

## SLIDE 1: Introduction

Goodmorning! My name is Laura Ashfield and I'm a member of Knox Presbyterian Church in Waterloo, Ontario where my parents Brooke and Linda Ashfield are the ministers. The reason I'm here speaking today is to talk about my experiences in the Middle East and share my stories and insights.

The first time I was in the Middle East I was just three years old. My parents were studying at Tantur Ecumenical Theological Centre near Bethlehem, and we lived there for a few months. All I really remember from the trip were the numerous amounts of sheep and their shepherds on donkeys. Everytime I saw a man on a donkey I was convinced it was Jesus riding into Jerusalem. Since I was three, my concept of the Middle East has of course broadened to more than just the cute sheep and the birthplace of Jesus.

## SLIDE 2:

I've been back twice, representing the Presbyterian Church at the Sabeel Young Adult Conference in the summer of 2008, and participating in the Gaza Freedom March just this past Christmas.

During the conference two years ago, I learned about the complexities of the occupation by visiting refugee camps, meeting with Israeli and Palestinian peace activists and government officials and spending time with youth from Israel and Palestine. I travelled extensively throughout Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip and my eyes were widened to the realities of the situation. To be perfectly honest, I was shocked and appalled by the acts of oppression and occupation that I personally witnessed. As much I was disillusioned by how people treat each other, I was also equally inspired by the people I met working tirelessly for peace and justice.

## SLIDE 3: SABEEL

I don't know if many of you have heard of Sabeel, but they are a partner of the Presbyterian Church. Their name means "the way" in Arabic. It is a Christian Palestinian Liberation Theology Organization that works for peace and justice within Palestine and Israel and tries to provide a more accurate international awareness about the concerns in the Middle East, by organizing conferences for internationals like the one I attended.

When I talk to people about my travels, many people are shocked and confused by the fact that there are Christian Palestinians living in the Middle East. When most people think of Israel/Palestine, I guess they think of a 'religious' war between Jews and Muslims, and they don't realize that there is an active Christian population living there. Because Jesus lived and taught in the area that is now Palestine/Israel, some of the very first Christians were actually Palestinians. Unfortunately, because many Western churches feel tied to Israel, our Christian Palestinian brothers and sisters are being ignored by the rest of the Christian world.

This is a picture of Rev. Naim Ateek who founded Sabeel speaking to the International conference.

## SLIDE 4:

Sabeel uses Liberation Theology which is a way to look at the Bible through the eyes of the oppressed rather than powerful.

Jesus was also living under occupation, and by learning from him and his response to injustice - this theology hopes to connect the true meaning of Christian faith with the daily lives of all those who suffer under occupation, violence, discrimination, and human rights violations.

Palestinian Liberation Theology seeks to contextualize the message of Christ in the experiences of the Palestinian community, and is a great source of hope for all the people of faith suffering under oppression.

#### SLIDE 5: Map

I definitely don't have enough time (or frankly the energy!) to get into the history of the Middle East – but I really like to show this map because it gives such a clear explanation of the recent history of the land.

1. The first slide shows British Mandate Palestine in 1946. The green shows Palestinian land, and the white shows Jewish land. At this time, they lived relatively peaceful together.
2. The second slide shows the 1947 UN partition plan that was proposed, and rejected.
3. 1948 – Israel was created and many Palestinians were forced out or fled their homes. In 1967 Israel invaded the West Bank and Gaza taking control of the land. The West Bank is the kidney shaped green part and Gaza is the tiny strip of land right by Egypt.
4. The last map shows the year 2000. You can see that Palestine is completely segregated from itself and made into a 'swiss cheese' as people like to say. Israel has complete control over the West Bank and Gaza and Palestinians are now living under total Israeli occupation.

#### SLIDE 6:

I'd like to give you a brief snapshot of what it's like to live under occupation.

One of the aspects of the occupation in the West Bank is the separation wall and the system of checkpoints designed to restrict Palestinian movement.

As Canadians we don't think twice about our daily commute and don't really have to worry about how long it will take to get somewhere – traffic is our biggest worry. However for Palestinians it is extremely difficult to get from one place to another. Everyone I met said that they live on the word "IF" because they are never certain of their future.

Israel/Palestine is a tiny place. Going to work/university/school should only take about 20 minutes, but it could take 3 hours, depending on IF the checkpoints are open, IF the soldiers are in a good mood, and depending on IF the rules and orders from that day will allow them to get through.

Many of the students I met get up at 4 in the morning to be at work or school for 8am just in case it takes them a long time to get through the checkpoint. Imagine waiting in line for hours everyday just to

get to a place that's only 15 minutes away. That's what the occupation does. It takes a mundane task like going to school or the doctors and making it an almost impossible exhausting daily challenge.

This is a picture of Palestinian men lining up at a checkpoint between Bethlehem and Jerusalem at 4am – their daily routine. This is only one aspect of the occupation that Palestinian people have to deal with everyday along with, the permit system, settler violence, and Israeli military control.

#### SLIDE 7: SOURCES OF HOPE!

Sometimes learning about all of the horrible things in the world can get horribly depressing, and can leave you feeling hopeless and powerless. When I'm feeling that way, one of my favourite bible verses to read is Micah 6:

“And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” It's simple. As Christians we are all called to work against oppression. It's not a choice.

After one of my presentations back home, someone asked me why I advocate for justice for Palestine.

My answer is this: I advocate because voices are silenced. Because people are living under occupation everyday and oppression has become a normal way of life. I advocate because the media does not tell the truth. Because everyone seems to have opinions on the conflict but the controversial nature of the subject leads to misguided opinions and snap judgements. I advocate because I've seen Palestinians and Israelis working together for peace. I advocate because I see hope.

I see hope in my friend Lina from Jerusalem whose cousin was killed by an Israeli soldier. She has reason to hate, yet she works tirelessly learning Hebrew and English so she can connect to her Jewish Israeli neighbours. She is passionate about connecting to people one on one and truly believes that once Israelis and Palestinians learn about each other, the violence will end.

#### SLIDE 8

I see hope in my friend Muslim friend Mohammed, from Ramallah. He works for the UN centre for refugees in Ramallah. In his spare time he raises money to create playgrounds in refugee camps and towns in the West Bank surrounded by Israeli settlements. Settler violence against Palestinians and vandalism is a common thing in the West Bank. Mohammed wants to give children a safe place to play and just be children and forget about the violence. I got the opportunity to be a part of the building of this playground. The entire town came out to help and it was a real community project. We decided to name it the Friendship Garden with the motto: “Let the laughter of children be the foundation of peace.”

I see hope in Israeli youth who refuse to serve in an occupying army, risking arrest and social discrimination. All Israelis are forced to serve in the army for three years once they turn 18, yet some are refusing to be enemies

#### SLIDE 9

I see hope in the small Christian community in the Gaza Strip. Gaza is nicknamed the world's largest open air prison. There are over 1.5 million people living there – 80% of which are refugees that rely on humanitarian aid. The West Bank is under occupation, yet the Gaza Strip is under complete Israeli siege, leaving disastrous impacts on the populations health, education, living conditions, and human rights. When I was there, I visited an Anglican Church and hospital that had both been bombed. The hospital does not have the supplies it needs and when I was there for just one hour, the electricity cut out about 15 times. The hospital staff have had to learn to be resourceful and smuggle in necessary medications and supplies, but they can only do so much. Later on we had a worship service in the bombed out church. It was one of the most inspiring moments for me because it showed me that even in the most dire situations, God is there. The members there had such fervent faith in God and they had hope that Gaza will soon be a safe place to live again.

#### SLIDE 10

I truly believe in the founder of Liberation Theology, Leonardo Boff's statement that "If we do not share life with the oppressed we do not share life with God." No matter who we are, where we come from, whether we are Palestinian or Israeli, we are all children of God.

The story of the good Samaritan from scripture today was not supposed to be a nice little story about helping your neighbors out. It was supposed to be a radical story to break people's notions about what separates us.

If that story were put into a current day Middle Eastern context, it would be as if an Israeli soldier was lying in the West Bank needing help, and the only one that would help him was a Palestinian. That is a radical notion! It would be unheard of! But that's what Jesus calls us to do.

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The Presbyterian Church in Canada International Affairs Committee has a few suggestions for congregations on what they can do to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Palestine.

1. Pray for peace in the Holy Land. Pray for all groups and organizations working for peace in the Middle East – Christian, Jewish and Muslim – Palestinian and Israeli.
2. Support and Stand in Solidarity – by promoting fair trade products such as Palestinian Olive Oil. Promoting Palestinian fair trade products is a means of showing economic solidarity with Palestinians and providing an opportunity to learn about the conflict and about the efforts to seek peace.
3. Visit the holy land: The Holy Land is not only the birthplace of our faith but the current home of some of the most ancient Christian communities in the world. Father Elias Chacour expresses his yearning for Christians to come and witness. He says, "You Westerners have been coming to the Holy Land for centuries to visit the shrines, the dead stones. But you do not see the living stones – the human beings who live and struggle before your eyes. I say, Wake up! What matters are the living stones!"