

# **Christian Peacemaker Teams Middle East Delegation Report November 19 – November 30, 2002**

## **The Group**

The eight delegation participants arrived at Ben-Gurion Airport at Tel Aviv on November 20<sup>th</sup> and were welcomed there by the Delegation Leader, Rick Polhamus, who had prepared the way. The delegation was comprised of Michael Banks (New York, NY), John Engle (Petion-Ville, Haiti), Joseph Jacoby (Bryn Mawr, PA), Barbara MacDougall (Block Island, RI), Duncan Murphy (Uncasville, CT), Betty Scholten (Mt. Ranier, MD), Felecia Shelor (Meadows of Dan, VA) and Anna Zilboorg (Meadows of Dan, VA). This total group of nine was joined and supported at times by other full-time Middle East CPT staff members during the daily schedule and itinerary. Conditions before and during our stay in the areas of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron were unstable in terms of violence and suffering.

Nonetheless, the delegation was properly briefed to observe, witness, and demonstrate while visiting with peace-seeking people and groups, and anyone who would listen, both Israeli and Palestinian, in an even-handed manner. We also acted with the goal of taking away the occasion of war, and getting “in-between”, to deter individual violence, and suffer in passive resistance.

## **Jerusalem**

During the first few days the delegation was based in Jerusalem for orientation, planning, lectures, observations and local travel to see critical areas and conditions in order to get a sense of the complex relationships between the Israeli and Palestinian populations of the West Bank. On the first evening, 11/20, after brief introductions and orientation, we walked through the ancient streets of the Old City of Jerusalem with Rick, our delegation leader. Rick showed us the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as we made our way to the Damascus gate. Just outside the gate we met up with Bob Holmes and Anne Montgomery, both full time CPT peacemakers based in Jerusalem who briefed us regarding their work and gave us the latest news of problem areas.

We learned of Israeli soldiers attacking Palestinians in Hebron two weeks before we arrived in the West Bank. And early the next morning, Bob and Anne quickly re-joined us with the news of a suicide bomb bus explosion in West Jerusalem causing 3 deaths and 14 wounded at 7:00 A.M. that morning. At that point we realized our delegation was truly immersed in an area of profound violence and suffering, on both sides, with Israelis and Palestinians desperately in need of Peace and civil community.

What followed in our days in Jerusalem was a well-conceived schedule of meetings for our delegation with peace directed individuals and groups. We also traveled to specific sites and areas to grasp the Israeli short and long-range road and settlement development planning for the extended Jerusalem region (which includes Bethlehem and Ramallah). (See Section on meetings with individuals, groups and site visits, below). Beginning on 11/22 we began the fieldwork of observation, demonstration and action with work in Bethlehem and Hebron.

## **Bethlehem**

On Friday afternoon 11/22 the delegation traveled south to Bethlehem. We were delighted with the hospitality, and experience of getting to know Issa and Dianna Zoughbi. The stay included a fine dinner prepared by Dianna, evening discussions with Issa and his brother Zoughbi Zoughbi, head of the human rights group Wi'am; and worship with Issa and Dianna together the next morning. But we also experienced trouble in getting to Bethlehem, and a terrifying experience in experiencing a nearby explosion of a neighbor's home during discussions with Zoughbi Wi'am after dinner.

Some of the following events of the afternoon, evening and the next morning occurred simultaneously, or followed so closely, that we relate them all in sequence here.

The sequence began as our van approached the Bethlehem checkpoint on the main road. Having left the van we walked up to the checkpoint. There we encountered a number of Israeli soldiers on duty, a watchtower and a large military tank. The soldiers all looked to be young, from age 18 to 22. The soldier that met us said "Bethlehem is closed (under curfew), you may not pass – leave for your own safety".

We all acquiesced, as suggested by Rick, and went back to get transportation thinking that Bethlehem was a no-go, but Rick had an alternative in mind. We secured another van, and drove only a few hundred yards north (towards Jerusalem), then turned left towards the West and circled southwest around Bethlehem to an un-manned road-block checkpoint at Beit Jalla on the west side of Bethlehem. At that point we saw a man, dressed in black, get out of parked car and greet Rick. He was Father Mahroun, Rector of the Latin Patriarchate Seminary, third level down from the Pope in Rome and the chief representative of the Catholic Church for the Middle East. Fr. Mahroun said to Rick, "We want Peace, and we need it now!" in the manner of a jest, but quite seriously.

Then we walked into Bethlehem, under curfew, to Issa and Dianna's house in time for some conversation, unpacking and dinner. A wonderful prayer of grace by Issa preceded our meal prepared by Dianna. Issa and Dianna are evangelical Palestinian Christians who radiate the Gospel of Love, and Forgiveness of our enemies. After dinner Issa told us to listen to the sound of stone being drilled nearby, and then informed us that the stone being drilled was in a neighbors house, about a 100 yards away, which was slated for demolition by implosion "tonight or tomorrow morning". Thereafter, we walked next door to the house of Zoughbi Wi'am (Issa's brother) who is a very open-minded intellectual, political activist and a reconciler between Palestinian and Israelis in the Bethlehem community. Zoughbi Wi'am works to strengthen Muslim-Christian relationships. He also believes the voice of CPT and church groups must be heard.

However, in the middle of our discussions with Zoughbi Wi'am at about 9:00 P.M. the house which was drilled for explosives was suddenly blown up, and we were all physically and mentally shaken. Nonetheless we continued our meeting. Zoughbi Wi'am sat silently and looked at us and asked: "Are we willing to pay the price for Peace?" He said we must raise our voice in America for Peace. He talked about how to deprive the aggressor of any enemy - to take away the occasion of war. (Zoughbi Wi'am is a graduate of Notre Dame University, and was married in South Bend, Indiana). Afterwards, we went back to Issa's house and retired.

After about 4:15 A.M. the Islamic call to worship was broadcast. Not long afterward we heard armored troop carriers move up our street. And when daylight came we heard a large explosion and saw its' mushroom cloud of smoke coming from a building across the valley demolished by another bomb – retaliation bombing(s) most likely in response to the bus bombing in West Jerusalem cited earlier.

After breakfast we climbed up the hill and walked down a main street to the open square in front of The Church of the Nativity, with young local boys joining us. Then the boys raced ahead and begin to throw rocks at a large Israeli Tank sitting in the square in front of The Church of the Nativity. Older men tried to get the boys to come back from the Square and one warned us that the Tank was likely to be ready for trouble. My sense was that the boys would continue to cause trouble if they thought we were there to watch them. Rick sensed immediately that the military men in the Tank might react to our action of marching into the square, so we turned back and prepared to leave Bethlehem.

As we went back the way we came in a friend of Rick's appeared and invited us into his house. His name was Sami Abdah. He and his friends served us tea. Sami told us of violent oppression; the killing of two in his family accompanied by vandalism and robbery in his house. The house was also shelled and suffered severe damage. After such a sad visit we walked towards the north passing through the Aida Refugee Camp, taking the road in the direction of Jerusalem.

We reached the northern checkpoint where we had been refused entry yesterday. The soldiers, and the Tank crew there, were surprised to see us coming up behind them. They yelled at us, told us to drop our backpacks, and checked our passports. Eventually, they calmed down and we passed with mutual respect. We then returned by van to Jerusalem for rest, and visited many of the Christian holy places as guided by Rick, attended Sunday worship, had briefings and prepared for field work in Hebron during the week of 11/25.

## **Hebron**

Hebron, like Jerusalem and Bethlehem, was equally complex with conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians, but with the added dynamic of militant Israeli Settlers.

We left via van at the Damascus Gate and arrived in Hebron, with only one checkpoint (and walking over a rubble barrier to get to another carrier), during the afternoon of 11/25. We settled into the CPT apartments in the old souk of Hebron. Hebron was at that time under curfew. All must stay indoors until curfew is lifted (except internationals & CPT, etc). On the top of the CPT apartment building we had a rooftop general orientation to the old city of Hebron, and then enjoyed a dinner prepared by the CPT Hebron staff. After dark we went out, with members of the CPT Hebron staff, to discover what happened to a Red Cross truck which was supposed to make deliveries that day but didn't arrive. We walked down an almost empty tunnel-like street in heart of the old city not knowing exactly where we were going, and it was very quiet and dark.

After about a quarter mile walk we emerged into an open area at the place of the Tomb of Abraham. Three young Israeli soldiers greeted us there, asking who we were, why we were out unarmed and why we were not afraid of walking the route we took. The soldiers explained to us that we were in the area of the Israeli settlers (living above the route we just walked); radical, militant, equipped with guns and at times aggressive against even the soldiers themselves. We had no idea that the settlers lived in apartments and dwellings "above us".

On 11/26 we went to hear Palestinian Abdel Hadi Hantash of the Land Defense Committee for the Hebron Sector. He briefed us on the current Israeli procedure used for the establishment of a "new Settlement": 1. Open a road around the new area, which makes the land inaccessible to Palestinians 2. Bulldoze the land 3. Bring in trailers (caravans) to show evidence of settlement and 4. Begin to build homes. In this manner it has been seen that Palestinians are being squeezed off their land and evacuated elsewhere. Abdel Hadi Hantash's job is to help those suffering from Israeli occupation including those who have lost land and those who have received home demolition orders. The setting up of new roads and settlements has effectively divided up and separated farms and villages preventing Palestinian farmers from getting to work in their fields and/or harvesting crops. In the Hebron Sector as well as Jerusalem and elsewhere in the West Bank many new settlements have been established, and a large amount of land, (about 42% of it) has been confiscated for "Security" (Israeli settlements and the military). In addition, it has been observed that a number of criminals, from the U.S. and elsewhere, have filtered in to settle as a small part of the population of the rapidly increasing settlements.

The next day 11/27 Rick led us for a walking survey of recent damage inflicted in the Air Jabul Johar area of Old Hebron. We were shown cisterns ruined, water tanks shot out, cars run over by Tanks, and orchards bulldozed – all part of the taking of Palestinian land. The Jaber family, one of the threatened families, invited us for tea. The mother had gone shopping and her daughters described their problems for

us, as well as the problem of curfew preventing them from going to school in preparation for college. The girls asked us to pass on their message:

"Show the world how much we suffer, and show how strong we are to suffer through it".

Near the home where we had tea, 12 Israeli soldiers were killed two weeks prior to our visit. Three Palestinian shooters captured an Israeli jeep and then fired on the 12 Jewish soldiers. As a result we observed that this Palestinian neighborhood had suffered the demolition of

several homes. Also, roads were then bulldozed through the community over orchards and farmland. As we were finishing our tea the family, and our delegation, noticed that Israeli Settlers outside were observing the house in which we were sitting. We took the back way out, among the trees, and got back to our apartment.

Later that day we met with Hisham Sharabati from LAW, a Palestinian human rights organization. He told us the story of his attempt to travel to the United States. In the end, after difficulties in obtaining a visa and delays getting into, and out of, Jordan (Palestinians cannot fly out of Tel Aviv) he finally made it to Chicago, where he intended to visit his wife and a newborn son. (The son is an American citizen.) He was questioned closely by U.S. Immigration officials, and was not allowed to enter the U.S.! Hisham showed the video, "God's Bunker", a chilling account of Settler life and philosophy.

On the evening of 11/27 the delegates were invited to be the overnight guests of families in the Beit Ummar, Yatta and Kiryat Arba areas in the Hebron district where we heard many of their hardships and tragic experiences: loss of life, loss of freedom of movement, loss of land, hunger, and home demolition. Yet we heard our hosts say that they have the strength and resolution to live through this harsh treatment and to survive it. We returned to the CPT apartment in Hebron the next morning (Thanksgiving Day) and found that curfew had been lifted in Hebron but only until 2:00 P.M. The streets were then full of people during the morning.

#### Spur Of the Moment Action

Rick invited us to proceed that afternoon in taking an Action by being on the spot at the time of the curfew clamping down at 2:00 P.M. The Israeli Army garrison in Hebron positions its troops in units of four or more soldiers, armed with repeating rifles, with orders to enforce curfew on the hundreds of merchants and thousands of shoppers in the streets, with no exceptions. The role of the CPTers is to be on the leading edge in peacemaking; to seek out and place themselves in situations of potential or actual violence, for the goal of peaceful resolution of conflict. A CPT member responds, in a non-violent manner, to potential or actual violence in several ways, depending on individual styles and the situation. The CPT member does not necessarily physically put himself or herself between someone giving and receiving blows, although that does occur on occasion. Many CPTers engage soldiers in conversation to ease the situation, telling a soldier or a group, for example, that there is no need for violence. Each situation is fluid and unique, requiring a mix of good judgement, clarity and creativity, but holding to the principle of peaceful conflict resolution. In the case of 2:00 P.M. curfew clamp-down at Hebron the following occurred.

The eight CPTers broke up into small groups and trailed the soldier units making their way through the market. The soldiers did some yelling at the merchants who were slow in closing their stalls or doors, and told the kids to keep their distance, but interestingly enough did not tell our CPT unit to back off - so we followed them closely for about an hour. At one point it happened that a baker's helper, a young man, was grabbed by the neck and collar by a soldier. As quick as a flash the baker got behind his helper to pull him away from the soldier, and a different soldier in the group got both hands on the attacking soldier and pulled him back from the baker's helper, and all successfully defused a tense situation.

During the afternoon we were invited to meet with an extraordinary woman named Zleekha who lives in the old city between the Mosque at the Tomb of Abraham, and a soldiers checkpoint. She told us that years ago Jews and Israelis lived peaceably together, but "now our economy, our lives and our schools are being destroyed". She has herself fought with the Settlers, and fought the Israeli soldiers "for freedom and dignity", and is well known by, and on close speaking terms with, the Israeli Military Commander. He told Zleekha "If you had ten people like you here, we would have no settlers".

We returned to the apartment for a wonderful Thanksgiving dinner prepared by Le Anne, John, Barbara and others. After dinner Rick read some scripture and a beautiful liturgy of Thanksgiving he had written. Le Anne briefed us on customs and manners appropriate when staying with Palestinian families. Later in the evening we met to plan a formal Action,

with Rick placing the responsibility for the form, content and place for the Action up to us, the delegates. In the planning process Rick queried us to help us avoid pitfalls, and to facilitate our decision. It was decided that we would conduct our Action in Nativity Square in front of The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem on our final day, on Saturday morning.

On Friday 11/29 on our first wet, cold and rainy day, we headed from Hebron up to Beit Ummar, a farming village at the north end of the Hebron Sector - with a road barrier and a change of vehicle on the way. Our second vehicle drove off the highway through vineyards and fields to avoid checkpoints and came into town by an unpaved back road. We arrived at the CPT apartment where we met CPTers Kathie Uhler and Joanne Lingle to have lunch and meet with Ghazi Brigit.

We heard Ghazi Brigit, the Manager of the Municipal Power Station for Beit Ummar, speak of the land he loves and all of those family members, collectively, who are his concern. In his words: "Father, Mother, Son, Daughter, Husband, Wife, Brother and Sister". He brought his young daughter with him. Ghazi not only works for Peace locally, but travels to Europe and America "to work for Peace and to possess freedom of movement, to put an end to violence, to have no casualties, to put an end to Israeli/Palestinian conflict; and coming to meet with nothing in hand, only hope, and to sit back and negotiate the right way".

At one point Ghazi told us that "his brother was shot point blank in the forehead by the soldiers, as tempers flew at a road block as he was trying to go to work in his farm field, after being told he could not cross the line, on Wednesday November 16, 2000 at 7:00 P.M." Ghazi retains this searing memory, but he goes farther to urge all parties to the conflict, and each one of us as individuals "to find the good for both sides". His latest project is a cellular telephone system where people can leave Peace messages for each other; people from both sides. The product is called "Hello Peace or Hello Shalom" and allows people to enter the system and prompt their way to speak about Peace to anyone on either side, rather like a dating service, leaving a message for response by any listener by age range or other criteria. Lastly, he played a CD video for us on a PC showing Israelis and Palestinians parents who came together who had had children killed in the Holy Land. The Israeli-Palestinian parents group went in Peace together to New York City and to Washington DC churches and cathedrals to speak out against war accompanied with 2000 empty coffins on display. After this meeting we returned to Jerusalem to withdraw and finalize the plan of Action and demonstration tomorrow, our last day of the delegation in the West Bank, in front of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

## **Action**

After breakfast and a time for centering ourselves in prayer and meditation, we left quietly via the Damascus Gate for Bethlehem. Fortunately, our van got us directly to the western entry barricade (without soldiers posted) where we had entered Bethlehem before, and once across it, another cab was there to take us as close as possible to the square. We approached the square and were relieved to see there was no Tank in sight. Then we walked spread out in a row, across the square and into the courtyard of the Church of the Nativity, and formed a semi-circle facing the door to the Church.

Michael Banks gave the Invocation and we then sang Dona Nobis Pacem better than we sang it in rehearsal. Anna Zilboorg read a passage from Isaiah and then each prayed as we felt moved in words or silence. At a moment when we had become silent, a man came over and asked us if we would like to enter the Church. He took us through a different door to the left and we found our way through several rooms and down a steep stone stairway to the small shrine underneath the church; the place where Christ was born. We knelt to pray and then once again sang Dona Nobis Pacem. Our Church guide then gave us each a candle to light. As we walked out through the large Church, and approached its' small door, a Priest opened the small door to let us out. Mary Lawrence and Anne Montgomery accompanied us in the formal Action in this sacred place. And it was Anne's 76<sup>th</sup> birthday! It was a wonderful gift of birthdays for us all. We walked slowly out of the City of Bethlehem on the northern road and approached the checkpoint with care. This time the soldiers and

the Tank personnel were more civil, and we exchanged smiles with the soldier who had denied us entry the first time.

The delegation returned to Jerusalem and all enjoyed a farewell dinner at the rooftop restaurant, Papa Andrea's, with CPTers Rick, Greg Rollins, Mary Lawrence and Christine Caton in the old city where the ending is the beginning.

## **Meetings with Individuals & Organizations**

Those in Jerusalem:

Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center - Speakers: Nora Karmi, Palestinian Christian and Catharine Nichols (a Swarthmore College graduate). Nora addressed Sabeel (meaning "The Way") as a non-violent action group dedicated to the rebuilding of Peace, based on love, equality, justice and respect for each other, working with women, the clergy and youth. It has an Israeli counterpart. Catharine spoke of restriction on freedom of movement as the primary way in which Palestinians, particularly youth, are oppressed. She cited an important reference book: "Justice for Justice".

Jerry Milgrom - Rabbis for Human Rights. Jerry was born in Richmond, VA and is a graduate of Univ. of Cal. at Berkley and a Rabbinical School in New York. He returned to Israel in 1968 and saw that the Palestinians had been marginalized. He is active in "Peace Now" and refused military service. He sees the problem as colonialism, and fears the repression may get worse; possibly sliding towards the South Africa position.

Jerry proposed that 1% of the aid that the U.S. sends to Israel should be shifted to a better cause. As we heard him speak, numerous young people came to hear him.

Israel Committee Against Home Demolitions and Settlement Tour. Naama Nagar, a young woman and former Israeli soldier involved in intelligence, was our guide for a tour around the settlement surrounding Jerusalem. She introduced the numbers: Palestinians number 3,500,000 in the West Bank, 4,500,000 in Lebanon, Jordan and Saudi Arabia claiming the right of return, and 1,200,000 living within Israel (a total of 9,200,000). There are 5,500,000 Jews in Israel. On the bus tour she pointed out that roads are the only way to control movement. Also, the use of roads to cut people off from one another has created a series of Palestinian "Bantustans"; isolated communities resulting from slicing through villages and farmland throughout the entire West Bank. At one place she said bravely something about herself, for us to hear: Determinism ends when it can be thought that "I can make a difference."

B'Tselem Israeli Human Rights Organization. The purpose of this organization, formed in 1983, is to two-fold: to monitor situations in occupied territories and to publish reports on human rights violations in terms of human rights laws. Jews and Palestinians work together in the office and there are also Palestinian field workers. They spoke of three kinds of home demolitions, which they document. They also brought out the ultimate human rights violation; using the human body as a shield. This group also stands against the establishment and continuation of the Jewish settlement in Hebron in violation of the Hague Convention and the Fourth Geneva Convention, which constitute part of international humanitarian law.

Those located in Hebron:

Abdel Hadi Hantash - Land Defense Committee. His group gives legal help to people who live in the Hebron Sector whose land has been confiscated or whose homes have received demolition orders. New settlements are being initiated in the North, South, East and West in the Hebron Sector seriously threatening farming operations; in one case where 83 farmers were taken by force at midnight. He tells us that highways are put in for "security" but used instead to confiscate more land, uproot trees, and forbid people to plant crops. At the end Abdel said Israel is taking almost all the land in Hebron District and all other Districts of the West Bank.

## **Conclusion**

**We finished our work as a peace delegation with a final CPT evaluation and some warm personal thanks to our leader and CPT staff members. During our time in the West Bank our delegation met with many good people and organizations on both sides. We must continue to seek peace and continue to intercede in a non-violent way to take away the occasion of war and violence. It was noted that we met with some people who are willing and able to forgive their enemies, and who hope that their children will be able to join together in the future. We also saw good work being done by various organizations and individuals to try to marshal justice and to seek equality.**

**Nonetheless we observed and witnessed the practice of mans inhumanity to man as applied by both sides in the conflict, but with one side doing it on a monumental scale (with an army equipped with tanks, helicopter gunships, and automatic weapons). It was suggested to us, not only Jeremy Milgrom, that the need is urgent for Americans to address the U.S. Government and act in protest to decrease the billions of foreign aid dollars sent each year to Israel. Currently, over six billion U.S. dollars annually in massive financial support is used in large part for military repression and aggression; aggression in the form of land confiscation, home demolition, the uncontrolled building of settlements and strategic roads not for security but to break up the farmland and villages. This is accompanied with repression in the form of denial of freedom of movement, and the proclamation of curfews which serve as virtual home, school, food market, and medical system total lock-up - with no one permitted on the street.**

**It was precisely in the wretched scene just described that this CPT delegation, walking the streets and fields of Bethlehem and Hebron, noticed people peeking out of shuttered windows or opening their doors a little to wish us well, and even noticing the hard faces of the young soldiers soften a bit with a touch of gentleness as we spoke with them. We have left the Holy Land, but we sensed that hope and resolution is there. CPT taught us well to get "in between" in situations of conflict and violence, as peacekeepers. We are keeping our red caps and will continue to speak out here, and in our travels, about what we observed and learned in action in the West Bank, in order to make a difference for Peace.**