



“PALESTINIAN CHRISTIANS & THE CHALLENGES OF TODAY”

4th Annual Young Adult Conference
July 21st – August 2nd, 2009
Conference Report

INTRODUCTION



two weeks seeking relationship, seeking truth, and seeking God in this holy land fraught with conflict.

From July 21st, 2009 until August 2nd, 2009 40 young individuals from all over the world, and from all over the spectrum of Christian traditions, gathered to

“A tourist goes through the land and visits the sites. On the other hand, a pilgrim allows the land, the sites, and most importantly the people to go through herself. You must allow the people to go through you.” – Father Thomas Stransky

A land is holy not simply because of its history, its ruins or its ancient stones. It is also holy because of the people who fill it. True pilgrimage cannot happen without interaction with the people living in the Holy Land.

Interaction between local Palestinian Christians and international participants made this trip a true pilgrimage. Together, we spent

hear the story of Palestinian Christians and the Challenges of Today. We heard lectures from prominent Palestinian leaders, we went to the homes of refugee families in the camps, we met farmers struggling to continue cultivating their land, we toured numerous holy sites and churches, and we witnessed the structural violence that seeps into every aspect of Palestinian life.

Our hope was to engage in a ministry of truth-telling and witness that would inspire further advocacy in each of our home communities. Our goal was to listen in solidarity with the young Christians who now live where Jesus lived so long ago.

PLANNING



Sabeel has already successfully undertaken three prior Young Adult Conferences, and was able to learn from each of these experiences. The fourth annual young adult conference was unique and improved as a result of careful attention to recommendations of previous conference participants. The conference was planned by staff of Sabeel and by the youth of Sabeel who live in the West Bank, in Jerusalem, and inside Israel. Local young people were able to represent themselves and their lives here as Palestinian Christians living under military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, and non-Jewish residents of Israel living under structural discrimination. For every aspect of the conference a youth committee was assigned.

- The different committees:
- 1) Application Committee
 - 2) Worship Committee
 - 3) Logistics
 - 4) Debriefing Committee
 - 5) Icebreaking Committee
 - 6) Participant Preparation Committee

VOLUNTEERS/STAFF

Sabeel Young Adult Conferences are unique because they are completely planned by young adults both local and international. All the young adults who work at the Sabeel office are involved in the brainstorming and planning of the conference: Bethany Fullerton, Enas Geraisy, Elizabeth Paxton, Lydia Bartholomew, Jake Weber, Nadia Aranki, Nicola Atallah, Omar Haramy, and Peter Miller. Special thanks to the numerous participants of the Sabeel local young adult program who helped in planning the itinerary and the preoperational work leading to the Conference.



PARTICIPANTS

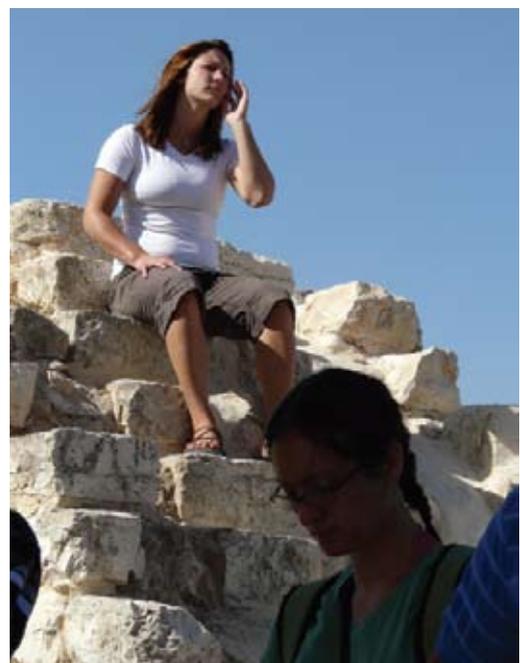


We had a grand total of 40 participants from all over the world. Young adults hailed from Canada, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Israel, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Norway, Palestine, South Korea, Sweden, and the United States.

The participants were a diverse group of people. Ages ranged from 17 to 32 years old. About half of the conference participants were students of theology or ordained clergy. Others were social workers, university students, journalists, photographers, and individuals interested in the Middle East.

All participants undertook an application process before attending the conference. The main part of the application process was writing an essay. The essay topic was on why they were interested in attending a conference focusing on justice and advocacy in Israel-Palestine; What did they hope to gain from this experience; and what ideas did they have for sharing their experience when they returned

to their home country. All applications were reviewed by a Sabeel young adult committee and acceptance was given on the basis of interest and commitment of the applicant.



INVITATIONS / PRE-CONFERENCE PUBLICITY



The promotional committee undertook the responsibility of researching seminaries and theology schools across the world to reach out to interested and gifted students.

Special thanks to all our friends around the world who volunteered to circulate information about our fourth Sabeel Young Adult Conference to their churches, universities and communities.

International Friends of Sabeel helped to put the word out for the 4th International Sabeel Conference. The USA, Canada, United Kingdom, Ireland, Sabeel Scandinavia, France, Netherlands, Oceania, and Germany Friends of Sabeel had all forwarded the Sabeel conference flyers to their lists of friends and contacts.

The Sabeel young adult's promotional committee designed a number of flyers. The flyers were posted on our website, and sent to all previous Sabeel Young Adult Conference participants and organizations that had sponsored participants to previous conferences. A multimedia invitation describing the Sabeel conference through music and pictures was prepared by the committee and used in our promotional effort.

PROGRAMMING

Speakers

- ◆ Bishop Munib Younan – Spoke on the theme of the Conference “Palestinian Christians & the Challenges of Today”
- ◆ Albert Aghazarian - Former Member of the Palestinian Negotiations Team lectured the group about his experiences.
- ◆ Jeff Helper - Spoke on his experience in advocacy work and the challenges that he encounters
- ◆ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs gave us a briefing on the humanitarian conditions and challenges on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza.
- ◆ Rabbi Yehiel of Rabbis for Human Rights - talked about his personal understanding of Israel and a Jewish theology of human rights
- ◆ B'tselem told us about their work documenting human rights abuses in the occupied territories
- ◆ Hebron Rehabilitation Center – toured Hebron with HRC, an organization that is working to revive the Old City in Hebron and return Palestinian families to deserted neighborhoods.
- ◆ Um Kamel - an East Jerusalem resident who lives in a tent after being unjustly evicted from her home to allow Israeli settlers to move in. We were very moved by her words as we sat in the shade outside her tent, which was destroyed by the military the last night of our conference.
- ◆ Mazin Qumsieh - spoke on the history of nonviolent resistance in the occupied territories and shared stories from his experience in advocacy.
- ◆ Village of Sachnin - we met with the Mayor of Sachnin, with Father Khoury, and with the families of young men who were killed during the uprisings of 2000.
- ◆ Town of Shefa'amr - we met the Anglican Priest Fuad Dagher and a number of young adults from the town. Rev. Fuad gave us a briefing on the challenges of non Jewish residents in Israel, with emphasis on the situation of Christians.
- ◆ Omar Tesdell - young American Palestinian who spoke to the group on his experience and academic work
- ◆ Samer Salameh - young Palestinian activist who works on promoting the roll of youth in politics

- ◆ Xavier Abu Eid - shared his personal story as a young Palestinian Christian who chose to come back from Latin America and work in advocacy for Palestine.
- ◆ Cedar Duaybis - an executive board member of Sabeel spoke on Liberation Theology

Tours/Field Trips



- ◆ Jerusalem Old City Tour and the Way of the Cross - we toured the Christian and Armenian Quarters of the Old City with a special focus on Armenian sites.
- ◆ Ein Karem - tour of a Palestinian Christian village that was depopulated in 1948. The homes still stand, but the military prevents anyone from returning to their homes although Jewish Israelis have moved in and have been allowed to stay in the remaining houses.
- ◆ Contemporary Way of the Cross - after walking the traditional path through the Old City of Jerusalem where Jesus walked before he was crucified, we also walked a path of modern day suffering, seeing check points, settlements, and depopulated villages.
- ◆ Israeli Committee against House Demolitions - tour showed the disparities between East and West Jerusalem. Both sides of the city are under the jurisprudence of the same municipality, but tragically fewer resources are invested in Palestinian neighborhoods. We also saw settlements sprouting up all over East Jerusalem
- ◆ Women in Black - we stood at a busy intersection in solidarity with Israeli women against the occupation. We received a range of responses from angry to supportive from passersby.
- ◆ Beit Omar and Beit Safa - we toured these hot spots and witnessed farmers who are harassed by nearby settlers. We spoke with the local farmers. The entire neighborhood came out to greet us, and we saw land and crops that have been recently burnt. Then, on our way home, our bus was surrounded by the Israeli Military. We sang and prayed on the bus while the local villagers negotiated with the military – an experience that is all too common for peaceful farmers. Eventually we were able to drive away, but not without realizing the dramatic affects

occupation has over every aspect of many Palestinian lives.

- ◆ Aroub Refugee Camp - we toured the camp, had a presentation at a local after school program, and ate dinner together with overwhelmingly hospitable and welcoming families. Being with these families helped us to feel the warm, human presence of the friendly people of this land after the frightening interaction with the military.
- ◆ Youth against Settlements - we toured the old city of Hebron witnessing the challenges and difficulties people face from Jewish settler violence and the Israeli occupying forces.
- ◆ Akka - toured the old city by the beautiful Mediterranean Sea

Worship Experiences



- ◆ Opening Worship in the Garden of Gethsemane
- ◆ Daily morning devotions throughout the conference
- ◆ Midnight Mass at the Holy Sepulchre
- ◆ Tour of many ancient churches including the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem, the Wedding Church in Cana, Church of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes in Galilee
- ◆ Visited Holy Sites, following the footprints of Jesus.
- ◆ Prominent local religious leaders spoke with us from multiple Christian traditions: Copts, Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, Melkites and Armenians. We met Bishop Younan, Father Rafiq Khoury, Father Afrayem Orshalme, Father Saleh Khoury, Reverend Kamal Farah, Father Romanos Radwan, Bishop Attalah Hannah, Father Jack Nobel, Father Raed Abu Sahlieh, Rev. Naim Ateek
- ◆ Worship with local Communities: participants were split in groups in the village of Beit Sahour where they joined the local community for Sunday mass.
- ◆ Bible study: Father Rafiq Khoury gave an interesting bible study on the life of John the Baptist. The bible study took place in a Roman Catholic convent in Ain Karim, the birth Place of John the Baptist.
- ◆ Bible study: Rev. Kamal Farah gave a bible study in the traditional place of the First

Miracle, Wedding in Cana, the bible study was conducted from a cultural perspective.

◆ Closing worship with Rev. Naim Ateek at the Sabeel Ecumenical Center

Cultural Events

◆ East Side Story movie followed by discussion

◆ Live Middle Eastern Music at the Kings Tomb outdoor stage

◆ Palestinian Wedding Ceremony and Traditional Debka dancing

◆ Swimming (more like floating) in the Dead Sea

◆ Barbeque Dinner with the Young Friends of Sabeel in Nazareth

◆ Performance by local singer / actress

◆ October's Cry Movie: The events covered in Julie Gal's political documentary October's Cry spring from the angry tide of violence that washed over Israel during the climax of the Al-Aqsa Intifada.

◆ Boat ride on the Sea of Galilee

◆ Time with Families - Participants were split into groups of 5 individuals and distributed to Palestinian Christian families for home made lunch and get to know each other experience.

Volunteer Work

◆ We helped 7 families, mostly elderly people, in the Christian village of Taybeh fix up their homes; We cleaned, painted, and even fixed one roof.

Evaluation / Follow-up

Every participant filled daily evaluation sheets. The participants evaluated every aspect of their day from guides, tours, speakers, meeting halls, meals, to the overall program. Over 400 pages of evaluation sheets have been collected from participants at the end of the conference. Sabeel staff has compiled the information in more simplified sheets to be used as a tool in planning for future conferences.

A separate evaluation meeting among staff was conducted to get the perspective of volunteers and staff on the conference. All the information provided has been helpful.

Evaluation of the conference was largely positive, and with plenty of suggestions and recommendations for future conferences.

A Word of Thanks

Sabeel wishes to express deep gratitude to God and all our friends and partners. The conference would not have been possible without generous support through prayers, commitment to promote the conference, and offering financial support for both local and international participants.

Sabeel would like to acknowledge and thank the following churches, organizations and universities for their sponsorship and support for the Sabeel 4th International Young Adult Conference:

- Alan Weirick
- Bishop Garver Foundation
- Boston University School of Theology
- Claremont School of Theology
- Church of Norway
- Common Services Corporation of The United Church Of Christ
- Daphne Grimes
- Diocese of Lund
- Episcopal Church - Domestic & Foreign Missionary
- Evangelical Education Society of the Episcopal Church
- Iona Community
- Lisbon United Methodist Church, Maine USA
- Mission Covenant Church of Sweden
- Pontifical Mission
- Presbyterian Church of Canada
- Robert Maynard Scholarship
- Svenska Missionskyrkan
- Sabeel Vanner
- TOPIK (Towards Peace in Korea)

"Palestine is a beautiful country with amazing people. I will never forget their hospitality and kindness towards us as foreign people, as well as their willingness to share their stories about the Israeli occupation. During my travel from Tel Aviv to Amsterdam I heard many passengers on the flight talking about Israel and where they'd been and I wondered, "Would they know about all this injustice we've seen? Would they know about the oppression that the Palestinians are facing everyday while we are walking as tourists through Jerusalem, supporting the Israeli government with the taxes we are paying?" The Sabeel conference has greatly inspired me to stand up against every injustice and to tell people about the suffering of the Palestinians. We shall overcome someday." ~ Margriet Westers

