

Peacemaking in Israel and Palestine

by Shannon Jammal-Hollemans, seminarian

On my recent trip to Israel and Palestine, I read a book by Julie Orringer. In the beginning of *The Invisible Bridge*, the main character, Andras, expresses doubts about his ability to fulfill the expectations placed upon him as he embarks to study in Paris on a scholarship. He speaks to his father about his doubt. Orringer writes, "At best, he told his father, he was the beneficiary of misplaced faith; at worst, a simple fraud." He asks his father, "And what if I fail?" His father's answer is succinct: "Ah! Then you'll have a story to tell!"

I have a story to tell. I traveled to Israel and Palestine this past summer as part of a group of ten North American graduate and undergraduate students on a trip with Hope Equals. Hope Equals is a joint project of the Christian Reformed Church's offices of World Missions and Social Justice. The trip offered four components of learning: touring of religious sites, visiting organizations working for peace and reconciliation, living with Palestinian Christian families, and working to build a home for a Palestinian Muslim family.

Much of our learning had to do with the impact of the Wall, a barrier constructed by the Israeli government. The Wall has been controversial since Israel began

building it in 2002. While supporters argue that the Wall is necessary to protect Israeli civilians from Palestinian terrorism, the path of the Wall deviates significantly from the Green Line—the border agreed upon by Israel in 1949—into the land also known as the Occupied Territories, captured by Israel in the Six-Day War of 1967.

On our trip, we spoke to those affected by the Wall. In addition to being an eyesore, the Wall is being used by Israel to annex Palestinian land and resources. Israel also places restrictions on the movement of the Palestinians who live near the Wall, particularly on their ability to travel freely in the West Bank and to work in Israel.

We visited a town in the West Bank which was cut off from a thoroughfare by the Wall. The empty storefronts facing the road testified to the Wall's crushing effect on the town's economy. We visited a park built by Christians on a former Israeli army base. It is the only park for children in that town, but after its completion, the Israeli military decided that they wanted the land back. Families are now afraid to allow their children to play there because Israeli soldiers have doused visiting children with gasoline, and hurled canisters of tear gas into the cars driving by.

Yet in the midst of such human sinfulness, we were encouraged to learn about the ways the Palestinians and Israelis are working together to resist the injustices and work for the creation of a lasting peace in the land. One such group we met with was B'Tselem, an Israeli agency that documents and reports incidents of human rights violations in Gaza and the West Bank.

We also met with Archbishop Elias Chacour, a three-time nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize. He spoke to our group about the issues he faces as leader of the largest Christian church in the Holy Land today. It was inspiring to hear him articulate the calling Christians have to communicate "clearly and courageously" as agents of God's peace in the world.

During the last eleven days of the trip we lived with Palestinian Christian families in the town of Beit Sahour. It was probably the most encouraging part of the trip for me—sharing in the lives of those directly affected by the policies and circumstances that we had been learning about.

We also had the privilege of helping to rebuild the home of a Palestinian family in the town of Al-Walaja. The family had lost their home twice before to Israeli bulldozers. Working with them—practicing the trade of Jesus in the land he called his earthly home—gave me insight into how God blesses his children when they work to bless others.

There were times on this trip when I said to God, "Why am I here? I am much more comfortable reading about injustice in books than seeing it with my own eyes." But I learned once again that God does not call us to be comfortable. He calls us to be courageous. He calls us to be peacemakers—agents of his *shalom* here on this broken earth.

But we don't have to go to Israel and Palestine to be peacemakers. We have all kinds of people in need of reconciliation to one another, and to God, right here. Yes, we may be frauds. We may be the beneficiaries of misplaced faith. But, what better opportunity for God to tell *his* story?



Jammal-Hollemans (front row with hat) poses with Hope Equals group and Palestinian family.