

## Pax Christi International Pilgrimage to Palestine, November 2025

Following the Pax Christi International Global Gathering in Florence last month, a small group of five of us from England and Wales, the US, Italy and Germany travelled to the West Bank, Palestine, to attend the Kairos Palestine Conference and the launch of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Kairos Palestine Document. Between us we also took the opportunity to visit projects, travel to meet communities suffering extreme violence from Israeli settlers and military and to spend time with Pax Christi partners and friends in both Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

I first visited Palestine at Christmas 2004, just after the 2<sup>nd</sup> Intifada, with a small group from the UK which joined a Pax Christi Dutch group and have been visiting frequently ever since. Our visit then was organised by **the Arab Education Institute**, a Pax Christi Partner in Bethlehem.

We stayed with families, who have become our friends, and they shared with us the realities of the Intifada and its effects, the curfews, the shootings and the sniper injury of the children's father, having to sleep on the concrete floor under the stairs every night and the endless violence, fear and uncertainty. We listened to the stories of the youth group and the women's group. Stories of theft of land, denial of movement, medical emergencies, difficulties in getting to school, college, university, hospital and work and so much more. It was a huge learning experience that has not left me - they taught us so much.

Over the years, on return visits, we have heard how the effects of the occupation have increased drastically and this time the stories were the worst ever. We met again in the SUMUD Story House which is a few minutes walk from Checkpoint 300, a vehicle and pedestrian checkpoint on the edge of Bethlehem. The Checkpoint has been 'developed' further and has many digital machines to check identity - but apart from one Palestinian family who were turned back - and of course the armed guards - the two of us were the only ones going through to Jerusalem. The woman on duty behind the glass screen went to town on checking our passports, taking photos of us on her phone and generally being awkward - but this is as nothing to the treatment any Palestinian will be given. Most Palestinians in Bethlehem can no longer go through as Israel has revoked all work permits and is denying many others.

At the AEI we met with staff and members of the Women's group members and listened to their stories of the present situation - and it is the most depressing I have ever heard from them. It is clear that the violence in Gaza, that we have witnessed on our screens, has spread to the West Bank and the viciousness of the armed Israeli settlers and the military shows that they can act with impunity as no one calls them to account. There is a tangible fear in the West Bank and Israeli military incursions happen every day and night all over and in the little town of Bethlehem that we have in mind at this time. Few have a 'deep and dreamless sleep' as they listen to the army vehicles trundling past and watch and wait to see where they will stop and whose houses they will invade and trash and who will be taken away, shackled in plastic ties, to an Israeli military post or prison. I well remember seeing this happen one night a few years ago when visiting a town further north. It's as if the people and the stones of the buildings hold their breath and then there's the aftermath to deal with.

But in the midst of everything, Palestinian warmth, welcome and hospitality is always unwavering. So, we were, of course, treated to a delicious, typical Palestinian meal, prepared by some of the women and eaten as we reminisced and shared stories about past visits.

The also discussed the way that Palestinians have always insisted on, and put their faith in, the need for the Christian families to stay, rooted on their land and to be a presence in Palestine. This has come at considerable personal cost at all levels. The present situation of extreme violence, increasing annexation, almost total lack of employment and no income has led to many more families leaving. 200 Palestinian Christian families and many individuals have left Bethlehem and about 4,600 Christians have left the West Bank. The young people say that there is nothing for them or for their children - so how can they stay. It is actually difficult to know how anyone survives in Palestine. Every single act of daily life is challenging or impossible. Teachers and others employed by the municipalities are not paid as Israel is not passing on to the PA any taxes they have collected. It was very good to be back but very sad that Bethlehem was so empty as shops, cafes and hotels were mostly closed as there are so few people going there.

In addition, the olive harvest was a disaster this year due to the drought. Some families did not bother to collect the olives as it was not worth it. That, on top of the violence and theft of the Israeli settlers and Military. For many it has not been worth taking the olives to the local press - even if they could get to it.

Before we left we were able to see some of the nearby Wall Museum where metal posters on the Separation Wall tell the stories of members of the AEI and enable anyone walking down from the CP, or in Aida Refugee Camp, to read very short stories that are very moving. In 2015 the final act of our Pax Christi International Global Gathering was to walk along the Wall and to stop, read a story and pray before celebrating our final Mass together at Wi'am. Sadly the posters are now very faded, and some have been damaged or attempts made to peel them off. Putting them up was a very prophetic, courageous and dangerous act of witness. For me, since we first encountered it, Walking the Wall has always been an act of Pilgrimage on every visit.

Walking this part of the Wall brings us to the **Wi'am Conflict Transformation Center** where the staff are also long-term friends and after coffee we were able to have an orientation update from their roof. It saddens and angers me to see the automatic skunk water machine on top of the Wall and to know that foul smelling streams of this water, and sewage from the local settlement, are deliberately targeted on the garden and children's play area - as recently happened at a children's birthday party. From here we went to nearby Aida Refugee Camp and visited a Youth Centre. We walked through the narrow streets and saw the way the very small space allocated to refugees in 1948 has developed over the years. The walls are painted with parts of the declaration of Human Rights - most of which are denied to those living there - and with the names of the villages from which the families were removed at the time of the Nakba. I'm always moved by the way young people, who have never seen their family's former home, will point to a name and say, 'This is MY village.' It is always heartening to see some of the messages and hopes on the walls and to see the way in which some homes have flowers and vegetation growing, giving splashes of greenery in such a 'grey' environment. Despite the cramped conditions and the lack of resources I marvel at the many

creative projects in Aida Camp that take care of young people and use art, drama and music to give them opportunities they would never otherwise have.

Another group I always try to visit in Bethlehem is **The L'Arche Community** Day Centre as it is real joy to be with them and share the very caring environment that has a well-established, safe, secure and structured daily programme. Along with shared meals, community prayer and music, everyone's birthday is happily celebrated. We joined them for just a short visit this time and were able to see the wool that is bought from local shepherds, cleaned and carded and made into felt that is then made into the lovely felted goods that many of us recognise - cribs, sheep, angels, purses, bags and slippers. Of course we couldn't resist buying things to take home with us. Sadly, like every group in Palestine, they are very short of funds to continue their important work but it is possible for them to send goods abroad.

As I write, it is 15 years today on December 10<sup>th</sup>, Human Rights Day, since I arrived in Jerusalem with two colleagues from the UK, to join Group 38 of the **Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel**, a group of 20 international volunteers who would for three months live and work alongside communities suffering extreme violence from Israeli settlers and military and work alongside Palestinian and Israeli Peacemakers. I was, therefore, very glad to be present at the poignant Handover Service, in the Orthodox Chapel of St Thomas' in Jerusalem, where our Group 38 had lived for a week while taking part in our additional training.

Members of EAPPI Group 100 were handing their work on to Group 101 and each of the leaving Placement Teams stood in turn on the altar with lit candles and passed the light to the Team which has now taken over their placement. A very ecumenical group of clergy each gave a short input, all of which were realistic, challenging and encouraging. There is no doubt that the International Protective Presence is needed even more than ever but again EAPPI are seriously short of funds and there is a need for financial support from churches to ensure that Accompaniers can continue to be sent as Human Rights Observer.

Another favourite visit is to the **Comboni Sisters** on the Mount of Olives. Usually I go with them to visit the Bedouin Communities which live on both sides of the Jerusalem to Jericho Road and live lives of great poverty and are constantly subject to settler violence and threats of forced removal. Sadly, this wasn't possible this time but it was good to hear the work continues but it is impossible to know how long the families will be left there as annexation has already become a reality in that area. The Convent is surrounded by the Israeli Wall but their kindergarten continues and is a life line to the local families. The Sisters told us of the recurrence of incursions by Israeli soldiers and of how they faced up to and challenged them while the soldiers insisted that this was their land, their building and they had every right to be there and that the Sisters had no right to be there. There are few Sisters there now but I have great admiration for their work with the poorest of the poor and in local bridge-building with Palestinians and Israelis. They are a small but very joyful, strong and courageously persistent group of women.

Throughout our short visit we offered what solidarity we could and heard the pleas for others to visit. We heard much that was depressing and it seemed so inadequate to say that we constantly do whatever we can to try and change the inhumanity that we see and hear from our seemingly

immovable governments. Even more embarrassing was to hear the pain and condemnation of many churches for their silence or for their weak statements and apparent lack of action in solidarity with Palestinian Christians and indeed with all Palestinians who are suffering untold injustices.

The words of our friends and of the whole Palestinian Christian Community are sobering and are encapsulated, by **Kairos Palestine**, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Kairos Document. We were privileged to attend the launch alongside delegates from 20 different countries, to bear witness to the call to us all from the Palestinian Christians. It was wonderful to meet up with so many friends there but salutary to hear the Kairos Presenters saying that they had failed with the 1<sup>st</sup> Kairos Document. It is NOT them who have failed but the rest of the world, and in particular many churches of the West, who failed to respond seriously to the call in 2009, or worse, ignored it altogether. The message of Kairos Palestine 2 is very clear and comes from 'the heart of the assault on Gaza.' It speaks of a cry of hope in a time of genocide and of renewing faith, hope and love in the darkest moment. **We cannot and must not ignore this call. We must read, digest, discuss and respond to this call now.**

As we wait, during this time of Advent, I am conscious that the Palestinian people have waited for generations for the ever-increasing darkness to be lifted and for the promised light to become a reality in their lives. This can only happen if we join their call for justice and actively pray and work alongside them in their nonviolent resistance - and hope against hope - because we know things can, and must be different.

Ann Farr

10<sup>th</sup> December 2025