

Living Stones

From Robin Morgan—

Since last week Ed and I were, for the most part, less than complimentary about the “dead stones” of the Holy Land, this week I’d like to turn to one of the “Living Stones” of Palestine whom we met. As far as I can tell, if there is any temporal hope in that tinderbox country, it is because of “Living Stones” like Dr. Mitri Raheb who draw their strength and wisdom from the Eternal Hope who undergirds us all. Dr. Raheb is pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. He came to Talitha Kumi, the guest hostel where we stayed just west of Bethlehem, to talk with us about life on the West Bank and about how he and his congregation are trying to make a difference, a Christian difference for peace. Here’s what he told us:

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict has shifted from an East/West conflict (the U.S. and friends vs. the Soviet Union and friends) to a North/South conflict. Israel is a first world country with an average annual per capita income of \$17,000. Palestine is a third world “country” with an average annual income of \$1,000 and the gap between rich and poor in both populations is widening.

The cultural challenges for both Israelis and Palestinians are about vision for the country. What is it to become? Folded into this question is another profoundly theological question – Who is my neighbor? Not unlike many other parts of the world, every small group (whether Israeli or Palestinian) is only willing to support others who believe exactly as they believe. The checkpoints (guard stations on the roads that divide Israeli and Palestinian territories) which are most dangerous for everyone are the checkpoints in their heads.

What does all of this mean for the Palestinian Christian community? Palestinian Christians have, for the most part, always been middle class. However, with the advent of a free market economy, they are losing ground and he predicts that if things do not turn around soon, many of them will emigrate to North America robbing Palestine of a vitality that it can ill afford to lose.

Christmas Lutheran Church is doing its mission work through five projects that are part of its new International Center:

First are women's studies. Both the economic and cultural conflicts of the country are often first manifest in the lives of the women. The church is offering various kinds of training for women as well as opening a "Women's Cafe" where women can come together for conversation and fellowship. **Secondly,** the church is offering adult education with an emphasis on being an open public forum for discussing important issues.

Third is authentic tourism. It's important for pilgrims to the area to get the whole story about the country, which includes the Palestinian perspective. Many holy sites are not included in Israeli tour packages because they are on the West Bank. In addition, at the moment, 95% of tourist money goes to Israel and only 5% filters through to the Palestinians.

The fourth and fifth mission areas of Christmas Lutheran Church are intercultural exchange and an international academy. In both cases, the church is offering its congregational home as an international meeting place where people from around the world can come together, whether through the arts or academic study, to learn about each other while they also learn about a specific topic.

The church needs to acknowledge the changing complexion of the

globe and reach out with those changes in mind. "The world is now a supermarket," he said and the church needs to keep this reality in mind as it does mission. Since our group was composed of Americans and Germans, he commented that the American church was good at creative change while the German church tended to hold to "As it was in the beginning, it shall be now and forevermore." On the other hand, the Germans had a much better understanding of what was actually happening in the Middle East while Americans tended to be unaware and naive about international affairs.

When asked what he foresaw for the future, Dr. Raheb answered, "Am I optimistic? No. But I am not pessimistic either. I am hopeful." And then paraphrasing Luther he added, "Hope is planting an olive tree today even when you know the Final Judgment is coming tomorrow."