

**Perspectives On The Holy Land
Conference of Bishops' Visit
January 2009**



He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

Isaiah 2:4



“O house of Jacob,
Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”
(Isaiah 2:5)

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

It has taken me some time now to gather my initial thoughts concerning our trip as The Conference of Bishops to the Holy Land. The experience was and is so large it will continue to keep me pondering over many things in my heart.

These initial thoughts are meant to let you in on how this trip affected and impacted me.

One trip to a land that is thousands of years old does not make me an expert. One trip can open one’s eyes and broaden ones perspectives.

As always, it is my hope and prayer that we might be in dialogue about anything in this report that interests or concerns you. Collegial conversation is a foundation that strengthens Christian community at every level.

You may wish to read the two appendices I have attached to this writing before you continue. These reflections are my attempt to be ‘self aware.’ It seems best to me that we try to name our opinions as we present to one another. The godly language of “truth spoken in love” is enhanced by honesty and disclosure in regard to biases we have collected along the way.

GOALS FOR THE CONFERENCE OF BISHOPS (C.O.B.)

As a group, we stated three major frames for our presence:

Accompaniment
Awareness
Advocacy

Accompaniment meant that we were there to walk “with” and “beside” our sisters and brothers of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and The Holy Land. (ELCJHL) We were there to experience, listen, learn and observe. We were not there to “fix” things.

Awareness meant that there was a strong hope that our perspectives might be both deepened and broadened by our visit.

Advocacy will mean many things to many people. For me, it meant that we might be able to encourage and speak out for peacemaking throughout the lands of Israel and Palestine and indeed, the entire Middle East.

LAST MINUTE CANCELLATIONS

At one time 60/65 bishops were set to travel to the Holy Land. The five who announced early that they could not attend had major commitments on their schedules before we had set the dates for this journey.

In the last days, 14 more bishops decided not attend. Some felt intense family pressure over safety issues. Some felt that the meaning of our trip would be lessened by the Gaza events.

I had personal access to each person's reason for staying back. Each person has my full support for doing so. Great care and much painful reflection led to their decisions to stay back for now.

What started as an unfortunate reality will turn into a new and exciting hope. Those who did not attend, plan to travel and will visit as a group at another time in the near future. This will renew our vision of 'accompaniment' with our sisters and brothers of the ELCJHL.

I feel our promise to come as a 'whole group' remains intact.



TWO STRONG REACTIONS

The trip to The Holy Land stirred two deep emotions for me...
humility and sadness.

It is humbling to ponder...

- ~Thousands of years of human conflict.
- ~Hatreds deeper than mercy's reach.
- ~A 'holy' land torn by 'un-holy' human pride.
- ~My own ignorance of the facts and events.
- ~My biases that cloud or guide my views.
- ~How America and Americans are viewed.
- ~Peacemakers who sacrifice much for small signs of hope.
- ~The freedoms I have that I take for granted.
- ~The luxuries I have that I take for granted.
- ~The biases of non-Americans which are deeply held but as unfair as mine.
- ~The layers of history that cover the land where Jesus walked.



It saddened me beyond words to...

- ~Hear thoughtful Israeli's site the Holocaust as the reason for their actions now.
- ~Hear thoughtful Palestinians site ancient atrocities for their actions now.
- ~See that wall every day.
- ~Reflect on how Jesus wept for Jerusalem.
- ~Experience Abraham's children forbidding one another from 'holy' sites.
- ~See how the Gaza incursion seemed to invoke despair for many I met.
- ~Know that gifted Palestinians are leaving the land.
- ~Know that young Palestinian people have little hope for careers.
- ~To see nations judge Israel without offering a meaningful solution of their own.
- ~Think how little has changed here since Jesus' day.



THE WALL



One cannot visit The Holy Land without observing, sensing and feeling deep reactions to the dividing wall that dominates the landscape. In some places it is concrete and reminds one of the sound barriers along highways. In other places it stands like a fortress; imposing, impenetrable and stark. In other places it is fence and wire. There are spots along the border (very few) where no wall yet exists.

My comments on the wall are comments on how it exists on Palestinian soil. Though experts cannot agree on the exact numbers, all agree that much of the wall is on Palestinian land. Imagine a neighbor erecting a fence through your property cutting you off from your back garden. It matters not whose safety is being tended when you are cut off from your own land.

The wall is certainly meant by Israel to secure its safety. I support that intent. However, one can sense and see that it has gone far beyond that goal. Examples of what I experienced are listed below.

~A 70 year-old man is surrounded on three sides by the fence. This land has been in his family for 6-7 generations.

~One can stand on The Mount of Olives and see the wall snaking out into the countryside to grab a hill for a tower, guard a brand new highway to a settlement and cut off Palestinian neighborhoods from their olive orchards and their fields.

~One can view the sacred land from the tower of Augusta Victoria Hospital and see how Palestinians are cut off from health care that is essential for all humankind.



~Entire business districts in Hebron and Bethlehem are dead because the wall immediately cut them off from their access to free trade in their markets.

~Movement is not only monitored; it is impaired, restricted and forbidden without explanation.

~Maybe 100 yards apart, a mother and daughter have not seen one another for over two years because the wall stands between their two homes.

I never saw or experienced the wall that separated East and West Germany. The joy the world experienced when that wall came down is still a vivid memory. While gazing on this wall my heart was heavy and I felt a sadness that was dark and deep.

Clearly, the wall is a tool of apartheid. It is not just for safety. It excludes, diminishes, scars and burdens the path to peace. It is cutting off the best hopes for both ancient peoples.

I make no call to tear down the wall under the current circumstances. I do and will condemn the wall as it stands in Palestinian territory and the many ways it has become a tool of aggression and separation. It is a cruel and terrible reminder of the power of human sin.

CHECK POINTS



Though we made several passages through the check-point system there still is no way to sense what the Palestinians go through every day. Our worst delays were like getting in the wrong line at the grocery store. Sure, it raises one's blood pressure and may take two-three times longer than it should, but eventually all is well.

Guarded mostly by young adults who would be in college in our country, the passage through the check-points ranges from capricious to vindictive. I can try to imagine that one could become inured to it all but that is difficult. If you had to prove yourself every time you went to work, school, shopping, visiting and the hospital how would you feel?

We were asked to get off our bus one day. There were about 40 of us on that bus. We were stopped because we were coming from Bethlehem back into Jerusalem.

As I stood near the very back of the line a young woman with four little girls came up behind us. Folks at the front of our line motioned for her to move in front of us. She went through the initial check point about 40 minutes ahead of me. She was still being held up as the last of our group passed through.

As was often the case, when someone found out that 'Western Christians' were in the line we were whisked through without even a thought of seriously looking at our passports. At least three times we were guided around the metal detectors entirely.

For us, a minor inconvenience. For Palestinians an event that could change an entire day and maybe even a life.

As a small group of us planned our bus trip to Tel-Aviv and our flight home we were well aware of the need to allow four hours because of security. Our bus driver was anxious. He was with five of us as we toured the Qumran caves and Masada earlier in the day. He begged us to allow two more hours for the passage. We reluctantly agreed wondering why he was so agitated.

Soon, we knew. As we arrived at our first check-point it was blocked. Though wide enough for two busses to pass, guards were allowing only one vehicle at a time. A small car with a lone female was being held up.

We were the third vehicle in line behind the woman and one other car. For the next 45 minutes there was no movement. Countless vehicles stacked up behind us. The guards and the woman were actively frustrated with one another. Our bus driver buried his head in his hands but kept silent.

After the long delay we (again as 'Western Christians') were held for a while but then quickly offered passage. As happened often, our passports were not even checked.

Once through the check point the driver, a Palestinian Christian, heaved a huge sigh of relief. We passed the car of the woman who was now being detained. He told us "We are lucky tonight. The Guards must be in a good mood. When they get it in their heads to block a check point we can sit for hours while they deal with one person like that."

I have long made peace in my heart with the impersonal and sometimes demeaning need for check-points as we travel by air. The check-points in the wall are experiences that most of us have never felt or seen. I can see the issue of safety we are trying to address at the airport. It is hard to see that it is only safety that guides the check-point system in The Holy Land.

ARAFAT'S TOMB

We understood that we would visit **Yasser** Arafat's tomb. We were there to 'accompany' our friends in Christ of the ELCJHL. This was their wish. It seems to me that Arafat is their 'George Washington.' Who am I to say that the person they revere is unworthy of my presence?



I admit to you I was uncomfortable. My feelings for the man are not as positive as that of our hosts. This was not the time for me to make an individual statement.



In some ways it balanced our trip to the Holocaust Museum where a wreath was also laid.

Bishop Hanson, with a keen awareness of the situation around Arafat's tomb insisted a wreath be laid at Rabin's tomb as well. Mark cared very deeply about the 'balanced perspective' wishes of many in our group, including me. His leadership was excellent and appreciated.