

QCEA/QPSW October 2010 Conference Synthesis

(held from 29-31 October 2010 at Maison N.-D. du Chant d' Oiseau, Brussels)

We have gathered, on the invitation of QCEA and QPSW, in a very peaceful setting to face a very painful subject - the continued conflict in Israel and Palestine. We are not here to solve the conflict, but to better understand its complexities and to discern how we, in our daily lives and in our advocacy work at QCEA and QPSW, can contribute to a just and lasting peace in the region. Some of us have lived in Palestine and/or Israel. Some of us have never been there. But there is a longing in this room for healing to its wounds.

In this room there is concern, passion and anger. There is also our faith in the power of God's love, belief of that of God in all human beings, and a conviction that peace cannot be built on violence and injustice.

As Quakers we strive to 'speak truth to power'. This weekend we have tried to discern what is the truth. On one hand the situation appears deeply complex. We review history and maps, of who said or did what, and when. On the other hand, the situation appears simple. Our testimony to equality is also a "Testimony of the unacceptability of other forms of inequality" (Quaker Faith & Practice, 23.34). We are all God's creatures.

We first heard from Christian Berger, the EU Representative to the West Bank and Gaza. We learned of the EU's support for a two-state solution, with borders defined along the 1967 ceasefire lines and Jerusalem as a capital for two peoples. EU support is primarily humanitarian and financial, and Palestinians receive the highest per capita of EU aid globally. The EU is also Israel's largest trading partner. Christian added that the EU and its fellow Quartet members have no direct contact with Hamas, which governs nearly half of the Palestinian population. In Gaza, he said, there is no normal life.

Our questions to Christian reflected our frustration. How can a Palestinian state be created with resources continually decreasing? Is Israel's trade relationship with the EU used as leverage for political change in supporting EU values of equality and justice? And how can the EU build peace when it refuses to engage with a government that represents nearly half the population? As one Friend asked, what are we afraid of?

Our Quaker Friend, Jean Zaru, travelled from Ramallah to address our group. Her presence was both a personal connection to the conflict and a voice of hope and love despite the oppression surrounding her. Life in Palestine, she said, is harder than ever before. The structural violence, be it from Israel, from Israeli settlers, restricted movement or depleted resources, has besieged the Palestinian population. The blockade of Gaza is a crime, and the demonization of Hamas, pathetic. By not speaking out, against this structural violence, the resulting silence is a violence of silence.

But despite her exhaustion, Jean gave us a challenging message to act, to hope, and to believe in the transformation of change. She encouraged us to seek a world of freedom and justice, of human dignity, to act, whether through divestment or BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions), advocacy of international law and/or human rights, but to act.

Peace cannot come without a transformation, of ourselves and of the structures of domination, in bringing justice. The time has come, she urged, to affirm all aspects of life and a spirituality based on human rights, equality and compassion, and to affirm that all land belongs to God. Do not, she urged, be pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian. Be pro-justice, for the occupation is destroying both Palestinians and Israelis. Believe in the possibility of change.

The nine workshops offered a time to discern the many ways that we are, or could be, involved in peace work in Palestine and Israel. Some workshops looked at existing Quaker work, others at political action, economic action, structures of oppression and, as shared in the evening, the creative power of music and theatre in our lives.

Our Ramallah Friend had reminded us that power and money are not the foundations for God's Kingdom. In this light we considered the economic role of the EU in the region, and the call by Christian leaders from the region to take action in the form of divestment and/or BDS. Many in this group have already acted as individuals on divestment. We sought greater discernment on the consequences of a total boycott. An economic boycott received greater clarity while a boycott of culture, sports, academia and other exchanges with Israel may conflict with our Quaker values for dialogue. Our Palestinian Friends have encouraged us to act as we can, and we note that a number of Churches and church organizations have already responded.

We shared our personal connections to Israel and Palestine, and learned of Quaker presence in the region over the last hundred and fifty years. We heard from Ecumenical Accompaniers in Palestine and Israel, of the daily peaceful witness in often violent situations. This Quaker history and experience is a foundation for QCEA work here in Brussels, a channel for speaking to love and truth when engaging with EU bodies over their actions.

We learned about the Israeli government and companies formalising relationships with European-funded security projects, and how this may directly be used to harm Palestinians. These agreements are an arms trade by another name. Is there a role for us in ensuring the EU effectively challenges violations to international law? Where does our peace testimony come in?

We also learned how Palestinians, Israelis and foreign nationals experience differently the right to movement, family reunification, health and education.

We learned how the identity card system defines one's access to these rights and how the occupation is based on a legal framework which dispossesses Palestinians. Do we ask ourselves what we would do if we were Palestinians, and faced this daily humiliation? What would we do if we were Israeli? In this light, we also learned about Israeli human rights groups and international Jewish NGOs working for a just and peaceful resolution to the conflict. They are a witness to the creative powers of the human spirit, and to the courage in upholding the Jewish message of social justice amidst harsh criticism if not punishment from their communities. If they take such risks for peace and justice, what sacrifice, we ask ourselves, are we as Quakers willing to make?

Our hours in these workshops were deeply informative and engaging, and at times overwhelming. Our time with the music and theatre workshops empowered the creative spirit at a time when many of us were sobered by the complexities and concerns before us. In one workshop we explored how music can move, mobilise and enthuse people. We heard Jewish songs which rejected nationalism and emphasised the Jewish tradition of dissent and rebellion. We sang with David Ferrard historic songs of anti-slavery as well as some of his own pieces, and discerned how the power of music can be used both for bad and for good.

In worship, I felt that many of us were sobered if not humbled by the day. "There are oceans of light", ministered one Friend in worship, "and oceans of darkness, and today I was shocked by the extent of oceans of darkness". But through all, he said, "light and love can conquer". That evening the more sombre air was transformed by further music from David, and through the guidance of the Plain Quakers theatre group. We experienced the 'theatre of the oppressed', where we were encouraged to act, to change what we, though observers, considered oppressive. To become involved. That evening we heard laughter again, we felt the power to act, to believe, and to change.

We are asked, as Quakers, to bring the whole of our life under the ordering of the Spirit of Christ. Are we open to the healing of God's love? This weekend, I found many of us both inspired and overwhelmed by the pain of this conflict. Our faith calls for us to hear all voices; we seek a balanced view but are faced with an imbalance of power that is destroying one people and could one day destroy both. When we witness the legal framework of the occupation, and the oppression this institutionalises, how do we act? Do we act with integrity, consistent in our peace work in other conflicts? Are we at times silenced by our horror over the Holocaust? Should we ask ourselves, if the occupiers were not Jewish, would we speak with a more clear and united voice over the oppression of Palestinians? What does this say to us?

This conference, as an event, is part of a process. We have been inspired by Quaker work and by the lives of Palestinians and Israelis who seek peace and maintain dignity while surrounded by violence. We see hope, in even the

simple stories of a Palestinian schoolbook encouraging children to read both Palestinian and Israeli understandings of their history. This weekend, I have heard calls for more discernment over the work we can do, but also heard great clarity in our commitment to the region, and in seeking new ways, such as economic action, as part of our peace work. We have learned this weekend about ways that QCEA, and QPSW, can deepen their peace work in the region. But they cannot do this alone. Our hearts, our minds, our financial support and our faith are essential to their success.