



SABEEL
Second International Young Adult Conference
“40 Years in the Wilderness...40 Years of Occupation”
19th – 29th July 2007



CONFERENCE STATEMENT

These things I will think over in my heart, and therefore I will hope: the mercies of the Lord never come to an end, his compassions never fail; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion' said my soul, 'therefore I will wait for him.'
Lamentations 3:21-23

Conference Summary

The 2007 Sabeel Young Adult Conference drew together over forty young adult participants: internationals, local Palestinian Christians, and young adult staff from Sabeel. Participants were Canadian, Colombian, Dutch, Norwegian, Palestinian, Swedish, British, Arab-Israeli, and the largest group was American. The Conference was truly ecumenical with representation by a wide range of Christian denominations. In addition to regional and religious diversity, the conference was made up of doctors, musicians, lawyers, students, accountants, artists, seminarians, ministers, and NGO workers. The participants each brought their unique perspectives to the Conference community. In the midst of diversity, unity was derived within the group from similarity of age and a common call for awareness, justice, and strength of hope for the future.

Conference activities were varied, combining fact-finding, interaction with the local community, observation of the situation on the ground, receiving lectures, engaging in solidarity actions with both Palestinian and Israeli organizations, experiencing Palestinian culture, and joining in Christian fellowship.

A number of important speakers representing organizations including the UN, the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), The Bethlehem International Centre, and the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD), to name a few, addressed the Conference. They focused on important issues including the history of the conflict, the humanitarian situation, violations of International Law, refugees and the work of groups currently active in the area.

The main purpose of the Conference was to gain a *real* and *personal* insight into Palestinian life, during this fortieth year of Occupation. It is our emotional and spiritual response to these experiences that will form the basis of our future advocacy work and calls for justice, peace, and reconciliation.

The internationals and most staff were afforded freedom of movement through the possession of foreign passports, though on several occasions Conference participants chose to stand in solidarity with our Palestinian brothers and sisters, whose movement is restricted, by passing with them through the checkpoints leaving Ramallah and Bethlehem. The negative psychological impact of these places cannot be underestimated and the daily reality of such an experience was shocking to all of us.

A very powerful and emotionally dense day was spent in Hebron during which, many components of the Occupation were witnessed by all. We observed the scale of 'the Wall,' we saw unequal segregation of roads divided by barriers, and crossed a checkpoint manned by young soldiers who were given the power to decide which worshipers could access their holy site that day for prayer. During this experience, many in our group witnessed a young Palestinian boy being beaten at the checkpoint and we were constantly aware of the ways in which the Palestinians among us were pulled out for ID checks and verbally abused by soldiers.

An encounter with one Israeli settler woman during a CPT tour proved to be an awakening experience. After seeing our Conference group, accompanied by EAPPI, legally walking down Shuhada street, an area of Hebron appropriated as a settlement, she drove very slowly through the middle of the group, trying to intimidate us. Parking, she got out, produced a camera, and proceeded to take photographs of the group all the while yelling insults in Hebrew. Soldiers, whose mandate in Hebron is to protect the settlers, then approached our group and began to check IDs during which time one Palestinian participant was arrested. A military police jeep was then present for the rest of our time in the settlement area. This hostile and disturbing action took place in front of the

settler's children and we were conscious of the fact that in the settler's effort to dehumanize others she also dehumanized herself. For all of us, this was a moving and upsetting experience.

Our experiences reflect the reality of life in Israel and the West Bank today (we were unable to visit Gaza). Though many were indeed negative, some revealed a great non-violent resistance to the Occupation and an inspirational continuation of Palestinian life and culture in the face of oppression. For many Conference participants, the cultural evening in Ramallah with sport, food, conversation, and Dabka was refreshing and an expression of hope. Similarly, we have been warmly received by all the Palestinians we have met, and the level of hospitality has been overwhelming. Few of us could imagine being invited to share coffee with refugees in their homes at Aida Refugee Camp or being given food by people whose employment is unpredictable and are prevented from travelling the few miles from Ramallah to Jerusalem without a permit.

In the face of occupation and oppression, resistance is to be found in those who seek education for their own people. We encountered so many for whom learning is seen as the key to a better future. Our experiences of those who provide economic (rather than financial) support for the Palestinians were positive and speak of the real possibility of a viable future. We have seen that dealing with the humanitarian crisis must be a top priority alongside resolving the political difficulties and ending segregation.

Outcome and Call to Action

- We, the 2007 conference participants, support the work of Sabeel and will seek to further the message of ecumenical liberation theology which promotes justice, peace, and reconciliation in Palestine and Israel.
- Based on our experiences, we commit ourselves to bringing about a truer representation of the conflict and real human situation in this land. As witnesses to the injustice, it is our duty to break the intentional silence imposed by much of the mainstream media. We call for the end of the Occupation and the segregation and discrimination which it entails, to make the people of our homelands and of the world more aware of the realities we have experienced firsthand.
- In the spirit of the Palestinian people, we will share our experiences when we return home. As young adults who are in touch with technology; we have at our disposal a great many communication tools including websites, blogs, and podcasts to get our message out beyond our immediate personal contacts. We embrace these opportunities as especially relevant to our ever-changing world, and endeavour to use them to reach out.
- We affirm the Human Rights due to all people of the world, and especially to our Palestinian brothers and sisters, and condemn the actions of the government of Israel which contravene International Law. We will continue to campaign for these violations to end and for real justice, peace, and reconciliation. As participants in this Conference delegation, we will petition our representatives on a local, national, and international level to the best of our abilities.
- It is our sincere hope that many more pilgrims will come to this land not only to bear witness to their Faith, but to stand in solidarity and be united with the Palestinian people. We pray that their hearts may be moved to action for justice which will bring about peace and reconciliation.
- We will engage with active non-violent resistance to the Occupation. At all times we will bear witness to the God of peace and follow the example of Jesus Christ, which is one of active non-violence.
- We affirm our faith in the risen Christ and stand alongside our Muslim and Jewish brothers and sisters who join us in praying for justice, peace, and reconciliation in the Holy Land.

This Statement was agreed and signed by the participants of the Second Sabeel International Young Adult Conference 2007 in Jerusalem at the close of the Conference.