

October 2021 — Why mission matters in the context of the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict

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Mission Co-Worker serving in Israel-Palestine

Jesus Christ's ministry focused on God's mission of compassion, justice and reconciliation. And one of the ways — the main way — that we can incarnate our faith in God is to work for God's agape, recognizing that we must be willing to serve, and not be served.

Words without deeds will ring hollow to those who suffer from injustice, oppression and a general lack of a secure future. Change will come, but at a price.

As Presbyterians, we understand the mission to be God's, and that we are called into that mission in order to help, to assist, and to be part of God's transforming and powerful love to all of God's Creation. But mission should not only be understood through the eyes of Presbyterians living in the U.S. It needs to be understood through the eyes of those whom we profess to be walking alongside and accompanying. We seek to minister to the poor, but we must also reach out to those who may be poor in spirit.

We seek to do no harm. But have we done, and can we do, any good?

"It matters," says Zoughbi Zoughbi, director of Wi'am, the Palestinian Conflict Transformation Center in Bethlehem. Sitting under the shadow of Israel's separation barrier/wall, which was constructed in 2002 at the northern entrance to Bethlehem, he and his staff work and minister



*Part of the 430-mile, 25-foot-high West Bank wall.
(Photo by Kathy Melvin)*

in a context that denies them the freedom of movement that other people enjoy on a daily basis. A "gun," filled with skunk water, sits poised to rain down on them at any moment a noxious mix of chemicals whose smell can last for days. Jerusalem is a short six miles away, but without an Israeli-issued permit, access to the holy city is denied to the majority of those living in Bethlehem.

Painted on the wall, within sight of the center, are the words "Love each other."

Trying to manage disputes within one's society, while living within the context of a larger conflict, can be a full-time job!

In the Bethlehem region, conflicts often arise between one family and another, between one clan and another, and for various reasons. Since the pandemic began in March 2020, tourism has dried up in Bethlehem, leaving many unemployed and without prospects for an income. Unemployment has led to people and families becoming impoverished, and a spillover in family and domestic violence. Rather than allowing these conflicts to fester, Wi'am seeks to resolve these disputes peaceably, allowing people to live at peace with one another.

He goes on to say that both faith, and deeds, go hand in hand. "People will know us through our mission, and the walk and the talk that we engage in. Mission tells us to go on the less-traveled road."

"We must not surrender to disappointment," says Zoughbi. "We possess legitimate anger. And we must continue the struggle."

In the meantime, what does a Presbyterian presence, in the form of mission co-workers, mean for the local Palestinian population?

Matthew 25 reads, "For I was in prison" (or, as in this context, "I was imprisoned, or under siege,") and you visited with us, or you came to us.

We follow in faith the work that was begun in Jesus Christ himself, more than 2,000 years ago, and continue to bear light in places of the world that have grown dark.

"You identify *with* us, without over-identifying *as* us," says Zoughbi. "Your presence with and amongst us gives us both strength and determination and helps us to continue in our Sumud — steadfastness."

We are called to be agents of change in our broken and divided world. The kingdom of God is at work, even when we don't see it, says the Rev. Dr. John McCulloch, pastor of St. Andrew's Scots Memorial Church in Jerusalem. "Seeds are planted, but it takes time for them to grow."



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