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Project Zion Podcast

Josh Mangelson 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Steve Kellogg 00:33

Welcome, everyone, to this Grounds for Peace podcast, a series that is part of Project Zion. I am Steve Kellogg, a bishop in Community of Christ, and a member of the Palestine/Israel sub team of the Community of Christ, Peace and Justice Team.

This is the third in a series of conversations about Israel and Palestine. The first of the series podcast 474, focused on Holocaust Remembrance Day, and the second podcast 480 focused on Nakba day. Both of those podcasts shared the traumatic impact of those events in the heritage and current life experiences of both Israelis and Palestinians.

Today we are asking the question, "How can we work for peace in Israel and Palestine?" and we are blessed to have the Reverend Dr. Mae Elise Cannon, Executive Director of Churches for Middle East Peace to share her passion for peacemaking, especially in the Middle East. Churches for Middle East Peace or C M E P is a coalition of more than 30 United States based church communions and organizations working to encourage US policies that actively promote just, lasting, and comprehensive resolutions to conflicts in the Middle East.

Earlier this year, Community of Christ became a member of Churches for Middle East Peace and affirms with the other CMEP members that working together: Justice can prevail. Peace is possible.

Dr. Cannon is an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Covenant Church or ECC. Her ministry and professional background include serving as Senior Director of Advocacy and Outreach for World Vision in the United States, Executive Pastor of Hillside Covenant Church in Walnut Creek, California, Director of Development and Transformation for Extension Ministries at Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois, and as a consultant to the Middle East for child advocacy issues for Compassion International.

She has earned doctorates in history and spiritual formation. That is a PhD in history, and a Doctorate in Ministry in spiritual formation, and has a Master's in Divinity from North Park Theological Seminary, a Master's in Business Administration from North Park University's School of Business and Nonprofit Management, and a Master of Arts in Bioethics from Trinity International University. Dr. Cannon completed her Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Chicago. Her PhD focused on American History with a minor in Middle Eastern Studies from the University of California that's located in Davis, and her dissertation focused on the history of the American Protestant church in Israel and Palestine.

Dr. Cannon has authored or coauthored six books whose titles illustrate her life's passions. They are ***Beyond Hashtag Activism***, about comprehensive justice in a complicated age. ***Evangelical Theologies of Liberation and Justice***, ***A land full of God*** about Christian perspectives on the Holy Land. ***Forgive Us*** about confession of a compromised faith, ***Just Spirituality***, about how faith practices fuel social action, and the ***Social Justice Handbook*** about small steps for a better world. In addition to reading her books, you can find and hear some of her other podcasts and addresses at her website, maecanon.com. That's M A E C A N N O N.com.

Well welcome, Reverend, Dr. Cannon, we are thrilled that your schedule allowed you to be with us today.

Mae Cannon 04:17

Good. Good to be here. Thank you.

Steve Kellogg 04:20

And before we get started, how would you like us to address you for the purpose of this interview?

Mae Cannon 04:24

Mae is just fine.

Steve Kellogg 04:27

Mae. Okay Mae, that's what we'll use.

Mae Cannon 04:30

Thank you. And do you go by Steven or Steve?

Steve Kellogg 04:33

Steve, I go by Steve. It's fine.

Mae Cannon

Okay, perfect.

Steve Kellogg

So Mae, just by way of background, Project, Zion Podcast listeners, which is what we're recording for, come from various faith traditions, some of which have included patriarchal church organizations, where women have not only not had senior leadership responsibilities, they haven't even had the opportunity to be ordained. And even in Community of Christ, ordination of women did not occur until the mid 1980s. And the first time we had a female minister who is a part of our world church presidency, it was not until 2007.

So many of our listeners will be interested in your discipleship journey, and your transition into ministry and leadership. So, to get started, if you don't mind, we'd like to know a little bit about your childhood and your family growing up. Were your parents religiously active? Was church attendance important? Or scripture reading or prayer in your family's home? And how did you think of your faith as a child?

Mae Cannon 05:33

I love that question. I am, I grew up in a family that historically was Irish Catholic. And so, my father was one of 13 brothers and sisters, I have more than 70 first cousins on that side of the family. And I had a great aunt who was a Catholic nun. And we used to go and visit her in the convent, like once a week, every summer. And it was funny because as a little girl, I wanted to be a nun because she was married to Jesus. And I thought that there was nothing better than that. I tell my husband now I am not a nun, and I am married. And I tell my husband now that I had to settle for him because, you know, I obviously did not go in. I was not baptized into Catholicism, because he was my dream!

Steve Kellogg

Because he was like Jesus!

Mae Cannon

There you have it. That's right. Yes. You know, so, my faith story, and I feel like I could take a long time to tell just even what happened in my life before I was five. My parents were young Christians. And I had a brother that was older than myself, who was named after the person that introduced them to the Christian faith. And he was killed tragically and was hit by a car. And so, my parents left the faith after his death.

And so, I had this history of my parents having had faith in God, but then really struggling and grieving with how could God allow for such a horrific thing to happen? And yet, I feel like God called me to Himself. And so, I used to go to church with all my different neighbors, and they were all members of different church congregations. So, I'd go to the Episcopal Church on one Sunday. And I'd go to the Baptist Church on the other Sunday. So, it's funny that I now lead an ecumenical organization because my faith was born in that beautiful diversity of the church.

Steve Kellogg 07:29

Wonderful. So, going on from there, how did you encounter a call to ministry? And what were you sensing or feeling at that time? And what made you choose to go to seminary and get a PhD and a Doctorate in Ministry?

Mae Cannon 07:43

Yeah, my... I originally thought that I would be a missionary, a medical missionary. So, I speak fluent Chinese, which does absolutely no good in the Middle East. And so, I thought that I would do medical missions. I actually was on my way to medical school. And I had a calling experience. I was in a Bible study with a young woman. She had just left. And I felt like God just spoke to my heart and said, "This is what I've called you to do." And the "this" was, you know, the ministry, the ministry of God. And I knew that meant not going to medical school. So that was about three weeks before I was supposed to leave for medical school. And I couldn't afford, you know, I already had a master's degree in bioethics. I could not afford more graduate school. And so, I prayed. And I said, God, if you would like for me to pursue this path, you know, would you provide a way? And I found out within just a few weeks that I'd received a full scholarship to attend North Park, which is a part of the Evangelical Covenant Church,

which I later became ordained in, and the doors were just opened. And that's kind of you know, how I started my ministry, if you will.

Steve Kellogg

God paved the way.

Mae Cannon

God paved the way. That's right.

09:05

Steve Kellogg

So, you had significant congregational leadership responsibilities with Hillside Covenant Church and the Willow Creek Community Church. Do you still have congregational leadership responsibilities, and how did you transition into leadership of Churches for Middle East Peace.

Mae Cannon 09:22

Yes, um, you know, I'm in the local church all the time, because we have church partners for which I'm so grateful for and so I'm preaching regularly. Probably actually, you know I used to only preach once a month as an executive pastor, and in the role that I have now at Churches for Middle East Peace, I preach even more than that, which is a great, great privilege. So, I feel like I'm in the body of the global church.

I spend a lot of time on speaking tours traveling around the US. But the role is much more now with Churches for Middle East peace. Our goal is to educate American Christians about the realities in the Middle East. And so, I feel like my ministry is to the broader church as opposed to just one specific congregation.

Steve Kellogg 10:07

So, you don't, you're not working solely with one congregation. You're working with many.

Mae Cannon 10:10

That's right. That's right.

Steve Kellogg 10:13

So, what exactly then does Churches for Middle East Peace do?

Mae Cannon 10:16

Yes. So, Churches for Middle East Peace is an ecumenical organization, which is very diverse across the spectrum of American Christianity and the American church. And so, we now have 34 member communions, which all are a part of our membership that agree with our goals of building peace and justice in the Middle East.

I'm so grateful Community of Christ just became a member in the last year. And as I was mentioning, before we came online, we prayed for that to come to fruition, literally for years, three years or so. And so, we were so grateful that you joined our movement.

And so, the coalition of Churches for Middle East Peace includes Orthodox churches, Catholic churches, mainline Protestant, Evangelical, it's a diversity of American denominations. And our goal is to shift and engage in US policies, so that the United States engagement in the Middle East is more constructive, that we would be promoters of peace, that we would be promoters of what we would call a holistic perspective of the Middle East that considers the narratives of all people, not just some people groups over others. And so, we engage as an advocacy organization based in Washington, DC to educate not only the church, but to educate our policymakers on the ways US policies affect the lives of all people living in the Middle East.

Steve Kellogg 11:46

So, as we think about the lives of the people in the Middle East, in your leadership experience of Churches for Middle East Peace, or even before, what, what did you encounter in terms of what was going on in the Middle East and the conflict there? And how did that affect you? You know, what was your reaction to it? How would you describe it to the people who haven't been there or not familiar with it?

Mae Cannon 12:11

You know, my story is very typical. And forgive me if this sounds critical, because I'm being critical of myself, you know, not critical of others. But for myself, I was so ignorant of the realities of the Middle East, and I was incredibly well educated. I had several master's degrees. You know, I was in a doctorate program, the very first time I went to the Holy Land. From the time I was a little girl, I dreamt of going to Israel, you know, I'd read the books like the... you might be familiar with the book, Exodus, where a movie was made that Paul Newman was in it. And, you know, I had, I had dreamt of going to the place that tells the stories of Jesus's ministry. But I also had this very strong affinity, which I continued to have with the Jewish people, but also with the struggles of the Jewish people.

And so I went to Israel, not even knowing that the Holy Land includes Israel, but also includes the West Bank and Gaza, you know, territories that we call the occupied Palestinian territories. I literally thought Palestine was a map in the back of my Bible. And so here I was on this spiritual pilgrimage, I was seeing these holy sites, I was meeting Christians. And the place was so many things that I had hoped it would be, you know, it was a sacred place for me in terms of reading stories from the Bible and seeing it come to life. But then I would see these signs that said, "Free Palestine," and I was so confused and disoriented and didn't understand. I mean, I'm embarrassed by my ignorance, if I'm honest with you, about, you know, how long the conflict has been going on between Israelis and Palestinians.

And so, we went on a trip to visit Bethlehem Bible college, and I met Bishara Awad, who's the founder of the college there, and he began to tell his story. And he told his story of becoming a refugee in 1948. And he's a Palestinian Christian. And he told the story of the Palestinian people. And Steve, I wept, I actually have a picture at my office right above my desk that's taken of me with Bishara with tears in my eyes, because my heart was broken for the struggle of the Palestinian people. And I think the invitation

to the church is, you know, for us to be lovers of all people, for us to love the Jewish people, for us, but in our love of one people group to not ignore the struggles, you know, and also to love their neighbors and to love the Palestinian people too.

Steve Kellogg 14:43

So, it was a powerful experience. What did you do in response to that or when you came back?

Mae Cannon 14:50

Well, my PhD is in American history, and I was writing about actually African American history and the history of domestic social reform movements in the United States. And I went back to my dissertation advisor, and I said, I want to write about Israel. So, I ended up getting my PhD in the history of American Protestant engagement in the Israeli Palestinian conflict, which then led me to living in Jerusalem and to working for development agencies, and ultimately led me to Churches for Middle East Peace.

Steve Kellogg 15:19

So how did that... How did that connection, come to Churches for Middle East Peace?

Mae Cannon 15:24

Yes, you know, I lived in Jerusalem for a while in 2010 and 2011. I was doing research for a development agency there. And then I led World Vision's work towards Palestine and towards World Vision's programs in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, I was doing their advocacy from the United States. And so, my time with World Vision was deeply meaningful. And I had just such profound experiences. And I had just transitioned out of the role with World Vision, and I got a call.

And I've been familiar with, you know, Churches for Middle East Peace has been around for 40 years almost. And I've used their bulletins to help educate me and to help keep me informed on what was happening. And they let me know about the role and the timing was perfect. And honestly, I felt like it gave me freedom to be more bold in my advocacy, whereas when you work for a development agency, often, you have to limit your advocacy because if you speak prophetically, it can sometimes upset your donors. And so, working for an advocacy organization, with my personality and temperament and things is really a good fit.

Steve Kellogg 16:40

Oh, we're so blessed that you accepted and had that opportunity.

Mae Cannon 16:46

Thank you, that's kind of you.

Steve Kellogg 16:47

So, we know this conflict has been going on for decades now. And after all these years, and all you've seen, I assume you're still hopeful that there'll be peace. And that's certainly consistent with CMEPs assertion that working together, Justice can prevail. and Peace is possible. In order for that peace to

come about what have been the defining experiences that shaped your understanding of what's needed? And how do you envision that that peace will be characterized for Israel and Palestine?

Mae Cannon 17:16

That's a wonderful question. I think, fundamentally, as people of faith, that we have to have faith that peace is possible, even though from external circumstances, it actually looks further on the horizon than it has in past years. You know, this is not a positive time, in terms of prospects for peace. We have an American government that really is neutral on issues related to the Middle East, they have no desire. You know, when President Biden came into the office, foreign policy was low on the priority list because of everything that was happening domestically in the United States. And all this was pre COVID. And so foreign policy was on the bottom of the list. And then Middle East policy was on the bottom of that list. And so, you know, it wasn't until the war in May last year that President Biden actually started to engage and had some responses, etc.

And so, the idea that there's a US government that has impetus or energy, to build towards peace, that's just not where we're at, at this moment. And similarly, you know, you've had complete instability in the Israeli government. And so, one of the things you need for peace to be possible is you need world leaders, who are committed to peace. And you need a Palestinian leader and an Israeli leader, who are willing to compromise and who are willing to come to the table. You know, and you have President Abbas for the Palestinians, who is quite elderly. I had the privilege of being with him a few months ago. And we had an excellent meeting and an excellent conversation. And he has sought so much to compromise. But unfortunately, he's lost so much credibility amongst Palestinians. And so even if he were willing to make peace, the Palestinian Authority doesn't have the best reputation in this moment, you know, where the Palestinian people support them. So, it feels like prospects for peace are very, very far away.

But one of the things that we talk about is in every global crisis, you know, be it the war in Northern Ireland, or, you know, be it the apartheid in South Africa. In every one of those global conflicts, the time before peace was often the darkest hour, and so we don't know when peace will come. And so, our goal is to be steadfast and to be diligent, you know, to continue in our work so that when the moment happens, we'll be ready. And we'd love for that to be tomorrow. Even though it feels like it's, you know, more distant in the future.

Steve Kellogg 19:42

Right. So, with Churches for Middle East Peace's program of educate, elevate and advocate, what other I guess, activities or peacebuilding opportunities have you been able to be a part of or achieved, and how are those going so to speak?

Mae Cannon 20:03

Thank you. I love that question. So, one of our main priorities is educating the American church, we have a program called pilgrimage to peace tours where we bring leaders from Israel and Palestine and the Middle East, you know, many American Christians can't go to the Holy Land, they can't afford it or don't have time. And so, we try to bring the Holy Land to them. And so, we bring leaders and we travel all over the country. We've been doing those tours, since even before I came to CMEP. And those tours

have spoken to more than 50,000 people face to face. And it's often people who, you know, just are not informed about the Middle East, they don't understand that there are Palestinian Christians, or they don't know about the occupation, you know, the military control of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. And so, a lot of those programs are just about basic fundamental education.

And then, you know, you mentioned Elevate, we're not a development agency. So, our goal is to highlight and introduce churches to organizations that are doing incredible work, peacebuilding organizations, and, you know, organizations that are responding to the economic disparity between Israelis and Palestinians, or in other parts of the Middle East. You know, like in Armenia, the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Or we're working in Iraq, on the sustainability of the church, you know. And so, our goal is to elevate just incredible, incredible leaders who are committed to peace and committed to laying down arms and committed to pursuing, you know, just resolutions to the conflicts that we're witnessing in the Middle East.

And then finally, you mentioned advocacy. And you know, I'm so grateful 5, 10 years ago, you wouldn't hear the word occupation on Capitol Hill. You know, it was kind of a word that you didn't say, because it wasn't very popular. But now there's no question that what's happening in the West Bank is a military occupation, like that's the technical term that's used in general by the American government, and certainly by international parties. And so now the conversation is about "is what's happening there apartheid?" you know. And so the conversation has progressed, which I think shows that people are much more educated about the realities that are happening there. And so, I think that there's great potential for us to have impact in terms of our advocacy because of those shifts that we're seeing, you know, in American public opinion, if you will.

Steve Kellogg 22:36

Right, traditionally, when we think of churches, we think of worship, we think of prayer, we don't often think of advocacy. I guess, given your, and frankly my own, ignorance of what was going on in Israel and Palestine until you actually see it. What... what kind of leverage, I guess, do you have, either with the churches who you're trying to talk to, or with the organizations, who are really parties to the problem, so to speak in Israel and Palestine to help them see things differently?

Mae Cannon 23:08

Well, I have been so moved. The realities on the ground speak for themselves. So, I don't feel like I'm leading this organization with my own political agenda. You know, we're learners, we learn by the things that we see. And we want to take people to see what's really happening. And so, we have had incredible success, actually, with a number of very large evangelical mega churches, evangelicals that are coming from a conservative theological perspective, that have a viewpoint about the people of Israel, and how that relates to the modern nation state of Israel.

And when you go and introduce them to Palestinian Christians, who worship Jesus, who are brothers and sisters in Christ; when they see the realities that Palestinians experience when children are going to school and having to walk by, you know, the military; when you show them farmers whose lands been confiscated; when they see things with their own eyes, I think their hearts are broken. And so, a number of the churches that support churches for Middle East peace are actually evangelical mega

churches that came from a very different perspective, and left saying, we want to be constructive in our engagement. We don't want to choose one side over the other, and we want to speak against injustice. And we want to respond to the needs of the poor, you know, all these ideas that we read about in the New Testament. And I think that's deeply moving when people have that type of a transformative experience.

Steve Kellogg 24:36

Right, so is there a movie or anything that people could watch since many of them can't travel to see those things themselves?

Mae Cannon 24:44

That's a great question. You know, one of the movies that I've actually shown... I showed it at a very large mega church in Colorado Springs. Which tells you a little bit you know, if you know anything about Colorado Springs, you know, it's a very politically one-sided place. And we showed this film that you can watch a Netflix, it's called *The Present*. And it's a story about a father and a daughter. And the dad is buying a present for his wife, and he's Palestinian. And it talks about just what he goes through in trying to bring this present home from Jerusalem into the West Bank. And it shows a glimpse of when we say occupation... like what's that mean? You know, what do checkpoints mean. And it's deeply... it's very, very short, it's about 20 minutes. You know, churches can do it for just a small group discussion type thing, because it's very accessible. But it shows you a glimpse of what the reality is like, today.

Steve Kellogg 25:41

Yeah, and the heartbreak that goes into that. So what about individuals like Steve Kellogg? Can I be a member of churches for Middle East peace? Or is this just for churches? Or how does that work?

Mae Cannon 25:51

Yes, well, we would love for you to be a constituent and a supporter. So, what we're looking for is advocates. We're looking for people who are willing to engage by either helping us connect with your churches, by... you can engage by doing small group studies. So, we have a small group study, that's an introduction to the Israeli Palestinian conflict. We encourage people to sign up for our bulletins, which we send them out every Friday. And it's just a snapshot of the top news coming from the Middle East. And the invitation is to engage also in political advocacy.

So, one of the initiatives happening right now, I'm sure you're familiar. 100 days ago, or so, there was a journalist who was a Palestinian American Christian journalist named Shireen Abu Akleh. And Shireen was killed, and she was killed by Israeli military. And so, there is a conversation in Congress about what would justice look like for this to be done. And so, we're calling on people to call on members of Congress, for the US to do an independent investigation, which many other countries have done, and the US has not. And here, you know, Shireen Abu Akleh was an American citizen. And so, we're inviting people to contact your members of Congress, you know, in support. In support of this, you know, as one example of what it might look like to be an advocate.

Steve Kellogg 27:19

Yes, I signed up for the virtual Advocacy Summit. And we just had our lobby visit with Senator Bunt's office on Shireen, as well as the Palestinian Children and Families act to protect the children from the military detention.

Mae Cannon 27:31

Wonderful, thank you.

Steve Kellogg 27:36

So, by way of background for this next question, the Community of Christ in 2016 had a World Conference and they adopted a resolution which they numbered 1311 and it reads as follows.

Resolved, that Community of Christ specifically declares its belief in the love of God for Muslims and Jews, and we denounce all Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.

And be it further Resolved, That Community of Christ join with other Christian, Jewish, Muslim, ecumenical, and secular peace movements, in the call for peace in Israel in Palestine. We with other Christians, call for the right of the State of Israel to exist in secure borders; for the cessation of the Israeli military occupation and illegal settlements in the West Bank; and for the recognition of the State of Palestine (in accordance with the 1947 UN General Assembly resolution 18/II, 1967 UN Security Council resolution 242, and 1988 UN General Assembly resolution 43/177).

So, Community of Christ membership in Churches for Middle East Peace is part of responding to that resolution. How can Community of Christ though, which is an international institution, better work for peace in Israel and Palestine, from Churches for Middle East Peace's perspective?

Mae Cannon 29:03

Great question. And I'm so grateful for that resolution, and the fact that you're joining us in our work. I think, you know, one of the things that the denomination can do, but also that every level of engagement in the denomination can do -- so at the church level, at the individual level -- is to talk about the realities that are happening. And I think, talking about the realities that are happening from various different perspectives. So, we often elevate, you know, multiple Jewish perspectives about the Israeli Palestinian conflict.

And I think one of the things it's so important for people to understand, we often say there's not two sides to this conflict, Israelis versus Palestinians. But that there's those who work for peace and those who don't. And so, understanding that there's not a monolith in terms of Jewish perspectives, we partner with a number of Jewish organizations that are doing incredible work within the Jewish community or more broadly, to help raise awareness about some of the realities that are happening on the ground.

And similarly, I think it's critically important, just, as you mentioned, standing against Islamophobia -- partnering and working with Muslim organizations who are committed to peace. The vast majority of global Muslims are incredibly peace loving people. And so, standing up against, you know,

Islamophobia. One of the main things that we can do is speaking out against some of those false presuppositions about violence coming from certain, you know, religious perspectives.

So, you know, from our perspective, one of the great opportunities for Churches for Middle East Peace is that our voices are much stronger together than they are alone. We just had a great success -- you were talking earlier about leverage -- we were invited by the Jordanian government to set up a meeting of church leaders here in the United States. When King Abdullah came to visit, we hosted him. And we had a meeting with the King of Jordan, King Abdullah, to be able to talk about what's happening in Jerusalem. And the fact that in Jerusalem, the very things we're talking about in terms of Christians, Jews, and Muslims, having equal access to be able to worship, having their properties be protected -- that's not happening in the city of Jerusalem. And Jordan, of course, plays a special role, because they're the custodians of the holy sites in Jerusalem, not only the Muslim holy sites, but the Christian holy sites as well. And so, in that conversation, we were able to talk about what are things churches can do. And so much of it's about raising awareness, writing letters to editors, you know, talking like you've been doing to your members of Congress, raising awareness so that we can change not only the narrative, but then the political realities.

Steve Kellogg 31:57

Yes, and you mentioned our listeners. Of course, they're spread out across 60 nations around the world. Not all of them are here in the United States. So not all of them talk to US Congress, or the US President. So, do you think, you see an international sort of perspective on how members and friends of Community of Christ can either individually or collectively in the places that they are continue that process of Elevate, Educate and Advocate?

Mae Cannon 32:24

Absolutely. We are so proud... you know, one of the things that we did last year, during the May escalations between Gaza and Israel, we put out a global letter from church leaders to the United Nations. And so, we do a lot of advocacy, specifically with the United Nations, for example. And so, wherever listeners live, you know, they would be able to engage with their member states to be able to advocate in that regard. And we are a part of a coalition that includes the UK and Europe as well. And so, if people wherever you are, have questions about "where are there similar movements?", where you're living, there are movements all over the world, that are committed to similar beliefs of holistic peacebuilding, advocating for justice, calling for an end to the occupation in settlements, as you mentioned, in your resolution. And so global advocacy is absolutely critical.

Steve Kellogg 33:22

And I know that you've had recently a series about Christian Zionism. For those who in their faith traditions have kind of had this perception that ultimately, the things that are happening there are the things that God ordained, so to speak, how do we go about helping people have a different perspective on what's happening there from a religious perspective?

Mae Cannon 33:45

You know, I think it's really critical to start where people are at. So, depending on different denominations, or different churches, some care very deeply about what the Bible says. And so,

opening up the Bible, to study it together. To say, “what does the Bible say about these issues?”, you know, can be a place to start. Other times, it's more, you know, history is more important or more valuable. And so, starting with the conversation about history, from various different perspectives.

I would encourage people the series that you're talking about, on Christian Zionism, we hosted Colin Chapman, and he spoke about his new book. All of those videos are available on our YouTube. And this fall, we'll be doing another we're calling those mini courses. You know, I think his was four different sessions. We'll be doing another mini course based on a book that I edited. That's called ***A Land Full of God***, that had 30 different chapters, but chapters from historians, politicians, theologians, you know, pastors and Christian leaders. And so, we'll be doing a mini course highlighting some of those authors from that book, that will talk about some of the very, you know, presuppositions that different Christians might start with, and helping expand our perspectives and learn together as a part of that study.

Steve Kellogg 35:01

Wonderful. So, what have I not asked that I should have asked that you'd like to respond to?

Mae Cannon 35:08

What have you not asked? You know, I think you asked this earlier. One of the things that people often ask is what keeps us in the game? You know, I feel like my recruitment pitch for joining CMEP... you know, we're always looking for donors. We're very, very small. Our budget is only about \$500,000. And we have about 12 staff members, including three staff members in the Middle East. And, you know, one of the things people often ask is, what keeps you in the game? Like, why do you continue to do this work? And I feel like my recruitment pitch is come and work with us towards peace, we never win, we never win! We never see -- you know, when you're feeding hungry children, you see that their bellies are fed, but when you're doing peace work, we don't see peace yet. But yet we believe it's possible.

And so, one of the things that just inspires me so much are the lives of the people in the Middle East who don't give up hope, who continue to be wonderful, kind, hospitable people. You know, I think about... I have a dear friend named Shireen, who's raising these four young Palestinian children in Bethlehem. And I think about the way they go to school every day, even in the midst of living under occupation. Even in the midst of the challenges that they daily experience. They are some of the most loving people I know. And so, if they have not given up hope, how can we give up hope? And I think that's inspiring. You know, for those of us who are in this work, for us to continue to stay at it, I think is really critical.

Steve Kellogg 36:44

And of course, you know, kind of what they're experiencing, because you've been there. So, can you describe for us what going through a checkpoint is like or what seeing the wall is like, or what some of the demolitions if you've observed any of that, what ... what's going on there when those are happening?

Mae Cannon 36:58

Yeah, well, you know, for example, there's a village right outside of Bethlehem that's called Al-Walaja and Al-Walaja is one of the villages that's kind of caught in between where the municipal lines were

drawn for Jerusalem, and Bethlehem. It's a Palestinian village. Well, in the early 2000s, the Israelis began to build a separation barrier. The Israelis call the wall, the security fence, and it is a fence in some places. In cities, it is twice as tall and three times as long as the Berlin Wall. And so, it's hard to imagine. You know, many of the Palestinian homes have this, this huge concrete barrier right outside of their homes. And in Al-Walaja, the village is almost completely surrounded by this wall. And so, in some of the villages that are in these closed off areas, children to go to school actually have to wait for Israeli security guards to open the gate for them to be able to even leave their village to be able to go to school. And you might think, oh, you know, I've heard some people describe it's just a little bit worse than airport security. But that's why I'd encourage people to watch this film called *The Present*, because that's just not the case.

Here you have young Israeli soldiers who even if they have the best of intentions, they're heading... sitting out in the hot sun for hours. You know, they're bored, there's nothing to do other than... and so often, they become rude and impolite, and they sometimes harass. And then you know, they have weapons. And so, the power differential for Palestinians that are, be they children or adults, have to go through the daily humiliation of subjecting themselves to the authorities of these young Israeli soldiers, who again are, you know, from their perspective, just doing their jobs. And so, one of the groups we work with actually, is called Breaking the Silence. And it's a group of Israeli soldiers who tell about the experiences of being a soldier, and the effects of that, but they also talk about many of the things that they've done to Palestinians that are just horrible -- horrible to witness or horrible, certainly to experience. And so those are just snapshots of some of what that can be like.

Steve Kellogg 39:22

And you've also, of course, interacted with Christian churches there in Israel and Palestine, what I guess what... what effect is this conflict having on them as Christians over there?

Mae Cannon 39:34

Sure, well, the primary effect is that the church is disappearing. Christians in Palestine, you know, historically used to make up large percentages of the population. But now in the occupied Palestinian territories the Christian population is only between 1% and 2%. And so, you know, when you think of Bethlehem being the place where Jesus was born -- I've been there for Christmas many times. Often there are so few Christians that there are as many Muslims celebrating Christmas -- because it's a holiday, and it's exciting, you know -- than it actually being a Christian holiday because the Christians have essentially disappeared.

And I think it's really important for people to understand the Christians are not leaving because of Muslim persecution. You know, often you hear that narrative and Muslim persecution does exist in the Middle East. But in Palestine, Christians and Muslims work side by side. You know, you're neighbors with Christians and Muslims. There's Christians and Muslims that are a part of the Palestinian government. So, the idea that Palestinian Christians are leaving because of Muslim persecution is just not true. They're leaving because of the political realities that make life there so terribly difficult. And the economy is devastated because of the occupation. And, you know, so a lot of Palestinian Christians have access to Western nations, they can get visas to be able to leave. And so, they leave to be able to get good jobs in Canada, or the United States or South America or other parts of the world. And Muslim

Palestinians in general don't make as much money, so they don't have the financial resources to leave. But also internationally, a lot of countries won't give Muslim Palestinians visas, you know, to be able to live somewhere else.

Steve Kellogg 41:21

So, what... I guess... well I think we can say, that this... this movie that you're talking about is probably not popular among governmental officials, right, if we were to show that to a governmental official, would they be receptive to that? The one about *The Present?*

Mae Cannon 41:38

You know, I think as human beings, they would be receptive to that. I think as politicians there's a lot less room. And what I mean by that is, a part of the reality for members of Congress is if members of Congress do not take a stand that is unilaterally pro-Israel, many of them can't be reelected. And so, they feel like they don't have the political room to be able to shift their perspectives. You know, and a lot of our argument is if you truly care about the legitimate security needs of Israel, of which there are legitimate security needs, you have to care about their Palestinian neighbors.

I would point people to... there was an excellent film that actually won an Academy Award several years ago called *The Gatekeepers*, and it was retired leaders of the Shin Bet, you know, the highest forms of Israeli military intelligence. And these leaders said the occupation is terrible for the future of Israel. So, if you can't care about Palestinians, for their own sake, care about Palestinians, you know, for the sake of, you know, Israel, which by the way, is only 80% Jewish. 20% of the Israeli population are actually Palestinian citizens of Israel.

And so, part of the work that we have to do, and we have a long way to go, is to create a safety net, so that if our members of Congress start to vote differently on issues related to Palestine and Israel, that they actually won't lose their jobs, that they actually still would be able to be reelected, which currently is not the reality.

Steve Kellogg 43:12

It's a real challenge. Well, I certainly want to thank you for your time. If there's anything else you'd like to tell our listeners, we'd be happy to have you share that, or any other questions that you'd like me to ask that I haven't, please feel free to say those as well.

Mae Cannon 43:29

Well, we are so grateful for you, for Community of Christ for your engagement. We would love to, you know, if there's ever opportunities to speak at events you have, we would love to. You know, we have incredible staff who are very educated, many are far more articulate than I. So, we'd love to be engaged in that way. And you know, one of the things we also do is taking people to the land. And so, if you would ever like to do a denominational trip with us, or if churches would like to do a trip, we would invite you to come and see because it's a life changing, transformative experience to be in the place, but not only to be in the place to meet the people there

Steve Kellogg 44:06

Yeah, To see what is currently happening and what needs to happen for peace to be a possibility.

Mae Cannon

That's right.

Steve Kellogg

Well, then, thank you Mae, I'll call you Mae now.

Mae Cannon

Yes.

Steve Kellogg

For our listeners, you can find out more about helping promote peace with Churches for Middle East Peace, the issues they are addressing, the latest CMEP news and public statements about current events, tools to take action to express your views to US governmental representatives, and more by visiting CMEP.org and we will include that contact information in the podcast overview description on the Project Zion website.

This is Grounds for Peace, part of Project Zion Podcast.

I'm Steve Kellogg. Thank you for listening.

Josh Mangelson 45:06

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