

Journey to Lebanon, Palestine and Israel

The American Board's 200th anniversary

Reflections

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August 21-September 3, 2011

In commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (now the UCC's Wider Church Ministries), a delegation of 13 individuals is visiting Lebanon, Palestine and Israel under the leadership of Area Executive Peter Makari.

Over the years I have been to the region several times, but much has happened on the world stage since my last visit two years ago.

The delegation met in a hotel adjacent to the Newark Airport for its initial briefing and commissioning. From Newark we flew on a much-delayed flight to London and then on to Beirut, Lebanon. After our initial meal at the Casa D'Or Hotel we headed off to bed.



Wednesday, August 24, was our first full day in Beirut.

After breakfast at the hotel buffet, we traveled by 20+ passenger bus through the crowded streets of Beirut to the Sed el-Boushrieh Clinic which provides medical care for Iraqi refugees under the auspices of the Middle East Council of Churches. Three years ago I visited a similar clinic operated by MECC in cooperation with the Greek Orthodox Church. This clinic was being hosted by the Syrian Orthodox Church.

MECC's partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has recently ended so they are having to fund their operations on their own.

The clinic provides medical assistance (social services) and advocacy for refugees.

Several families told their stories:

- One mother told of the birth of their son with a debilitating brain disorder that has not received proper medical attention. Her husband had been a journalist in Iraq and was now a hotel porter. They are trying to emigrate to the US but the process has been very, very slow.
- A father told of how his son had been injured in a bombing (and knifing). He was attacked for being a Christian. One child was kidnapped and eventually released without any ransom. Then the father himself was kidnapped and ransomed.
- Another woman told how her husband had been injured in the shelling and was now unable to work. He had been a guard at a church.
- "My husband is paralyzed" the last woman shared. In Bagdad we ran a liquor store.

All of our visitors are "in line" for emigration. Our hosts shared that it is estimated that there are some 60,000 Iraqi refugees in Lebanon, only 10,000 are registered and another 10,000 are asylum seekers.

A common theme was the de-population of Christians in Iraq. The numbers are in steep decline.

Across the street from the clinic we visited with the Syrian Orthodox Bishop in his chapel. He shared how the Syrian Orthodox were considered a minority legally in Lebanon and therefore not guaranteed a seat in parliament. Instead, one seat is designated to represent several minority groups and a member of parliament appointed to this seat by the government.

He was proud that his church was the only non-Protestant church to be part of the MECC from its earliest days.

The bishop again stressed that since the US invasion in 2003 it is not safe for Syrian Orthodox to return to Southern Iraq, only the north where they are welcomed by the Kurds.

As we were about to leave a UCC "comma pin" was presented which he proudly added to the front of his black robes and was still wearing when we saw him that evening.

The Arab-Christian Dialogue Group continues to provide a setting for leaders in several faith communities to come together to share. One of their members, Dr. Sammad (?) had been to the UCC General Synod in Tampa in July.

A few weeks later he also attended a meeting in Mecca. In Mecca he presented a translated version of the UCC Synod resolution entitled:

Other speakers spoke of the plight of the Christian minority throughout the region:

- “We are a fraction of what we once were...”
- “An alarming decline...”
- “The drain goes on...:”
- “...discrimination...”

“We are a people of dialogue. We feel our mission of peace is in jeopardy more than ever. How do we institutionalize our movement...?”

The speakers continued:

- The context is bigger than the Middle East alone.
- How can we prevent extremism in the region?
- Who controls Israel?
- Western policies have pushed us back to colonial patterns...(scary).
- With the falling dictatorships...the West celebrates...can you advise us so western countries will not confiscate our Arab Spring? Turning it into Autumn?

There are three options for the Christian communities:

- a) Align themselves with the regimes
- b) Align themselves with the opposition
- c) Be non-aligned

No decision is 100% safe.

For Christians, the outcome of the (the Iraq war) has become catastrophic, especially for the Christians. One of the speakers said: I predict the Christians will migrate away from Iraq, leading to more fanaticism...

“It is like a volcano...!”

“Christians have played a special role in the region. We were 18 million, now less... The Christian role has been downgraded and replaced by Islamist and Arabism...”

“There is much dialogue but little understanding...”

This change (the Arab Spring) has come from young people using social media and replacing 30 and 40 year old dictatorships.

Rev. Dr. Paul Haidostian, President of Haigasian University greeted us at the entrance to one of the University’s five downtown buildings. Haigasian has its roots in the American Board’s missionary activity among Armenians.

Paul is a lively gregarious, energetic, leader of the 800 – 900 student campus. 40% are Muslim, 40% Armenian, 58% female, 30 majors mostly BA/MA and a \$6 million budget. The school receives the equivalent of 8 or 9 full scholarships through the endowments administered by Wider Church Ministries and is affiliated with the Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches. Most students are recruited by word of mouth.

In a small auditorium on campus President Haidostian presided over a four-person panel which focused on celebrating (commemorating) the 200th Anniversary of the American Board (ABCFM) which played a hand in the founding of the University and also sent missionaries around the world. He noted that ABCFM is the story of Christian faithfulness (part of God’s story among us). ABCFM’s story is not just an Armenian story; it is an act of radical love, and includes (in the case of the University) the impact on the recipient of education. “New seeds” follow from the Old Mission (Haigasian University is still being realized and fulfilled).



The panelists included Ken and Betty Frank (UCC Global Ministries personnel in Turkey), Rev. Dr. Mgrdich Karagoezian (President, Union of the Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East), Dr. Peter Makari (Global Ministries Area Executive), President Haidostian and myself.

The panelists topics followed the subjects suggested by the organizational affiliations. I shared “Lessons Learned from the American Board Massacre of 1847: 14 dead, 50 held hostage...” This presentation outlined the work of the American Board in Old Oregon initially among the Nez Perce, Cayuse and Spokane nations which abruptly ended with the massacre of two of the missionaries and a dozen others at the primary mission site near present-day Walla Walla, Washington. My outline was distributed to the group and is attached as an appendix.

Back on our trusty bus we drove up into the mountains to the Armenian Union’s camp for dinner under a tarp suspended between the trees in the cooler air high above the city. (The camp was acquired in the 1940’s and was occupied during Lebanon’s Civil War from 1975 until 2002 by various military units).

During dinner Rev. Barbara Kerschner Daniel and I were seated with President Haidostian and learned that the University is seeking to develop an international partnership with a UCC-related school in the US. Imagine our surprise when we discovered that that school was Hood College just a few blocks from

our homes in Frederick, Maryland. Meetings concerning the possible relationship are scheduled in Maryland later this month, while we are still traveling.

The University is also developing two new research centers: 1) An economic justice center in collaboration with the Mennonite Central Committee and an Armenian Diaspora Research Center. In conjunction with USAID the school has recruited 65 students who ordinarily would not have higher education opportunities.

After dinner we headed back to our hotel. It had been a long, full, day.

August 25, 2011

Peter Makari briefed us on a recent American University of Beirut survey on refugees in Lebanon which showed some 260,000 – 280,000, ½ under 25, 2/3 in camps and 1/3 in “gatherings.” Poverty is greatest in the camps, 66% jobless with the others only able to work in a limited list of jobs.

At Sabra-Shatila there was a massacre of some 2000 [1982] in the camp (Christian Militia allied with the Israeli’s and overseen by Ariel Sharon.)

We bussed through the city on our way to the camp. Our guide shared that she’d grown up in this neighborhood. I grew up here, she said. The neighborhood is called Hamra, which means “red”. The color of the soil. “Now my house has been torn down and a skyscraper built over there. Beirut is overbuilt. It’s just not the same...”

I had visited the DSPR (Department of Social Services to Palestinian Refugees) three years earlier. Their program is essentially the same with job training classes in hair cutting, cosmetics, electronics, TV repair, computers, etc. They also run an elementary school, the last of 15. Clearly funding cutbacks have hindered their efforts.

From DSPR’s offices we walked through the nearby refugee camp. Given Ramadan it was quieter than before although the bazaar and alleys were full. Conditions in the camp are basic, wires and pipes dangle in all directions, the streets are narrow and dusty, buildings are expanded vertically because land is scarce...it is amazing that the camp does not boil over in these basic, limited conditions.

A group of gypsy women approach us and beg for money. Several have very young children draped over their arms. Our guide dismisses them with disgust.

As we exited the camp we visited the site of the massacres.

One of our group recounted: How many bodies in the street will I step over knowing the story of the Good Samaritan?

Shortly thereafter our bus deposited us in front of a bright, modern restaurant where platters of food soon greeted us. The contrast from the crowded conditions of the camp was striking.

Staff from the Armenian Evangelical Union of the Near East greeted us at their headquarters and shared the story of the early ABCFM missionary activity among Armenian communities. The tragic Armenian genocide began in 1915, at that time the majority of the population in Eastern Turkey were Armenian.

An ABCFM missionary, Harry Riggs, provided funds for the construction of an Armenian school. The funds had been saved for his daughter's education, but she died before they could be used.

There are currently 25 or 26 congregations affiliated with the AEUNE with similar numbers in the AEUNA (North America). Other "unions" exist in the former Soviet Armenia and in Europe.

"Tell your folks back home: you might not feel it very much but we are connected (to the UCC). In this age of DNA mapping we are discovering that we all are connected....Islands are connected...under the water."

When asked, our host responded that, "I am in fear for freedom in America."

"When the king thinks he is all powerful, he will fall." "America will face new difficulties in the future." So too will Israel.

Who controls the media?

"In Iraq, the only people losing their land are the Christians."

The young people working with the Forum for Development Culture and Dialogue (FDCD) were a delight as they shared a powerpoint with us at our hotel conference room. Through a variety of programs they work for dialogue among young people from a variety of neighboring countries. Their topics include citizenship and human rights, peacebuilding, youth conflict resolution... Conferences, camps and social media contacts have been among their strategies.

Their energy and enthusiasm electrified our group.

Our discussions of the Middle East were interrupted by word that yesterday the Presbyterian Synod had met to discuss possible withdrawal from its relationship with the Presbyterian Church (US) in light of the PCUSA's decision to ordain gays and lesbians. The Mexican Presbyterian Church had already acted.

The Synod has just recently agreed to ordain women.

Consideration of the resolution to withdraw was delayed for two weeks.

We met with the head of the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches which started in 1924 as the Near East Council of Churches.

A coalition of Congregational, Reformed, Lutheran and Methodist churches has formed to advocate for the ordination of women.

She prayed that there was enough peace in our region in order to allow us to fulfill our vision... In light of this year's difficulties there has been a reluctance to meet due to security concerns and fear. "Arab Spring may be a very long season."

Another challenge has been the underground missionaries...sneaking into the region...some not very underground, especially in Palestine, Jordan.... Their impact has not been positive.

She left us with a paper detailing their programs.

August 25, 2011

Our morning devotions included a time where we each added one word as the developing prayer went around the circle.

Soon thereafter we boarded our familiar bus for an hour-long drive south and west into the mountains. The road twisted and turned as we ascended the steep ravines with ancient orchards and villages clinging to their walls. At a hairpin turn the horn blew even louder than usual to warn on-coming vehicles.

In our briefing we learned that the Druze played an important role as a "minority" within the Lebanese government. The Shia and Sunni portions of the government were about equally divided. Where the Druze went to form a "coalition" formed the majority for a government.

At the top of the hill was an ornate palace built in 1800. It reminded me of the Alhambra which Carolyn and I visited while she was on her sabbatical. The President of Lebanon was in residence. Visitors roamed the grounds under the watchful eyes of "secret service" guards and military personnel. Still I was amazed at how close we were to the President, his guests and the official offices after we had only been screened by the most rudimentary procedures.

It was Friday, the Muslim holy day, Druze leaders made exception and came to visit us at their offices a short drive down road. Their leader, called a Sheik, is joined by another Sheik and two assistants. One assistant continually serves us coffee, cookies and juice throughout the meeting. He takes great care not to "touch" any of the women in our delegation.

They are a sect of Islam which incorporates influences from other religions and described themselves as "Unitarians." Their sect is a peaceful one which accounts for their participation in the dialogue groups.

"If a human being does not dialogue with others...the person loses his/her own existence."

“In most instances wehre you find fanatics, you find people who are not interested in love of the other. Most are interested only in self-interest. No place in religion for the extremist. Druze cannot be suicide bombers.”

“Search for truth through your own religion.”

“We believe a savior will come as a savior for the world and...we believe we should prepare our hearts for the savior’s coming, not the establishment of a new nation.”

The Druze explain that they are a unique small community in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Isreal. They express a strong sense of national identity with their host country and often are trusted to serve as border guards in Israel. “Druze did not leave during or after the *troubles*,” and had close ties with the Brits.

At age 15 their sons make a decision whether or not to pursue becoming clergy, otherwise they are a closed community that outsiders cannot “join”. There is no “ordination” as we know it.

Without skipping a beat, both Shieks pull pocket phones out of their billowing clothing and respond to text messages...

I slept most of the way down the hill from our visit with the Druze as we headed for a very warm greeting from Mary Michael...at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut. Mary treated us to lunch and conversation in her “President’s apartment” on the 5th floor of the school. She will be leaving at the end of September following 15 years.

Today the school includes Armenians, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Lutheran in its student body. Mary spoke with special appreciation for the school’s roots with its Congregational and Presbyterian founders.

NEST has trained 95% of the pastors and Christian educators in the region. After September 11, 2001, they no longer received students from 15 countries who were banned from studying at NIST.

Now they are helping build bridges with Iraqi Christians, 50 have been trained thus far. We try to teach: justice, righteousness and freedom.

“We stand between what we learned and what we see.”

“America is one-sided about Arab-Israeli issues... America lets Israel do what it does...why the double standard?”

Mary (she is Syrian in background) comments that she has just returned from a one-day meeting in Syria. She traveled in and out of Damascus without difficulty.

Syria, she comments, has experienced one party rule for 40 years...security and freedom was phenomenal. The ruling party is the smallest in the country and they rule with an iron fist. Minority freedoms were respected. The uprisings have been near the borders.

One irony of the “iron fisted rule” is that so many weapons have suddenly appeared. How did this happen? You can only reach one conclusion: corruption.

“Reform (by the government) has been met with more violence. Implementing reform takes time. This is a one million piece puzzle.”

In our debriefing that night we learned of the complexity of the situation and that many of the Christian groups support the current government in Syria during the current crisis as a “better option”. Had we gone to Syria, in addition to the security concerns (not necessarily shared by partners) we might have been placed in awkward, potentially compromising, situations.

UCC missionaries in Turkey Ken and Betty Franks shared a powerpoint on the ABCFM mission in Turkey which was initiated during the Ottoman Empire as a religious mission. With the fall of the Empire in 1914 the mission became a “secular, humanist” mission in order to comply with the new secular government’s requirements.

In the 1960’s the initial steps were taken to turn over the mission and its extensive operations fully to a Turkish foundation established for this purpose. Just last year this was fully accomplished. “SEV now has full operational responsibility for the hospital, publishing, and the school. It’s a big operation.”

Instead of taking our bus for a late-night trip to dinner at a sea food restaurant we decided to eat at an “Italian pizza” place across from the hotel.

August 27, 2011

The Casa d’Or Hotel had become our home for our week in Beirut. At 6:15 A.M. we boarded our bus for the last time and headed for the airport.

Following a long and cumbersome security and check in process we boarded a Middle East Airlines flight for Amman, Jordan. After clearing customs, obtaining transit visas, and collecting our luggage we headed for the border with the West Bank.

Once there we discovered that it was closed on the Israeli side. It had been due to close at noon and it was now 11:30.

We were in and out of the bus three times. Conversations took place with various officials as we stood with our hand luggage in a corner of the normally chaotic border terminal. Happily three busses of Indonesian tourists (Pastor Reuben’s group) also found themselves stranded at the terminal.

Normally crossing here is a chaotic scene where you arrive at the terminal in one vehicle, clear customs, board a second bus to the Israeli checkpoint, clear Israeli formalities and the board a third vehicle on the West Bank side. Frequently, the busses are lined up for hours waiting their turn and the terminal is a sea of humanity.

In the end the tourists, a few others in the terminal, and the tourist group were permitted to travel across the Jordan River to the Israeli checkpoint on the other side. Once there, we were escorted through the VIP side of the terminal “as the 11 Americans.” The Indonesian group went into the other side which was also basically empty...

Our processing was swift and without difficulty...it was the easiest transit into Israel that I have ever experienced.

Once back in the now-familiar bus we headed for Jerusalem and St. George’s Guest House about an hour away. After dinner and settling in our rooms, several of us headed toward the Damascus Gate of the Old City. As we approached it was dark and the Muslim faithful had begun to emerge from their family Ramadam family dinners to the carnival-like atmosphere at the Gate.

One of our group scouted ahead and found a way for Bob Molsberry’s wheelchair to navigate down to the gate and enter the Old City itself. The stairs and bumpy cobblestone proved to be quite a challenge but the experience of being in the midst of the crowds was exceptional. Finally, we came to the airport-style security at the entry to the Western (Wailing) Wall Plaza.

Mostly, we simply stood in awe and observed the sights and sounds of the faithful at prayer. Bob, Dave and I headed down to the men’s side, donned temporary headgear, and mingled amidst the unfamiliar men near the wall. Some rocked, others seemed to weave, several waved their arms in excited gestures, and mostly they ignored these strangers who had dropped in from some other planet.

This intersection of Judaism, Christianity and Muslim faiths is always an amazing place to be.



August 28, 2011

Each member of our delegation has been taking responsibility to write in a blog. These daily summaries can be found on the Global Ministries website. On Sunday, August 28 (the same day Hurricane Irene went up the East Coast), it was my turn to write. Reprinted below is my submission.

Sunday’s blog...August 28, 2011

The 9:30 A.M worship experience at St. George's Cathedral (Anglican) in East Jerusalem was truly a cross-cultural experience as our group of UCC members fumbled with the unfamiliar hymnal, prayer book and order of worship while participating in a service which was both in English and Arabic.

The Cathedral's pastor, a recent graduate of Virginia Theological Seminary, reflected on today's text from Matthew 16 and then joined in celebrating communion with Bishop Dawani. In his English summation he reminded us that our faith is not to be self-centered, we are called to care for others beyond ourselves.

Echoes of his words filtered through our day as I pondered them knowing that I would be writing today's blog. How do we live this out in this context?

Here three great Abrahamic faiths intersect in a matrix of relationships and conflicts perpetuated over the centuries. Last night and again this afternoon we visited the plaza in front of the Western (or Wailing Wall). There Israeli young people gathered in their military uniforms with their machine guns to gleefully be photographed in this Holy space. The sight in this place for prayer and devotion was incongruous and jarring.

Our day was mostly spent touring in and around the Old City. In an ancient tomb at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, our guide shared the story of how the eight groups in charge of the church lived with a "status quo" agreement. Apparently the light bulb in an ancient tomb had burned out. It provided the only light. Two of the eight Christian overseers of the property called the Jewish staff person at the government ministry to complain. Neither Christian caretaker group could do the obvious. The staff person, in turn, contacted the Muslim key-keeper and the key-keeper and the Jewish staff person replaced the light in the middle of the night. The next morning the staff person called the two Christian overseers to say there was "no problem," the light is working.

The analogy to the present realities in these sacred lands is obvious...how can our ungodly behavior toward one another be replaced through dialogue, cooperation and collaboration with light?

It has been remarkable to see our 11 person delegation of UCC'ers move through this experience...we have repeatedly climbed in and out of the bus...disassembled and reassembled Bob Molsberry's wheelchair and marveled at his skill in overcoming obstacles...eaten unfamiliar foods and gathered each day to share devotions and reflection. Truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience for most of our group. Many thanks to Wider Church Ministries and Peter Makari for sharing his experiences and contacts with us.

The full blog can be found at the Global Ministries website.

As we shared a glass of wine on the patio of the guest house I turned on my American cellphone. I did not anticipate that it would work, but within seconds I received two text messages and a "roaming"

signal. It worked – as the “free” text said, for \$2 per minute. But at least it worked...and I was able to call home and learn that our family had weathered the hurricane well.



August 29, 2011

Our day in Jerusalem included four content-laden stops at:

- The United Nations Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
- The Department of Services for Palestinian Refugees
- The Jerusalem Interchurch Center
- The American Jewish Committee

We had barely made it into a conference room at the UN offices when our speaker asked if she could proceed with a 90 minute powerpoint presentation. In her presentation she made it clear that the crisis which this UN agency was documenting was one made by humans which could be resolved. The issues she included covered: the denial of basic human rights by Israel, security, land loss, housing and livelihood.

Gaza is a small place where the majority are refugees, under 18 and poor who receive food aid. Even though Israel withdrew from Gaza, she noted that the international community still considers Israel as the occupier of Gaza because Israel “controls” Gaza.

She described the Gaza blockade in two parts—the first three years and the last year and a half. Crossings are limited and one key location for the transfer of goods is isolated and ill-equipped. Other supplies continue to come in through tunnels between Gaza and Egypt. At the height of the blockade they estimate there were some 600, now just 200-300.

While some goods are getting into Gaza, the movement of people has been severely limited. Missed doctor’s appointments are common, due to problems at the crossings. The majority of the population cannot leave. They have no place to go. It is collective punishment—there has been no recovery of the

economy or improvement to livelihoods and no easing of the movement of people. Israel's response: "this is economic warfare."

The need for housing is not being met, many continue to live in the bombed out ruins. There is little access to basic services. 90% of the water is unsafe.

The conditions make it such that people risk their lives for work—i.e. taking dangerous jobs working in the tunnels.

In Gaza, she states, there is a basic denial of human rights resulting in an 80% dependency on aid.

The way forward:

- Lift the blockade
- Provide safe access
- Protect Civilians

Now, in Gaza, Israel is clearly violating International Law, but there is no mechanism for the enforcement of International Law.

The powerpoint moves from Gaza to the West Bank and she is able to one by one add overlays to show the impact of settlements, the separation barrier, the division of the West Bank into sectors—A, B, and C, etc. (In A&B the Palestinian Authority has some control and the areas are generally built up. In area C Israel retains complete control).

They estimate that there are now 500,000 settlers in the West Bank, 200,000 in East Jerusalem alone. "Settlements are at the heart of this humanitarian crisis."

The separation barrier which snakes around and into the West Bank is 60% complete and an additional 6% is under construction.



In the closed military zones there is a ban on construction and 25% of the West Bank is covered by the ban.

There has been no significant change in Israel's policy on closures and there is shrinking space in the West Bank for Palestine to develop.

Among the humanitarian issues are home demolitions. Some 5000 home demolition orders have been approved...only 13% of East Jerusalem is left for Palestinian development.

Access to water and medical care are also limited.

There has been a large spike in violence between settlers and Palestinians. Settlers now control 40% of the West Bank.

Israel has plans to relocate thousands of Bedouin tribespeople to other locations. They will lose their traditions and livelihoods as they are awarded ¼ acre plots.

The UN offices recommendations:

1. End home demolitions, evictions and forced displacement
2. Enable safe movement and access to land
 - a. Demolish the barrier or reconstruct it along the Green Line
3. Protect civilians from violence and harassment

Much of the documentation (including the interactive maps) is available at UNOHC webpage).



Bernard Sabella is the head of the Middle East Council of Churches Refugee Services Programs, a professor at Bethlehem University, and a Christian member of the Palestinian Authority Council (the parliament). We met in his offices not far from St. George's and adjacent to the American Consulate.

He prefaced his comments by noting that CBS 60 Minutes is doing a show on Palestinian Christians and has asked him to participate. Over the weekend he had been reviewing data and statistics in order to prepare for his interview.

He sees Palestinian Christians as part of the answer, a vehicle to talk about the future.

The current religious experiences (including Glen Beck's visit last week), instead of opening things up have shut them down. "Palestinians are not perfect, but the current political situation is unjust."

"Yesterday there was an attack on a police check point in Tel Aviv. Violence either way is unacceptable!"

WE FEEL STUCK.

This is a hopeless Palestinian – Israeli tragedy.

He does not feel the PA should be going to the UN next month for recognition of statehood unless there is a viable peace process in place. One that stops settlements and honors the 1967 boundaries.

Going to the UN we are damned if we do and damned if we don't.

Negotiations are going no place...over the last 20 years. Ramallah is no longer a nice little town (its rapidly growing into a modern big city).

The Intifada was a cardinal sin...the suicide bombers weakened our Israeli allies and the Israeli left is now in shambles. We have lost the middle ground and today there is very little cross-dialogue...dialogue by itself does not get us anywhere. The Separation Barrier is a statement (by Israel) that they really don't want to talk to us, it redefines borders and allows for no freedom of movement.

Israel is proud of its two big construction projects—the airport in Tel Aviv and the wall.

The greatest thing we could do would be to truly make Jerusalem a bi-national city.

The plusses of going to the UN is that we could have the instruments of a state...we already have the government apparatus—ministers, ministries, etc.

In this the US is trying to make us look bad. Rarely do Congressional delegations meet with Palestinian leaders....PA lacks leadership, too.

If you want Hamas, you get Hamas. AIPAC (American Israeli Public Affairs Committee) is bolstering Hamas.

If Abbas, Fatah's leader, does not go the UN he will be damned by our people.

He then told the story of settler violence, where settlers rolled large boards down the hill at night to trample the crops of Palestinian farmers below...

Referring to the prolonged Arab Spring he commented: If you are not careful changes in the region can become Anti-Israel. America and Israel are doing little. Israeli's and Palestinians have grown apart – we are living in two separate worlds with the stereotypes of each other.

Maybe we will have a miracle – but whose?

“I blame the current Israeli government...their preconditions for new conversations are totally unworkable.

- No discussion of refugees (and the right of return)
- No discussion of East Jerusalem

The Palestinian refugee communities (camps) have “settled down.” They are virtual neighborhoods, with a sense of permanentness...but the residents are still refugees...with all of the limitations which that implies. In reality in Gaza, Jordan and Lebanon the camp conditions are not so great...

He does not believe the overwhelming majority of refugees desire to come back (and cited a Harvard study).

Today Israel is a “feta comple”

Most Arab Spring uprisings have been for internal purposes NOT Israel or external things and NOT religion.

Demonstrations are unlikely now—Palestinians are not excited about demonstrations...

He told the story about a young friend who assumes a different personality when he is a soldier...the young man said: “I am a different person when I am a soldier...”

If he could raise a magic wand:

- The 67 borders would serve as the basis for the two states
- Settlements would be negotiated
- The city of Jerusalem would be an open city'
- Refugee rights would be negotiated
- Gaza and the West Bank would be one entity

Fatah is to blame for its loss of power...it did a miserable job...remember, too, that Hamas did not get a majority either. Fatah is secular; Hamas is essentially for Islamic law.

Now there is a high level of coordination between the Palestinian Authority Police and Israeli authorities.

Gaza Strip cannot economically support itself.

Asked about good news sources he suggested: Palestine Monitor, MAAN and Beadel (on line)

This is a stalemate...

Obama has proven to be a weak President.

With a wide grin Sabella proudly accepted his NY Fire Department hat as one of our gifts in gratitude for our time together.

David Rosen, AJC

We visited with David Rosen, AJC's International Affairs and Interreligious Affairs executive at their offices in west Jerusalem.

He noted the work of the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land which exists to keep lines open, combat insightment against the other but has failed to produce peace and reconciliation.

"Ironically we did better with the Bush administration. No single rep. of the Obama administration has met with the religious institutions of the Holy Land."

The political leadership here (in Israel) will not take the Council seriously until the (U.S.) administration does.

The solution is quite simple: Clinton's parameters... but we have an inability to get there...the sides are distrustful of the other. Things are now worse than at the time of Oslo.

The average Israeli wants simply to get on with life in the world of the PITS (Post Intifada Trauma Syndrome). Reaction is exaggerated as a result...

Ironically the Mitchell initiative provided less access.

There is plenty of time to resolve this...but time is not on Israel's side. The demographics will eventually lead to a Palestinian majority within Israel. "If we maintain a Jewish state when we are no longer democratic..." "If not democratic, then we are not Jewish." We must respect the dignity of all individuals.

The danger is in the creation of a South African like situation.

The political solution: Oslo accords, '67 boundaries plus swaps, address settlements, redraw boundaries to include Arab populations which wish to be part of the new state, respect the right of Jews to live in the West Bank, resolve Jerusalem's status pragmatically.

Don't address the sovereignty of the Temple Mount...access is the issue.

The Israeli right wing is extremely insecure...

The Israeli left is pathetic...for the time being there really is no Israeli left.

Key issues: Trust: alienation, get out of zero sum mentality, Israel will never be secure unless Palestinian question are addressed...including the establishment of a state.

We need to care about the integrity of both...there are those who care for both of us...

A positive sign: the collaboration between Augusta Victoria Hospital and Acedosa (sp) Hospital.

Rabbi's for human rights are about constructive engagement...

We return to our rooms at St. George's...about two blocks away from the Demascus Gate...it is the end of Ramadam...horns blare, fireworks go off...cars zip around on the narrow streets and some kids take over a small garbage dumpster and use it to ride up and down the hill...before dumping it unceremoniously into a vacant lot. Its around 3 in the morning when things finally quiet ...

August 30, 2011

Rabbi Bill Burke was the coordinator of the AJC-Hartman Center program I participated in in 2008 and 2009. He jointed our group for breakfast at St. George's and rode with us back toward his West Jerusalem neighborhood. He continues to work as a consultant for Hartman while also working as a consultant for a group tour travel agency. It is good to see him and share recollections of those summer experiences.

Bill had taken a taxi toward St. George's but the driver left him blocks away and pointed him in the wrong direction. His visit to St. George's was a new (and positive) experience. He'd been unaware of the guest house and its facilities. Our bus pulls into the familiar compound of Bethlehem's Y in Beit Shour, a branch of the East Jerusalem Y... this is my third visit to the facility which receives support from UCC offerings.

The Y has a long history of relief efforts...working with the victims of conflict. Their vocational ed. Program is accredited by the Palestinian Authority. The rehab program for victims of the conflict began in 1989.

Their residential program has been replaced by outreach programs in various West Bank locations.

A home renovation program makes houses more accessible. At one house they Y built a ramp for a woman shot at a checkpoint. The woman used to frequently visit her neighbors, so they built ramps too.

They also do assessments of people's abilities...and use a wholistic approach to counseling...as they design a rehab plan.

They serve two main groups: those with physical disabilities and victims of violence/political conflict...they've also trained groups in Colombia and Peru.

Another emphasis has been on children who are ex-detainees...some 700 per year are arrested by Israel Defense Forces...they are 12-17 years old. Israel still engages in torture...and are legalizing mild torture tools...to encourage collaborators.



The average time for children in prison is 147 days...trauma and hero complexity...and radicalization.

The Y starts by working with the family to anticipate the child's return to make the home a welcoming place rather than an expelling place.

....

On the eastern slopes of the Jordan valley many are displaced. Israel has declared this to be a military zone...but the military zone is being offered to settlers...including Bedoin (sp?) land. The IDF pushes the shepherds out and blows up their cisterns and wells.

The Y uses the EMDR therapy technique to work with victims.

...

We are Christians, love is the core of Christianity, the core of our belief. We are not missionaries or evangelists. We are Palestinians...we are the indigenous people of the land. We believe in non-violence and international law. We care about our nation/our homeland.

“The UCC resolution regarding hostility toward Muslims was very helpful...”

The IDF shelled the Y building in 2001 and 2002. It has been rebuilt, but the piece of shrapnel remains in the side of the piano as a reminder.

Two main things Israel is doing: 1) building facts on the ground and 2) hiding its crimes (contradicting international law).

“Put your fingers on the wounds of the Palestinians...”

Funding is the main headache for doing this work...there's no USAID funding now...

The Y in the USA opposed their work...

Nader Abu Amsha is the exec of the east Jerusalem Y...

...

As we tour the facility we visit the Olympic pool....complete with the smell of chlorine...somehow it seems so out of place amidst the stories of conflict and torture.

We clear the checkpoint and head into Bethlehem's central core for a visit to the Church of the Nativity. Several "guides" approach us to offer "tour services"...one sees Bob in the wheelchair and offers a way around the line (which is now crowded with tourists off of a Haifa cruise ship). It quickly becomes clear that if Bob can maneuver his way down the steep stairs we can carry the wheelchair down the exit stairs to the bottom to greet him right in front of the shrine which commemorates Jesus' birthplace.

It works. I grab the front of the chair, Louie grabs the back (it really didn't need two of us), Bob goes down one step at a precious time, he kneels at the birthplace star, kisses it and we repeat the routine going back up. Amazingly the crowd parts to accommodate our maneuver...and the rest of our group is allowed in through the exit as well.

We wandered through the tourist shops that line the square in front of the church. Not too many tourists, though. On a lark, I try the Bank of Palestine ATM to replenish my supply of American dollars. Upstairs an older man works in a small booth, ornately carving crosses by hand. He invites me into the booth to see his work...it is impressive. Slowly I realize its all part of the "sale" and the sale price is way out of my range.

Pastor Mitri Raheb greets us at Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. He's been the pastor for 23 years. CLC is the oldest Lutheran Church in Palestine. It was started by Germans around 150 years ago—first as a school and then out of the school a congregation. Today the church has 220 members and the school 300 students (51% of whom are Muslim). It is a youthful congregation with few elderly.

Unemployment is 30%. 40% for youth.

In 1995 the church began its outreach program. Today it has 100 employees and 2000+ are served—media, leadership development, religion & the state... Three countries are featured—Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel.

"Identity is at the heart of what we have here—we have to know where we come from—this not static. (We) don't want folk to feel too comfortable in the role of victim. Trapped in a need to cope with Israel—therefore the focus is on an approach to our identity (as Palestinians)...transforming people from thinking they are spectators to empowering them to be actors.

Most of the time people from western countries are part of the PROBLEM not spectators...

We need an experience of conversion...transforming people to become part of the solution.

We focus on the relationship between art and identity...our whole region is searching for a new identity. Is the Israeli-Palestinian quest/conflict a short sprint or a marathon... I'm not sure it will end. In this environment it is very important to learn how to breathe...culture has a therapeutic aspect. Art is an alternative way to deal with depression. (He cites a Hopkins study that 80% of Palestinians are dealing with depression.)"

Where does he get his energy: from a sabbatical...family and youth catching a glimpse of reality.

"Most folks look through a 60-100 year window. I look through a 2000 – 3000 year window that includes the Bible.

When did we really have peace in this region?

Bible addresses—how can you survive if you are constantly being crushed.

His political analysis is pessimistic: We are heading toward the most sophisticated apartheid system in modern history....

What's the difference between optimist and hope? Hope is not what we see, its what we do... We are very hopeful because we can do!

"Congress sacrifices its own values in order to be re-elected..."

The Christian community in Palestine may be the strongest in the region...there is an emergence of a fundamentalism out of a crisis of hope. ..without hope you create a very dangerous situation.

He met with a Jewish group...US Jews were OK with civil rights, but now in this context they have turned away...

Has the U.S. forgotten what peace is? For 100 years it has engaged in one war after another.

The Bible is a brief for hope...because it was written in the most hopeless situation.

CLC's three foci: 1) media/arts; 2) health: wholistic/preventative health and 3) college with focus on art, dance, media and life-long learning.

Is this apartheid or reservations—Israel even added a casino at the entrance to Jericho.

In this new apartheid—roads now serve to separate. Israel confiscated the land from a Christian family for a road and now it will not allow them to drive on it. 80% of the water goes to the settlers. There is no freedom of movement.

Israel is using the worst combination of Apartheid, Reservations, Walls and Segregation...they are trying to make it "so perfect."...creating a mindset to accept these realities. This is the worst scenario you can think of...a frightening reality... A visiting African delegation kept saying this is worse than apartheid.

Two members of the WCC's Ecumenical Accompaniment Program join us and tell us of their work monitoring the border crossings. One is from Colombia, the other Norway.

Our bus stops on a side road that has been blocked by large piles of dirt. The road leads to the Tent of Nations, where a Palestinian Family seeks to retain their land against the threat of confiscation from Israeli settlements which now surround them on the nearby hills. The multi-generational family has carried out a valiant non-violent campaign to retain their land...against the odds...with the support of volunteers, visiting groups, etc. Our host, a young man, is one of nine children. They collect water in cisterns, use solar electricity...

They are resisting against the odds...there are now 50,000 settlers in the area but only 10,000 Palestinians.

This is a political crisis, he states...not a humanitarian problem. The government tempted us with dollars, they cannot force us to leave. We are trying to be self-sufficient.

"Peace should grow as an olive tree. Cared for closely in its first three years..."

He told the story of a settler that came down to visit and while there realized that they had no running water but she had a swimming pool...to her horror...just a short distance away.

Their village is trapped inside Israel's walls... The bus stops at a gap in the 30 foot wall...Jerusalem is on one side, Bethlehem the other. We walk around trying to imagine what it must be like...once the wall is complete, the community (Al Aljare) will be cut off from itself. Residents will need permits to travel, there are no medical facilities, the school has a demolition order... "The plan is to displace people by making it impossible for people to stay..."

The village has lost about 70% of its land.

On our way back to Jerusalem, the EA Accompaniment team takes us to a checkpoint where we leave the bus and "walk through" as if we were Palestinians.

The place is deserted because of the holiday. To get to the booth you walk through a long hillside walk that is fenced on each side...its claustrophobic... You try to imagine the crowds on a work day trying to get into Jerusalem...tonight the place echoes...

As we approach the first gate, it becomes clear that Bob's wheelchair will not fit through the turnstile. He asks the young guard to open the gate. The guard declines.

I join in helping "carry" Bob through the heavy metal fenced turnstyle... as we are walking across to the terminal on the other side another guard appears who walks Bob around the formalities...

With our American passports, we simply walk through without hassle...past numerous booths and unused crowd control lines...

Our bus is waiting on the other side...and we offer a ride to young tourists heading for central Jerusalem.

August 31, 2011

Just a few blocks north of St. George's is the YWCA where Mira Rizer is the executive. She is also a member of the Global Ministries (UCC/Disciples) Board representing this region.

Mira notes that the wall of their building is shared with another house that "is being confiscated." The whole neighborhood has been targeted for confiscation. She adds that Jewish international organizations and corporate fronts have been using a 2020 plan to create a "green area" with housing, shops, etc.... which equals a mass exodus of Palestinians and confiscation of the land.

The long term goal is a unified (Israeli) Jerusalem. How long can people resist? The PA has no authority over East Jerusalem. The YW is a critical presence...not sure what the cost is. Palestinians now have 10% of what was offered in 1947.

This is not a conflict about Israel-Palestinians alone...this is a regional problem when refugees are factored in.

What about water?

This is a complex occupation, therefore dismantling it will be complex too.

Her powerpoint notes that the Palestinian population is around 11 million...45% are refugees, 40% are in Palestine. Gaza has the highest density in the world.

One million refugees were created by the Naqba in 1948. Today there are 7.1 million... A key is the right of return...and full recognition of rights.

Now there are ½ million settlers on Palestinian land...

The whole system works toward the occupation...

Palestine lives on foreign aid...

Women's safety a key issue...fear...violence...including domestic...humiliation...indignation... female labor lowest in world 16%.

As Christians how long can we stay as we see Palestine decline?

We get taxes with no benefits, no mobility for staff/volunteers and economic deterioration.... Our West Bank staff has never been permitted to visit... There are YW facilities in Jerusalem, Ramallah and Jericho and in two refugee centers.

Global Ministries has been a long-term partner in the camps.

Our vision: An Independent Palestinian democratic state where all live in peace: Justice/peace/equality.

Our goals: improve conditions for women and promote equality.

They work in four areas:

- 1) Women's economic development
- 2) Promoting women's and gender rights
- 3) Youth leadership (few women in political arena)
- 4) Children's education and cognitive learning: If we can keep a smile on their faces, we can keep hope alive.

After September the situation may regress. The US will veto the statehood resolution in the UN. What are the implications of this? Hard to keep optimism in the face of September.

Israel is not really interested in peace. They'd have to give up something. How will Israel start losing?

She sees two positives: The Kairos document (prepared by Christian leaders in Palestine) and BDS (very cautious). The Y has supported the BDS campaign.

"There has not been an injustice which has continued forever..."

How can you create a state under physical occupation? Deliver services without resources?

Three foci: Jerusalem, Settlement/land and Water...

Intefada was positive in one respect: people were driving the process and had ownership/vision. The PLO has confiscated the vision. We need a people based strategy and say what we want.

We cannot wait until someone comes for us. Who is the government and has responsibility to deliver?

This is a long-term process...start at the base...she fears the young are very frustrated.

August 31, 2011

Jean Zaru is the clerk of the Ramallah Friends meeting. Jean hosts us at her home in Ramallah just across from the Palestinian Parliament building.

She notes that Israel has all the benefits of the occupation but none of the responsibilities. We do not want to legitimize the occupation and ignore what's happened...the reality is that they underestimated the people.

We know the problems and the potential...don't want to fall into a trap...given the intransigence of Israel. I will never reconcile myself to hopelessness. To achieve justice or peace you have to work for it.

The Quaker community in Ramallah is getting smaller due to deaths and emigration. There is no evangelization. The Anglican Bishop is technically living illegally in Jerusalem...he's from Ramallah. Israel considers Christians as part of the problem...and exclude Christians from dialogue.

Why does the US ignore its own laws when it comes to Israel? Using US dollars to support the occupation?

Christians here are perceived as remnants of the crusaders...

She's been in dialogue groups for 35 years...gets pressured...Israeli authorities told her she was on blacklist...

Israel tries to get the last word...

Medical appointments are frustrated...her's was for breast cancer..."The permit was for her, not for her car..." They set the rules to make life unbearable for Palestinians.

I am trying to say I exist. They are saying we don't.

The cry of Palestinians is a lamentation... This is a death without arms because of the structures...

The closure of Jerusalem cuts us off from Christians there, Bethlehem and elsewhere...

Family life is the source of community and support—and that's been cut.

Back at St. George's we meet with Rev. Drs. Samuel and Nohemi Pagan, Global Ministries mission personnel in Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

They have been serving for 3 ½ years in Bethlehem...translating, teaching (Spanish , Hebrew Bible, tour guide background...).

Generally Hispanics who come to the region have the perception that all Palestinians are terrorist Muslims.

This is not totally a religious problem...it's a political problem. The occupation is the issue...and the related military structures needed to maintain it.

The State of Israel is a dysfunctional government...so is Palestinian government...

Gaza is medieval... West Bank more modern, complete with corruption. The issue of security is irrational...

Alan Butha's parallel to Apartheid:

- 1) Come to Middle East and discover normal Christians living here
- 2) Christians have been here for 2000 years ...The Day of Pentecost took place here...there is an ecumenical mandate to engage and support ministries with the churches here.

We need to distinguish between Biblical Israel and the constitutional political state of Israel.

(see Daisey Mercado, Sociology of Borders, walls: Mexico and Palestine; the same company is building both border walls).

Distinguish:

- 1) Now and Biblical times
- 2) Right of people of Israel to be here
 - a. Respect and affirm
 - b. Jews have always been here, back to David
- 3) Post Holocaust ideology
 - a. Israel as place of new exodus out of Europe
 - b. A religious experience for people
 - c. A land with no people, for a people with no land...
 - d. The vast majority of Israeli Jews are Europeans...not Oriental Jews

With no sharing, there will be no peace...

Once national security is touched all else stops... Does Holocaust trump all else?

U.S. needs to say this is it! Complexity of Israeli society will not allow this to happen from within.

An image: dead stones vs. living stones...

September 1, 2011

We are greeted at the offices of BT'Selem , the Israeli human rights organization in Jerusalem.

1/3 of their work is documentation

1/3 promoting accountability (investigations and forwarding info to authorities)

1/3 public education/advocacy

Now using video (small cameras) to promote local communities as advocates for human rights.

Big issues now:

- 1) September UN vote
 - a. Prospects of violence
 - b. Regular demonstrations now at about 10 locations
- 2) Settlements
 - a. New map will show expansion when issued next month
 - b. Boundaries now extend almost all the way to Jericho

42% of West Bank is now settlements...Jordan Valley has been declared state land...a problem diplomatically and politically.

There is a two tier legal system: one for Israeli's (civil courts) and one for Palestinians (military courts).

Roadways and water are restricted...

The separation barrier: what is its real purpose? Route?

- 3) The closure of Gaza
 - a. Very different than West Bank
 - b. Isolation
 - c. Military occupation in West Bank; in Gaza its military siege and economic strangulation.

How do you argue with God?

God made a promise to Abraham. But that promise has very little to do with the State of Israel, a secular member of the UN.

Oslo is a complicating factor. It created the PA and divided the West Bank into areas. Areas A&B are now effectively the same. Today Israel goes everywhere with impunity

Hebron and south are very poor, marginalized populations of Palestinians...

We use cameras as a deterrent to violence.

The reason the house is on fire is the settlements...

Oslo ignored human rights on the ground.

Political issues in Washington are divorced from reality on the ground...

End the zero sum game

Our office opened in DC at same time as J Street...are some things opening up?

Never again: What???

Obstacles to peace:

- 1) The land (WB)is ours
- 2) WE want peace, they don't (stuck, like Camp David)
- 3) Pessimism/burned out
- 4) Demographics of Palestinians

Little chance of shared peace...

Visit to Sabeel, Naim Ateek

We visited the Sabeel Center for Palestinian Liberation theology...the new streetcars zipped by out front...but they don't stop here...

Sabeel is putting out a statement on the UN vote...

Christians in area were 10% in 1947, now they are 1%

When we went back to church after the Nakba we read the Bible differently...ancient stories came became here and now alive... What's God's will?

Naim: reading the Bible with Palestinian eyes...religion is part of our identity...

Non-Jews are presently an absent people. A lost people... strangers in our own country, spiritually as well...

We waited for a solution and we are still waiting.

We are divided about the UN vote...

Negotiations have failed, we are at impasse. We are in trouble either way (UN vote).

In reaction Israel has annexed settlements...disrupted foreign aid, disrupted tax money and there have been no negotiations. The situation is fragmented.

Palestinians are divided into five groups...

- a) 1.5 million live in Israel
- b) West Bank
- c) Within Jerusalem's limits
- d) Gaza (a big prison)
- e) Refugees

There is no room for refugees were they to come back...

Options:

- 1) 67 borders
- 2) Jerusalem shared
- 3) No return of refugees
- 4) Recognition of Israel as a Jewish State (a denial of our narrative)
- 5) Agreement regarding Jordan Valley

Why go to the UN? US will veto...

Predicts annexation of settlements if UN votes

PA is calling for non-violent demonstrations

Another opportunity for Christian Zionists...

We read the Bible in a different way...they read Israel as God's plan.

Israel wants to retain oversight/management...take all land...keep occupation/security/settlements

Israel claims to be a democracy and a Jewish state, the two don't go together.

There have been 8 big conferences on this...

The restrictions of youth, jobs, education...have been furthered...everything cut off...

But, the Jewish community is not monolithic...

There needs to be Christian atonement for Holocaust and acknowledgement of Jewish empowerment.

Try to keep hope alive within youth...Olive picking has its place...

This all hinges on the position of the US, very important for future of peace.

We are doomed unless US takes a more positive position...Government of Israel wants a stable solution. People in US government are in a collision course with the State of Israel...then there won't be peace...and justice will have been trampled by US and Israel. Ideal is one state.

We ended our time together with communion and a meal.

A guide from the Israeli committee against home demolitions takes us for a tour of the wall and settlements. We see first hand how the wall cuts through historic neighborhoods and is now graffiti strewn...

The wall creates a giant prison...cages for Palestinians...our guide is an Israeli woman who refused to serve in the military....she says there are more Jews in East Jerusalem than in West Jerusalem. Palestinians cannot get building permits...Israeli's can. The expansion of Jerusalem is slated to cover a much broader area..

The wall is dividing Palestinian communities...if you end up on the wrong side you lose your Jerusalem pass.

The bus stops so we can take pictures of a demolished home...it is still rubble after seven years...

Bishop Dawani is the 14th Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem. The early focus of the Anglican mission was the evangelization of Jewish people.

There are three distinct aspects to his ministry:

- 1) Pastoral: in the context of a tremendous decline in the Christian community
- 2) Institutional: medical facilities, schools, rehab facilities, etc.
- 3) Ecumenical and interfaith relations to promote peace/reconciliation

Most Christians who leave are well to do. They decry the limits on access and want the freedom to move. Peace will start from Jerusalem....Jerusalem is the city of the resurrection, city of hope as well.

The Bishop's primary concern is the health of the churches...

Note: my room at St. George's is just across a narrow alley from the offices of the Diocese...the Bishop's office. His residency status in Jerusalem remains unclear.

Friday, September 2, 2011

This is our last day in Israel and its my turn to lead the morning devotions which started with Peter Paul and Mary's folksong about being in search of the promised land from a music file I found on my lap top. I then shared the story of how I had once used the first versus of Isaiah 10 at a Public Utilities Hearing and many of those present did not believe "Woe to those who issue tyrannical decrees, who cheat the poor among my people of their rights and rob the widow and maim the orphan...what will you do on the day of judgement... Where will you hide your riches?"

As seek to model peacemaking in this tumultuous region I invite our group to add their words for peace and conclude with either "selah" or "dianu" >>>

We end our final devotions with the words from Thomas Merton's prayer:

MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

- Thomas Merton, "Thoughts in Solitude"
© Abbey of Gethsemani

Our bus is waiting to take us on the short cross-town trip to Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust Museum. I have been twice before and anticipated a somber, powerful experience. I was not disappointed.

Once inside it became clear that while the museum's process of weaving visitors through the history and horror of the holocaust remains unchanged, the technology employed has been updated and improved. Flat screen monitors throughout the displays tell the ghastly stories of the survivors.

After three hours we are back on the bus in search of a place to eat. The three-day Muslim holiday is in its third day and its getting close to the Jewish Sabbath. Most shops and restuarants are closed. Eventually we enjoy at Middle Eastern feast at "Christmas Hotel," just a block from St. George's.

Our afternoon was free. After a quick nap, I headed for the new streetcar line station not far from St. George's. During its first two weeks of operation the sleek, modern, "trams" were operating for free and they were crowded

with Jews and Palestinians alike. I rode to City Hall in Israeli Jerusalem . The streets were deserted, it was like Christmas Day in a closed shopping mall.

From City Hall I headed back into the Old City, bartered for a table cloth for the office and a communion plate to replace one that had become broken. With my treasures in hand I proceeded to walk in a big circle before finding the familiar path to the Old City Gate where I had entered.

Following our 'last supper' on St.George's patio we boarded the familiar white Mercedes bus with its Israeli plates and multi-lingual driver for the ride to Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. The bus breezed through the perimeter screening at the airport but at each additional step various individuals from our group were singled out for "additional screening." In the end, double and triple humiliating searches over, we all headed to the gate.

Every seat was full as Continental's flight 91 pulled away from the gate.

Before leaving Jerusalem I write contacts in the Administration to offer to share my perspectives. We have exchanged emails and had one brief conversation with more promised for later. September 20th is ever-closer, the UN debate and its consequences is now front page news but clarity still seems to be lacking...

JRD final

