecting others (which usually includes believing that there is nothing in others

worth learning) is usually accompanied by claims of help and assistance. Using adjectives to refer to people is one form of disrespect that is subtle and sounds good. For example, the use of “marginalized people” is a subtle way (with connotations of good intentions) of ignoring what people have, including a name, dignity, knowledge, and ways of living. Fourth, the absence from European languages of the dual (which is called *al-muthanna* in Arabic) has been crucial in how Europeans perceive and relate to others. The absence of the dual—I and you—from their languages led to its absence in their consciousness, awareness, perceptions, and thinking. *Al-muthanna* embodies a logic that is different from Aristotle's and Hegel's. In Aristotle's logic, you are either a “copy of I” or “not-I”. In Hegel's logic, you and I can form a new synthesis (one expression of which is referring to one's spouse as “my other half”). In contrast, within the logic of *al-muthanna*, you remain “you” and I remain “I”, but there is a third party which is the relationship. This third party becomes so important in one's life, almost inseparable from either you or I. The absence of *al-muthanna* is much more serious than what Europeans can comprehend and, unfortunately, more than what many Arabs realize. Palestinian Christians—because of their history and the languages they spoke—embody *al-muthanna* in their perceptions, actions, and relationships with others. Those who believe that Aristotle and Hegel exhaust all kinds of logic are handicapped in their ability to see, let alone understand, the logic embedded in *al-muthanna*. This at least partially explains why a person could not and will probably not be able to build an authentic dialogue with others, and why missionaries have been unable to see what Palestinian Christians have.

Since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the forgotten *faithful* have been uprooted from their land and are slowly disappearing. The forgotten will soon become non-existent in Palestine.

Dr. Munir Fasheh is director of the Arab Education Forum at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

SABEEL'S 6TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

“THE FORGOTTEN FAITHFUL: A WINDOW INTO THE LIFE AND WITNESS OF CHRISTIANS IN THE HOLY LAND”

November 2-9, 2006

Through lectures, workshops, worship, and excursions in the Holy Land, Sabeel's 6th International Conference will provide a unique opportunity to encounter the realities of Christians in Palestine and Israel.

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NO CHRISTIAN SPIRIT IN THE THEME PARK IN GALILEE

by George Sabhar

The Christian theme park in Galilee, planned by right-wing Christian groups, will create a world of fantasy and fairy tale that has little to do with the truth and reality in the holy land and much to do with their political agenda and biased view of the conflict. The theme park will cost approximately sixty million US dollars (\$60,000,000). This astronomical figure should have been used in many places around the world to feed the poor and provide medicine to those who need it. Money will be spent so Christianity will become a tool to spread an image of the holy land, from the holy land itself, that has nothing to do with the reality there.

The declared aim is to create a theme park, amphitheater, broadcast studios, and hiking trail in the area where Jesus walked. I am compelled to remind organizers to consider not only where Jesus walked but also what he said. The message of Jesus is inclusive love and compassion, and it extends to Palestinians as well. Inherently the theme park will serve Israeli interests, since the 125 acre plot of prime land, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, is donated by the government of Israel.

I wish the 60 million dollars were spent on a study center that will bring Palestinians and Israelis to learn about each other's culture. Christian organizers of the theme park should become part of the solution, not part of the problem, in the Middle East. I wish the 60 million dollars were spent on development projects to generate income for the long-forgotten Palestinian Christians, to encourage them to remain in the land where Christianity started. It is amazing that such a huge amount of money can be generated for a theme park, to drive attention away from the truth in the holy land. I wish the



money were spent on projects that will bring back Christians that immigrated because of the occupation, oppression, and loss of hope.

The theme park will market an image that has nothing to do with reality. It will not show the segregation wall, the squalid refugee camps, checkpoints, or the churches in the West Bank and Gaza. Voices that will be heard from the theme park will tell the whole world that everything is wonderful. How can one pray and reflect in such a place? I pray to God to guide them, so they will tell the truth. I pray to God to lead Christians who visit there to see the refugee camps, so they can help the poor people, and to talk to Palestinian Christians whose story is about to be further subdued.

Under normal conditions, I have no problem with Christians coming from around the world to explore their own heritage in the land where Christianity began. However, how can one claim to be Christian while ignoring the story and experience of fellow Christians of Palestine? How can one exploit the message of Jesus, to justify directly or indirectly, the policies adopted by the state of Israel against Palestinians? The theme park, as it stands right now, carries no Christian message.

The unprecedented theme park will create a Christian Disney Land. I question the motives behind it. Christians do not need a world of fantasy. Today what Christians need is not a place that creates further divide and rift, but rather a place that sets an example of tolerance, in the footsteps of Jesus Christ; a place that will convey the truth about reality in the holy land. The message out of the Christian theme park should be one of equality for all citizens of Israel and an end of the occupation of the Palestinian territories, so that Palestinians and Israelis can become free. We have pressing issues where Christians can contribute around the world: combating HIV/AIDS, helping the hungry in Africa, and feeding the poor and providing shelter to the homeless in the rich countries. That is the true message of Christianity.

Fortunately it is not too late. The Christian theme park is in the planning stage, so its path can be corrected so that the message emanating from it is one that calls for peace and reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis. A Christian theme park should not become the new mechanism against Palestinians. I hope the organizers of the theme park will realize their mistake and change course before it is too late. I pray to God to show them the way.

George Sabhar is a board member of Sabeel.

CHRISTIAN ARABS OF THE HOLY LAND

by *Fuad Farah*

The importance of Christian presence in the holy land cannot be overlooked but needs to be widely acknowledged. Christians around the world who have strong sentiments toward the land that witnessed the birth, mission, crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord, are no doubt, keen about the continuity of Christian communal presence here for the past two thousand years. Religious ceremonies and celebrations carried out by the local Christian communities are closely followed and attended by devout worshippers. Pilgrimages to the holy places have been a long-time tradition bringing spiritual, moral, and material benefits for the whole population. Muslims and Jews as well ought to have a special interest in a flourishing Christian community in their midst, as they are keen to present to the world pluralistic tolerant societies of their own, where the freedom of worship is observed and guaranteed. With their strong ties to the churches around the world and especially in the West, Christians can serve as an important media role advocating for human rights issues and for self-determination. Alternatively, considering their moderate, nonviolent attitudes, they can also play a reconciliatory role in the Arab-Israeli conflict, if given the opportunity. Above all, the educational, health and humanitarian services offered by the churches to the Arab population are major contributions and an outstanding monument of charity and benevolence for all.

Despite the fact that Christians here have well kept their special identity, they consider themselves Arabs in the widest sense of the word, and they were active partners in molding Arab culture, despite its Islamic elements. Arab Christians were key figures in translating, and thus

preserving, Greco-Roman heritage in the fields of philosophy, sciences and humanities. Christians were also pioneers and active partners in the creation of the Arab National Movement, preceded by a literary awakening during the middle of the nineteenth century, when tribal and religious allegiances were replaced by a tolerant, secular and Western-minded ideologies within the dormant Arab societies.

On the whole, Muslim-Christian relations have been characterized by mutual cooperation and a common destiny, despite few incidental events that have been easily contained. The recession of the Pan-Arab National Movement as well as the socialist and liberal ideologies during the latter part of the twentieth century gave rise to a new brand of Islamic fundamentalism among the Arab masses. The politically influential Christian Zionists and New Conservatives further aggravated these tensions. With false biblical interpretations, these Western Christians lend full support for Israeli

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Middle East history is witness to ethnic and religious minorities that have ceased to exist. Remembering Constantinople, once the centre of Christian glory, let us all join hands in support of what is left of Christian presence in Jerusalem and Galilee before it becomes too late.”

claims over the whole of Palestine advocated by religiously fanatic Jewish activists. Growing anti-Western feelings within the Arab population, as a result of continued American support for Israel, has changed the once tranquil Muslim-Christian relations into undeclared Muslim identification of Christians with Western imperialism.

Future prospects do not look bright for holy land Christians, and one cannot but notice a deep sense of frustration and hopelessness among them. Their rapidly decreasing population as well as their fragile economic, social and political statuses cause them deep concern regarding their ability to cope on their own with the difficult challenges confronting them. Rather than being awarded recognition for their on-going struggle to uphold Christian witness and continuity in its cradle, they feel that the international community and world Christianity has neglected and failed to recognize them, while caring more for Jewish and Muslim issues.

Today there are not more than 170,000 indigenous Christians or about 1.7 percent of the total population living between the river Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea, close to sixty percent (60%) of whom reside in Galilee. In comparison Christians comprised around seven percent (7%) of the population a little more than fifty years ago. This decrease was mainly caused by the exodus of nearly forty percent (40%) of the Christian population from what has become Israel during, and in the aftermath of, the 1948 war. Other reasons are their low birth rate (in comparison to indigenous Muslims) and the continuous process of Christian emigration.

There are several reasons for Christian emigration from the holy land. Political

unrest, which reflects more negatively on minorities, is a primary reason. Their better adaptability to Western-style living, religion and culture makes it easier for them to accommodate themselves to their new environments. Furthermore their status as a minority spread across several cities and villages as small, weak and isolated communities curbs, to a great extent, their electoral influence in public affairs and at decision-making levels. Job opportunities, once more freely open to Christians due to their higher education, are becoming less and less available for them. Furthermore their status as a largely landless middle class society affords them more mobility and at the same time presents them with severe housing problems compared to the mostly rural Muslim population and the more privileged, state-supported Jewish settlers.

In view of this, many Christians are seeking an easy way out: emigration. Emigrants are usually the young, educated, ambitious and socially recognized elite, namely those who would expectedly be the future leaders of our community, doubling the pain of our loss. Yet despite the fateful direction of this phenomenon, no one has yet taken any serious action on this subject matter, neither in planning nor in conducting research and studies.

Middle East history is witness to ethnic and religious minorities that have ceased to exist. Remembering Constantinople, once the centre of Christian glory, let us all join hands in support of what is left of Christian presence in Jerusalem and Galilee before it becomes too late. At the same time Palestinian Christians should realize that their presence in this land is God's bestowed blessing and that they are therefore expected to set their roots deep in this land as living reminders of the life of Jesus Christ and a continuity to our faith, heritage and mission.

Fuad Farah is an engineer, a member of the Sabeel-Nazareth Committee, and chairman of the Orthodox Church Council in Israel.

IN DEFENSE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

by Hossein Shahidi and Sari Hanafi

The publication of a series of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad in a number of European newspapers has led to official protests by Islamic governments, boycotts of European products, demonstrations, sometimes leading to loss of life, and attacks on several Western embassies in the Middle East. Moreover, an Iranian newspaper has launched a competition for cartoons on themes including the Holocaust.

Appearing when memories are still fresh about reports, later denied, of the desecration of the Qor'an by American troops at the Guantanamo prison, the propagation of the drawings in Europe have strengthened the perception among many Muslims that not only are they being exploited economically and manipulated politically by the Western powers, but they are also insulted by the West culturally.

At the same time, troops from several Western countries are deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq; Israel continues its occupation of Palestinian Territories; the West has threatened to stop its financial support for the Palestinian Authority now that parliamentary elections have been won by the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas; and tension is rising over Iran's nuclear program. In the West itself, many Muslims, and other minority communities, have for a long time been facing what they see as the erosion of cultural diversity and increasing prejudice. In such a highly polarized world, the continuation and escalation of this new conflict can have disastrous consequences. Some have defended the propagation of the cartoons on the ground of freedom of expression. However, freedom of

expression, which is a basic human right, can only increase understanding if it is exercised with intellectual rigor and social responsibility. To present the Prophet Mohammad as a symbol of terrorism, as is done in one of the cartoons, is no different from presenting Moses as the symbol of right wing Israelis' actions against Palestinians, an association that would be rightly condemned as anti-Semitic and is prohibited by the laws of many European countries.

We call for a serious treatment of Islamic values by the West in line with the tradition of commitment to facts and rational analysis that have distinguished the best in Western thought since the Enlightenment. Writings on Islam by secular authors such as the late Montgomery Watt, and the late Maxime Rodinson - British and French biographers of the Prophet Mohammad, respectively - are regarded by many Muslims and non-Muslims as models of scholarship.

At a time when humanity is in dire need of understanding to ensure peaceful coexistence, the propagation of a set of ill-conceived drawings in several European countries has reinforced ignorance and hatred towards Muslims, and incited, albeit inadvertently, violence against European citizens and interests in Arab and Islamic countries. In defense of all those who have been aggrieved, we demand that the judicial authorities in all the countries concerned prosecute those who have inflicted harm, either by abusing freedom of expression, or by seeking redress through violence rather than through the rule of law.

Hossein Shahidi is Assistant Professor of Communication and Sari Hanafi is Visiting Associate Professor of Sociology, at American University of Beirut.

“CHURCH ACTION FOR PEACE” PILGRIMAGE

by Robert and Maurine Tobin

The Sabeel Spring Witness Visit this year was transformed into a new opportunity to further the Sabeel commitment to ecumenical cooperation and advocacy. With the Joint Advocacy Initiative of the YMCA and in concert with the World Council of Churches International Advocacy Week, Sabeel co-led a “Church Action for Peace” pilgrimage. Rana Qumsiyeh from JAI and The Rev. Chris Ferguson from the WCC joined in the planning, which included an ecumenical candlelight prayer vigil at the Qalandia checkpoint. Forty six pilgrims from eight nations worshiped and traveled together for nine days, blending the purposes and agendas of the three sponsors. Our pilgrims came from Japan, the Netherlands, Korea, the Philippines, Canada, the UK, Ireland, and the US.

We began our journey by attending the WCC launching event with the Patriarchs and Bishops of the Churches in Jerusalem on Sunday afternoon, March 12. Patriarch Michael Sabbah delivered an excellent sermon in which he introduced the International Week of Action for Peace in Israel and Palestine. His sermon has been distributed worldwide. His plea is for the international community to step beyond the confusion of Israel’s deep concern for security and the deep need of Palestinians for freedom, dignity as expressed by the recent election. Both Israelis and Palestinians deserve acceptance as human beings, he said. The world must address and support both sides as valuable human beings who can trust and live side by side. The international community must play a key role if peace, justice and human dignity are to be achieved and honored.

Similar services were held around the world that day.

The nine days were extremely busy as we sought to experience as much as possible the new realities emerging from the elections and the wall. We heard from religious and political leaders who will be seeking to address the next phase of the conflict. We visited some of the people most affected by the unilateral decisions of the Israeli government. Those who have visited before felt a deep sense of dismay that the wall has totally redefined the possibilities for future negotiations. Those seeing the reality of the wall for the first time felt a sense of outrage and disbelief. Among those we heard from were Hind Khoury, Sabeel Board member, former Palestinian Authority cabinet member and now ambassador in Paris; Victor Batarsieh, mayor of Bethlehem; four members of Hamas, two of whom are newly elected members of the Palestinian Council; two Christians and members of the new Council, Hanan Ashrawi, General Secretary of MIFTAH, and Bernard Sabella, Executive Secretary of Middle East Council of Churches; and Jeff Halper and Angela Godfrey-Goldstein, from the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions.

“ “ Those seeing the reality of the wall for the first time felt a sense of outrage and disbelief.

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Particularly poignant were our visits to At-Tuwani and Zababdeh, two small villages in the West Bank. At-Tuwani, a very small ancient village south of Hebron inhabited by farmers and sheep herders, has been under almost constant harassment from settlers who have moved in to take over their land. Last year the villagers invited members of the Christian Peacemakers Team, Ta’ayoush, an Israeli peace group, and Operation Dove, an Italian peace group, to live with them and help protect them from the settlers’ aggression. School children have been beaten, sheep poisoned, and olive trees cut down as the villagers are ordered to leave their historic homes. Zababdeh, a small Christian village close to Jenin in the upper West Bank, is one of the few remaining Christian villages. As guests of the Rev. Fadi Diab and the Christian clergy, we were treated to a wonderful luncheon and were greeted by the mayor and other community members.



Our plan was to visit the Jenin refugee camp after lunch. However, that was not to be. While in Zababdeh we learned of the Israeli siege in Jericho during which a prison was destroyed, two guards killed, and 33 other people injured. The tension was understandably high. Calls from the camp indicated that it was not wise to visit, so we rearranged our plans. In Bethlehem, we were able to visit the Aida refugee camp and meet the children and residents there. Since we were staying in Bethlehem, we experienced daily the new checkpoints and the difficult lives of the residents who are now completely shut off from the rest of Palestine and indeed the world.

We took time in Nazareth and the Galilee for some rest, reflection and prayer at the holy sites as well as visitations with the Sabeel staff in Nazareth. Our second Sunday in Bethlehem we were invited into the homes of Palestinian Christian families after attending worship in their respective churches. Our final worship service was quite moving as we prayed for peace and committed ourselves to action at home in the Cave of the Shepherds on the grounds of the YMCA. We left feeling a deeper commitment to the peace efforts in Israel and Palestine and solidarity with the Christian community.

Rev. Robert and Maurine Tobin, Sabeel volunteers from Maine, coordinated the Sabeel/JAI/WCC "Church Action for Peace" pilgrimage.

From Her Diaspora The Giant

by Najwa Farah

In my ghorba* as the evening approaches
I am overcome by sadness
While shadows relentlessly crept
The soul travels to a past world
Where many years had passed
A terrible giant moves in
He snatches me to shaggy mountains,
And there he roars with laughter
Its echo is heard over the desolate peaks.
Then he strutted with a swagger
I wait, then I ask, "What is it you want?"
"Yes I demand something."
"Name it," I say. "Is it money; is it provisions?"
"No, no, that is not my request,
I am well fortified
I want your memories."
Anxiety and anger seize me.
"You will never possess such a treasure,
This is me, my roots
My love, my companion,
The glimpses of my motherland
The scent of the orange blossoms
The fans of the palms
The flowers that shine on the holy hills.

There is a usurper, who stole my homeland
And a young child confronts him
Unarmed is that child but he loves Palestine
Such memories are what is left
The memory of the motherland,
The struggle of a child the treasure I guard,
At my words he diminished his face was pale
As he retired I heard the echo of his voice.
"The scent of the orange blossom, the confrontation of a child
I can never acquire such memories."
The shadows on the mountains had lengthened,
The mountains were yawning bored, old very old
Their peaks dazzled by the rays of the sinking sun
I traced my steps to the city which was flooded by its lights
From my window I watched the bustle of life but my heart
was in Palestine.

*exile

Najwa Farah is a Palestinian author and poet active in women's issues.

ELECTORAL TRANSITION

by Bernard Sabella

These are transitional times in Palestine and Israel, with Palestinian elections just behind us and Israeli elections just ahead of us. The Palestinian platform, on which the major lists of Hamas and Fatah, as well as third parties and independents ran, clearly addresses the social, economic and institutional issues that have been plaguing Palestinian society since Oslo was signed in 1993. Thus reconstruction and paying attention to the ills and needs of the people is high on the agenda of the new Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). The political situation is a cause of worry to all of us in the new council: Israel is disengaging, unilaterizing, concretizing, and drawing its borders without admitting to international legality and consensus. Worse, in the process, Israel is expropriating Palestinian lands and infracting the basic human rights of thousands of Palestinians in terms of free access, employment, schooling, health care and use of resources, such as cultivating agricultural land or using water reserves. The situation is one of total control and hegemony without any serious challenge from the international community or the Arab world, for that matter.

There was disagreement in the first session of the newly elected Palestinian Legislative Council between the majority bloc Hamas and the opposition bloc Fatah on the authority of the new PLC to annul decisions taken by the exiting PLC in its meeting of February 13. These decisions have constitutional implications, as they put the power to nominate judges to the Palestinian Constitutional Court in the hands of the President of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Continued disagreement on this issue caused the Fatah members to walk out of the session. Unfortunately, this beginning of the new PLC postponed the discussion of the vital and important

issues awaiting all of us on the social, economic and political agenda of our people.

I am hoping that in the future the leadership of both Hamas and Fatah blocs will find a way to make the PLC meetings more productive in terms of answering to the needs and ills of our people. I strongly feel that third party and independent members present in the PLC can play a

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Unless some dignified form of “live and let live” is found, we will all pay a heavy price.

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very constructive and essential role in the process. Our obligation as members of the PLC is to our people. While each of us subscribes to her/his political party and its platform, the platform of our people should be a unifying force that should guide our deliberations and decisions. As I have contacted some of my constituents in the greater Arab Jerusalem area, I am more aware of the pressing preoccupations of municipal and local councils, of charitable societies, of families and communities facing hardships, and of schools and other service organizations in need of a framework for reconstruction and for moving ahead. This is the real work of the PLC, regardless of the hurdles and difficulties that will be placed by Israel on our work, especially in Jerusalem.

International and Arab attention has been directed, since the outcome of the Palestinian elections, on convincing Hamas to agree to international and mutual agreements signed between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)

and the National Authority on one side, and Israel. Differing versions of how Hamas can do this without compromising on its own platform have been advanced; the most prominent among these is for Hamas to join the PLO and therefore automatically subscribe to the PLO platform and to all its agreements and accords with the nations of the world, including Israel. Whether Hamas will undertake such a step remains to be seen. Meanwhile, there are indications that the new Palestinian government will be announced soon. Most likely it will be a government dominated by Hamas ministers and some independents, and possibly third party personalities.

On March 14 the Israeli military took over by force the Jericho prison run by the Palestinian police. The Israelis took prisoners both Ahmad Saadat, General Secretary of the PFLP and Fouad Shobaki, a Fatah official who was accused by Israel of attempted smuggling of weapons on the ship *Karine-A* in 2002. Both were serving term, together with other Palestinian prisoners, in the Jericho prison as a result of an agreement with Britain, the United States, Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The incident angered Palestinians, who saw it as yet another Israeli disregard for signed international accords encouraged by British and American pre-takeover approval or advanced notification of withdrawal of British and American security personnel. These personnel were in place at the Jericho prison as part of the agreement in order to secure that Saadat, Shobaki and their colleagues would remain in prison.

Whether the Jericho incident will lead towards progress on talks of coalition government formation among Hamas and Fatah remains to be seen. This is doubtful. But in any case, the formation of the new Hamas-headed government will introduce another round of Israeli threats and

possible military actions and other measures against the new government, its ministers, and its finances. The Israelis are not intending to make it easy for a Hamas government to rule for a long period of time without agreeing to Israeli conditions. There is doubt that Israel would see in Hamas' formal joining of the PLO an acceptable transformation of its platform on the right to resist Israel as an occupying power, through armed struggle. In the meantime and regardless of the membership of the incoming Palestinian government, Israel, Europe, the USA and other donors will not be as forthcoming with their financial and other support to Palestinians as they have been in the past. The Jericho incident, with its various repercussions, at least in the very immediate future, will not help either.

Even if all this paints a pessimistic outlook on electoral transition in Palestine, we all need to remember that over seventy percent (70%) of the Palestinian population is under thirty years of age. These young people need hope. Given the prevalent conditions, the Israeli threats and the Western pressures, loss of hope would mean only one thing: predisposing more and more Palestinian young people towards radical solutions and actions. This will serve no purpose to anyone, least of all for these young people. Thus the challenge is for all of us local, regional and international players and not simply for the PLC or the incoming Palestinian government. Unless some dignified form of "live and let live" is found, we will all pay a heavy price. Electoral transition could have been a little less pressing, but the realities look us in the face and inform us that the agenda of our people, and its youth, cannot wait. This is a message not simply to us in the Palestinian Legislative Council but also to all those who wish to see the end to Israeli occupation of our lands and the creation of a viable Palestinian state with Arab East Jerusalem as its capital.

Dr. Bernard Sabella is a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

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'ABOUD A PEACEFUL AND TRANQUIL VILLAGE IN THE WEST BANK

by Ibrahim Nairouz

Studies have shown that at the beginning of the 20th century there were towns and villages in Palestine that were totally or predominantly Christian. Today, the number of those Christians has significantly declined or totally disappeared.

The village of 'Aboud is one such place. Located thirty kilometers (30 km) north of Ramallah, 'Aboud is a peaceful and quiet village, known for the beauty of its landscape, its hospitality, and its warm welcome to visitors.

'Aboud, with its charm and natural beauty, enfolds several layers of history, culture, religion and civilization. It holds a rich reservoir of memory handed down through the ages through its many churches and monasteries that date back to the early Christian centuries.

Today, the gracious and warm welcome that 'Aboud affords to visitors cannot hide

the sadness and anxiety lying underneath. This Christian village is being emptied of its people, especially the younger generation, as it moves towards its unknown future. One can almost hear its fields, its homes, and its churches crying out to its sons and daughters to stay and preserve the place that holds the traces of Jesus' footsteps and those of the saints who walked its fields: Barbara, Theodoros, Anastasia, Simon, Elias, Surur and many others.

Christianity reached 'Aboud early on, making it one example of a village that has held onto its Christian faith for two thousand years. Conditions have changed and faces and names have changed, but 'Aboud has stood steadfast, upholding the faith it has inherited from its ancestors. It preserves the history of nine churches and monasteries rooted in its soil. They are as follows: the Church of our Lady Mary, 5th century; the Monastery of St. Simon, 6th century; the Church of 'Ovadia the prophet, 7th century; the Church of St. Theodoros, 6th century; the Church of St.

Anastasia, 7th century; the Church of St. Barbara, 5th century; the Church of Sha'ira, 6th century; the Church of the Messiah, 6th century; the Monastery of St. Elias, 11th century. These holy sites record the memory of some of the most famous figures in Christianity, especially the Virgin Mary and St. Barbara, who was born in 'Aboud and who withstood many hardships. St. Elias the monk from 'Aboud was driven out of his village and persecuted, but he returned and built the monastery with his own hands and with the help of the villagers. In the monastery, he established the first library in the region. It held many books and valuable manuscripts. These are but a few names of those who kept the faith alive in the hearts of the faithful from generation to generation.

Today, the village of 'Aboud is a target of fierce attacks from the Israeli army, which from the beginning of the occupation, set out to confiscate its lands, uproot its olive trees, destroy its fields and orchards, as well as chase and kill many of its inhabitants. In 2002 the occupation army blew up part of the Church of St. Barbara while searching for "wanted" men. The Palestinian Authority under Yasser 'Arafat rebuilt the church but later discovered that the Israeli authorities had plans for the separation wall to pass through the area where the church stood. Through the concerted efforts of the people of the village, friends who supported the justice of the Palestinian cause, and the firm stand of the church, it was possible to divert the route of the wall.

On November 2, 2005, the village council of 'Aboud was officially informed of the intent of the occupation authorities to build the wall, which on the western side was 12.5 kilometers long and sixty meters wide, to include the buffer zones on either side. This meant it would take 1449 dunams of land belonging to the village (4 dunams = 1 acre). It would also consume 3887 dunams on the other side of the wall, thereby confiscating this land and preventing its owners from reaching it. The total village land lost to the wall

would then amount to 5336 dunams, thereby depriving the villagers of the source of their livelihood and driving more of them away from their village.

The population of 'Aboud reaches approximately 2660 people, fifty percent of whom are Christian and fifty percent, Muslim. The Christian and Muslim communities harmoniously co-exist in 'Aboud as in most mixed villages in Palestine.

The main problem facing 'Aboud – this charming and tranquil village – is emigration. Why are the young men and women deserting their village? Many questions arise. Is it the result of the Israeli occupation and the political instability? Is it the stumbling peace process, the ambiguous future, and the lack of political horizon? Is it the tension between one's national and Christian identity? Is it the diminishing number of Christians and a feeling of being lost? Is it the neglect of Western Christians and the realization that Eastern Christians do not register in the psyche of Western Christians? Is it a fear that the Palestinian society may become classified according to religious affiliation? It could be any one of those factors or a combination of some, but the fact remains that Palestinian Christians are leaving. People are seeking solutions through emigration rather than facing their problems at home.

Ibrahim Nairouz is a personal assistant of the Coadjutor Bishop of the Episcopal Church of Jerusalem, and the author of a book on 'Aboud.

MAILYA A CHRISTIAN VILLAGE IN GALILEE

by Shukry Arraf

The village of Mailya is an Arab Christian village in the northern part of Israel. All the villagers are Melkite (Greek) Catholics with European cultural influences.

Mailya is situated twenty-eight kilometers northeast of the city of Acre and seventeen kilometers east of the Israeli city of Nahariya. It is not mentioned in any historical document before the Crusader era, when the French built a citadel in that location.

In the year 1267, the Mamluk Sultan Beibers al-Bunduqdari drove out the Crusaders and brought in Muslim citizens to take their place. He also appointed a Muslim cleric to teach them Islam. The Muslim residents continued to live in Mailya – inside the compound of the king's castle – until the middle of the 18th century, when the governor of Galilee, Dhaher al-Omar al-Zeidani, brought in Christian Melkites (now known as Greek Catholics) from Lebanon and Syria. At the request of France, he did this after this group of Christians separated from the mother Orthodox Church. France provided him with protection and modern weapons in return for his protection of this Christian group of people.

The first Greek Catholics to be brought to Mailya were two silk-worm growers – experts in the production of natural silk. Again, this was done at the request of France. He also imported cotton and started the first cotton mills that marked the beginnings of the European industrial revolution.

Later, Dhaher al-Omar negotiated an agreement with the Muslims of Mailya to leave the village and move to nearby Tarshiha where the majority of the population was Muslim and to bring back the people of Mailya to their homes in the village. Remains of a mosque south of the castle still stand.

During the excavation of Mailya, remains of three convents were found around the Byzantine church with its colored mosaic floors. This provides proof that Mailya was inhabited before the Crusaders who must have settled near Roman Byzantine remains. Their churches are likely to have been built over Christian churches of that period. The present inhabitants also did the same, except that the present church is built to the east of the castle, perhaps over the remains of a crusader church.

During the years of the British Mandate over Palestine, security improved further and people's homes spread out even more especially with the coming of the automobile to replace animal transportation. Slowly, life in the village became more city-like in style.

The population of Mailya numbers 2800 people and has an average birthrate of two or three children per family. About ninety-five percent (95%) of the women of the village are working women, some inside the village and others elsewhere. A large number of these women are university educated.

It is noteworthy that about thirty-three percent (33%) of the people in Mailya are academics; that is to say that one out of every three people in Mailya hold a university degree, which makes this village comparable in education to western Europe. This high rate of education affects the behavior patterns of its youth and its people in general. There are two schools in Mailya. After attending the elementary school, up to grade nine, students move to Notre-Dame secondary school, built with the aid of Germany and France. Notre-Dame has scientific and humanities sections as well as a vocational school.

Mailya continues to be a lively and active Arab Christian village.

Dr. Shukry Arraf, of Mailya, is a historian and author of several books.

IN PERSON



ARCHBISHOP ELIAS CHACOUR

The new Metropolitan of the Melkite Catholic Diocese of Akka, Haifa, Nazareth and all of Galilee, on the occasion of his consecration.

*An interview by Janet Lahr Lewis,
Media Department*

Congratulations on your consecration as the new Archbishop.

Thank you.

What do you see as the biggest challenge to the Christian community inside Israel at this time?

I think we have never dealt with the fact that we are Palestinians, Arabs, Christians, and citizens of Israel. All these four factors are still a big confusion to our Christians in the holy land. Very often they developed a "minority mentality," which means that if you have to ask for any of your rights you are begging for them, you are not asking for them with any dignity. Our Jewish friends also developed a mentality of majority, which means that whenever you give anything to the minority you are condescending, which can develop into a mentality of paternalism.

What do you consider to be your biggest challenge as the new archbishop?

There are many, many challenges. On the level of the diocese, the biggest challenge is whether or not I will be able to create a new mentality among the priests, to unite our clergy first of all. For almost thirty years we were completely abandoned to ourselves, and each one did what he wanted, as he wanted, with no control and no direction from any authority. The priests became severely divided, and they formed camps, centers of influence and power, around the strongest among them. I am happy to see that momentarily this melted when I was appointed archbishop. I called for meetings immediately upon my return from Lebanon [where he was officially appointed], and I was very encouraged to see that all of them came together for the first meeting, all except two who had reasons not to come. But the second meeting I called for, all were there without exception. So there is a general attitude, a general readiness among

the clergy to find unity among themselves. I am proud of my clergy; I'm very proud of them.

The second challenge is the finances of the diocese. We were considered to be one of the richest, the wealthiest diocese of the Melkite [Greek Catholic] Church in the world. But now I receive a diocese that has such a huge deficit simply because the previous bishops not only did not develop the church, but they used what was there and that's it. They did not replace anything. We have to find a way to cover the deficit and then, goodness, to start considering the development of the diocese. We cannot remain a maintenance church, only baptizing, marrying and burying our people. We need to cross from maintenance to mission.

With my priests and my clergy we already have a kind of vision where we will soon set a five-year plan of development of the diocese, surely financial development, but most of all human development. We will give lots of attention to the university students and to the young couples. We will not give as much attention to cemeteries as to young couples. It is a very heavy burden and responsibility. That burden I will never carry alone. I will share everything with my clergy and many things with our community members who are concerned, committed. I will try to build a church from human beings.

What do you consider to be the strengths of the Christian community at this time?

Well, its major strength is its [political] powerlessness. And no matter what is said, what happened in Nazareth a few weeks ago showed an immense strength of the Christian community. The Jewish man who exploded some home-made explosives inside the Basilica of the Annunciation was not harmed but rather protected, together with his wife and daughter, until the police came and took over. I think this instance

shows the amazing power, moral power, of the Christians in the holy land.

What effect do you think your new role as archbishop will have on the ministry of the gospel? Will it be compromised? Will you be forced to be more administrative rather than ministerial?

Well, so far I did not have time to care for administration, for papers. The only thing I have had time to care for so far is to lift up the dignity and the self-esteem of my people. I know that as an archbishop I am considered in Israel to be more than a man of religion. I am considered to be a man who has authority in the society. You should have seen the thousands of Muslims, of Druze, and now of Jewish people who come to congratulate me and to say, "We expect you to be our bishop, to represent us in the society, to speak with our voice." The Jews, on one side, are happy that I am a "blue and white bishop," that means the colors of Israel. I will be very happy to be that if Israelis will understand that I can never compromise on any Christian value or any human value, and I consider justice and righteousness to be necessary for peace and security. Everybody would love to have me compromising for his side. But I'm used to being a troublesome boy. I do not compromise on the gospels' values or on human values. Even if that makes many angry, so what?

How will you respond to or build on international connections and relations with the Christian communities here? I know you've done that already with your connections through the school [Mar Elias Educational Institutions]. Now that you are the Archbishop in Israel, do you think those relations will come naturally?

When an Archbishop speaks, it is loaded with much more authority, meaning, and vision than when a simple priest speaks as his own person. Now I speak with lots of authority. I'm sure that many people will be much more open to connect with us. I'm afraid some people will no longer be open to connect with me. I'll be very

sorry for them and for me. But I'm sure we will give lots of attention to our international friends because of what they deserve and because of our faith. I am ready to receive everybody and to go to everybody to tell them, "We are your brothers and sisters. What we want from you internationals, more than your finances, is your solidarity. We want your friendship. We want your courage to mention our humanity and our existence as Palestinian Arab Christians in the holy land."

We have a special responsibility. To everybody we will tell the story of our Compatriot, the story of the empty tomb and of the Risen Lord. We need a lot of solidarity with overseas Christians if they care to have Christians stay in the holy land. Christians are leaving. Our major enemy now is the emigration abroad. Let it be clear, it is not because of any special threat that we face from any Muslim group. The emigration is because of the very scary situation that is the outcome of the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israeli Jews. The occupation is the major reason for Christians of the West Bank to emigrate. In Israel, the major reason for Christians to emigrate is this kind of uncomfortable situation of finding yourself between two majorities that have extremist groups.

I must say here that Muslim fundamentalism does not frighten me in any special way. But fundamentalism in general, whether it is Christian, Muslim or Jewish, is of great concern for me, because

fundamentalists feel themselves with the same doctrine, with the same ideology, with the same destructive exclusivist values, and none of them is better than the other. None of them is acceptable, because it is destructive. We have been living with Islam for thirteen centuries. Even when Islam was the only power in the Middle East, we were not killed because we were Christians. Why, now, do some especially motivated Christians or non-Christians want to portray the situation as Muslims against Christians?

Is there anything in particular that you would like to say, to let people know?

Yes, yes, yes. I think one of my major concerns and responsibilities would be to remind the Jewish community in Israel that no matter what they do against us, one thing they will never be able to do is to turn us into being their enemies. That means that we will always tell them the truth. When we hurt, we will express our pain. When we are unhappy, we will say we are unhappy. We will never accept to be the enemies of anybody, and we will never, never accept to be their friends if it means being the enemy of others.

Thank you, Bishop, for your time and your challenging words, and our prayers and best wishes go with you in your new role.

Archbishop Chacour is also Vice-President of the Board of Sabeel.

Sabeel congratulates

ARCHBISHOP ELIAS CHACOUR

the new Metropolitan of the Melkite Catholic Diocese
of Akka, Haifa, Nazareth and all of Galilee.

Our prayers are with you as you continue
serving the Lord in your new role!

Purpose Statement of Sabeel

Sabeel is an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians. Inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, this liberation theology seeks to deepen the faith of Palestinian Christians, promote unity among them, and lead them to act for justice and love. *Sabeel* strives to develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities. The word 'Sabeel' is Arabic for 'the way' and also a 'channel' or 'spring' of life-giving water.

Sabeel also works to promote a more accurate international awareness regarding the identity, presence, and witness of Palestinian Christians as well as their contemporary concerns. It encourages individuals and groups from around the world to work for a just, comprehensive, and enduring peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action.

For more information on *Friends of Sabeel* groups in your area please contact our International representatives or the Sabeel Center in Jerusalem.



Sabeel

Ecumenical Liberation
Theology Center
P.O.B. 49084
Jerusalem 91491
Tel: 972.2.532.7136
Fax: 972.2.532.7137

Visit our website at:

www.sabeel.org

E-Mail addresses:

General E-mail: sabeel@sabeel.org; Local Programs: local@sabeel.org; Clergy Program: clergy@sabeel.org;

Friends of Sabeel: world@sabeel.org; Youth Program: youth@sabeel.org; Media: media@sabeel.org.

Friends of Sabeel

North America (FOS-NA)

(U.S. and Canada)
Canon Richard Toll
PO Box 9186
Portalnd, OR 97207
USA

Tel: +1 503 653 6625

E-mail: friends@fosna.org

Website: www.fosna.org

Canadian FOS (CFOS)

c/o The Rev. Robert Assaly
2262 Braeside Ave.
Ottawa, ON
Canada
K1H 7J7

E-mail: sabeel@rogers.com

Website: www.sabeel.ca

Friends of Sabeel

United Kingdom (FOS-UK)

Jennifer Oldershaw
9 College Green
Gloucester GL1 2LX
U.K.

Tel: +44 1452 311 101

E-mail: fosuk@fish.co.uk

Friends of Sabeel

Ireland (FOS-IR)

The Rev. Ken Thompson
ARDSONAS'
12B Carrickbrack Road
Sutton, Dublin 13
Ireland

Tel/Fax: +353 1 832 1152

E-mail: fosirl@eircom.net

Friends of Sabeel

Scandinavia

Rev. Mats Thurffjell
Den Gode Herdens Kyrka
Bläkullagatan 7
250 13 Helsingborg
Sweden

Tel: +46 (0)70 372 60 85

E-mail: sverige@sabeelskandinavien.org

Website: www.sabeelskandinavien.org

Friends of Sabeel

Australia Inc. (FOS-AU)

The Revd Dr. Greg Jenks
PO Box 822
Kenmore, QLD 4069
Australia

Tel: +61 (0) 408 767 344

E-mail: sabeel@faithfutures.org

Website: www.forthfaithfutures.org/sabeel

Sabeel- Nazareth

PO Box 8862
Nazareth 16300
Israel

Tel: 972(4)6020790

E-mail: nazareth@sabeel.org