

## Letters from Overseas

### Susan Palmal Writes from Israel/Palestine

Hello, Friends in Canada:

February 2010

Much to my surprise, privilege and pleasure, I arrived back in Israel and Palestine on January 2, 2010, for a second term as an Ecumenical Accompanier (EA) with the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). This time I have been placed in the holy city of Bethlehem with a team comprised of a Swedish man, a Scottish man, and a Swiss woman. All of us are at the same age and stage in life, which makes for a harmonious group, something one hopes for when living, eating, and working with three strangers.



Following an orientation period, we wasted no time in getting started. Our tasks for the next three months will include human rights monitoring at the Gilo Checkpoint (CP); visiting with people in many villages with a focus on An'Numan and Jubbet Adh Dhib; supporting Christian churches in Bethlehem, Beit Sehour, and Beit Jala; accompanying schoolchildren at checkpoints in An'Numan and Tu'qua; giving English classes in Aida refugee camp; and in general supporting the International Committee of the Red Cross/Red Crescent, United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and various NGOs around Bethlehem.

Gilo CP watch seems to be our most challenging task at the moment. We followed in our predecessors' footsteps, arriving at the checkpoint at 4:45 a.m. to monitor the situation. Some 600 Palestinians were gathered in the queue waiting for the 5:00 a.m. opening, some having been there since 2:00 a.m. Some sleep on pieces of cardboard cartons; some build fires in the queue to keep warm. The checkpoint is basically a steel cage funnelling into a turnstile at one end. Once through the turnstile, Palestinians are required to present their permit to work in Israel to an Israeli soldier sitting in a booth. The next step in the process is to line up to pass through a metal detector, and the final step is to show their ID card and place their hand on a bio-metric handprint reader at another booth with another soldier. They can be turned back at any step along the way and not get to work in Jerusalem that day. The whole process can take from one to two hours on a good day, a lot longer on a bad one.

Twice in our first week the CP was opened when we arrived and the soldier said the CP had opened at 4:00 a.m. The Jerusalem EAPPI staff asked us to go an hour early to monitor and report on the new opening time. So four times per week, we are up at 3:20 a.m. now!

There are some striking differences between Tulkarm, which I experienced from November 2008 to February 2009, and Bethlehem placements. The most obvious difference is the Western/tourist influence in Bethlehem. Hijabs (the headcoverings worn by some Muslim women) are not as commonplace here, even though the percentage of Muslims living here has risen lately. The figure we have heard is that only 16 percent of the population in Bethlehem (mostly concentrated in the suburb of Beit Sehour) are Christians, with the rest being Muslims. It is sometimes difficult to verify the statistics we hear; we rely on UN figures. Of course, in Tulkarm, being largely a city of farmers in the north of the West Bank, people tend to be much more conservative and traditional in their ways. In Bethlehem, huge tour buses are the order of the day. I don't imagine Tulkarm has seen a tourist in a very long time, if ever. And restaurants—plentiful in Bethlehem, not so much in Tulkarm.

Interestingly enough (based on anecdotal evidence only), many of the problems are the same: restrictions of movement, no right of return for refugees, high unemployment for the Palestinians, high financial cost for Israel, and psychological cost (according to Breaking the Silence, an Israeli organization of ex-soldiers) to youth in Israel who have no choice but to serve in the army in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt). The financial cost to the Israelis is obvious to all who visit the West Bank, with hundreds of CPs manned by soldiers at every turn. The effects of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories is damaging to both Palestinian and Israeli societies alike and must somehow be brought to a peaceful conclusion.

Yes, peace in Palestine and Israel: continue to be hopeful and pray with us.

Susan Palmai

*To learn more, visit Susan's blog (<http://susansojourn.blogspot.com>) and view photos of EAPPI work (<http://unitedchurch.smugmug.com/IsraelPalestine/IsraelPalestine-EAPPI>) taken by United Church accompaniers.*

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