

# Grounds for Peace | Israel, Palestine, and Zionism

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Israel Palestine conflict, Zionism, Community of Christ, Churches for Middle East peace, Christian Zionism, Jewish Zionism, Palestinian Christians.

## SPEAKERS

John Hamer, Paul Bethel, Diana Bethel, Steve Kellogg, Chris Peters, Andrew Bolton, Robin Linkhart

### **Robin Linkhart** 00:28

Hello and welcome to Grounds for Peace, a Project Zion Podcast series where we explore what it looks like to follow Jesus, the Peaceful One, and ask difficult questions about how people of faith can make a difference in today's world. I'm your host, Robin Linkhart, and I'm here with Andrew Bolton and a whole team of folks who will be talking about Israel, Palestine, and what is really Zion. The Middle East has been in the middle of a war with a fragile cease fire. People were very disturbed by the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023 with 1200 people killed and over 200 hostages taken. People are very disturbed since then, by the over 47,000 Palestinians killed in Gaza and over 100,000 injured, many women and children. Amnesty International, a responsible human rights organization is calling it genocide in Gaza. President Trump is talking about moving all Palestinians out of Gaza. Others call this ethnic cleansing. Violence against Palestinians on the West Bank is increasing. The word Zion is used when we talk about Jerusalem and Israel. There is Jewish Zionism - return of Jews to their homeland, the founding of the State of Israel. There is Christian Zionism - support by Christians for the return of Jews to the Holy Land, support for the current state of Israel. Then Community of Christ uses the word Zion, "Seek to bring forth and establish the cause of Zion" are the words used at the very beginning of the Latter Day Saint movement in April, 1829. In Jewish Zionism, Christian Zionism and Community of Christ Zionism, are they all the same, or are they significantly different? Are these zionisms part of the conflict or part of the peacemaking? Today, we have seven people - members of a Community of Christ peace delegation who traveled to Israel/Palestine recently. This is a first - a group of church members, three of whom are pastors, going as a peace delegation into a war zone. Andrew, do you want to say a few words about this?

### **Andrew Bolton** 03:19

Yes, let's have each member of the delegation introduce themselves, say where they're from and their current role in Community of Christ. I'll start. So, I'm Andrew Bolton from Leicester, England. We live five minutes walk from our Community of Christ congregation just around the corner. This was my third trip to Israel/Palestine, and as you've already said, Robin, this is the first time we've had a peace delegation going to a war zone from the church. So, let's meet the team. I'll start with Paul. And Paul, you choose somebody else to go next.

### **Diana Bethel** 03:57

I'm Paul Bethel. I am co-pastor of the Gardena, California congregation. I'm also a member of the GPNW North America Climate Justice Team, and I'll make a note that I was blissfully unaware of issues in the Middle East, until Andrew ruined it for me, and now I have an awareness that I can't shake. So Chris, why don't you take it from there?

**Chris Peters** 04:29

All right. Thank you, Paul. My name is Chris Peters. I live in Omaha, Nebraska. I'm an adult convert to the church. I took my confirmation under Section 164 after having been baptized Methodist as a child. I became aware of Community of Christ when I married my wife, Anna, who was a lifelong member. Anna was also Andrew's neighbor at Harvest Hills in Independence, and that's how I became aware of the Church and its peace and justice ministries, which really resonate with me. I'm also affiliated with Unitarian Universalists, where I have a regular gig as Sunday morning pianist for an Omaha congregation. For Community of Christ, my membership is in a retreat-based congregation that meets at our local campground four times a year. And Diana, I'll hand it to you.

**Diana Bethel** 05:17

Okay. My name is Diana Bethel. I live in Honolulu, Hawaii. I attend the Kalihi congregation in Honolulu, as well as the Gardena congregation in California. I'm also a member of the peace and social concerns committee of the Honolulu Friends Meeting or the Quakers, which has a branch in Honolulu. I learned quite a lot on this trip to the Middle East, and some of the things really surprised me and others confirmed what I had heard, and hope to share it with more people what I learned. John?

**John Hamer** 05:59

Thanks. I'm John Hamer. I live in downtown Toronto, Canada, where I serve as the pastor of the Community of Christ Toronto congregation. I also am the host of Community of Christ in Canada's Beyond the Walls global ministry. And I'm also the, get to serve as Community of Christ in Canada's one of our two observer members of the Canadian Council of Churches. So, I'm very much interested in both ecumenism and also interfaith work. My congregation created a an affiliate charity called, Encounter World Religions, where we seek to promote peace among different peoples of different religions, by by through education. And so it's a program, for example, where children in, let's say, the local sectarian school, Muslim school, will be taught about Judaism and then go to the synagogue and actually experience a Shabbat, and likewise, in the Jewish schools, will go to a Friday prayers at, in a mosque and so on, in order to promote that kind of peace through mutual understanding. I've long been, you know, very concerned about, very interested in history, but history of the Holy Land, and concerned about peace there. Back in university, when there was, you know, now, now, so many years ago, I was scheduled to spend a whole year as a teaching assistant in in Jerusalem. That was a trip that was canceled because of Saddam Hussein's attack on Kuwait, and that included sending missiles towards Jerusalem. And so, I've never been able to go until because there's always, it's never been peaceful. And so, just, I finally, when, when Andrew came and said, the church is for Middle East peace, this wonderful ecumenical group is going to go. We just, I said, Look, well, I'm going to go, and I don't care how, how bad it gets, we're going to, we're going to continue and make this happen, and so and so. Speaking of churches for Middle East peace, I'll send it now to Steve.

**Steve Kellogg** 08:15

Thank you, John. I'm Steve Kellogg. I live in Independence Missouri, and I attend the Beacon Heights congregation. I'm also a member of the World Church Peace and Justice Team, and I am the Community of Christ board member representative the Church's Middle East Peace that we'll talk about a little bit later. In addition to being active in Community of Christ, I also coordinate the Independence Missouri Friends Committee on National Legislation, advocacy team, and I've been made the token representative for J Street, the Jewish advocacy organization here in the Kansas City area. You

**Robin Linkhart 08:51**

You first heard the story of the American colony from Maine that came to Jaffa in 1866 to help support Jews return to Palestine. John, can you briefly summarize the history there? What is the significance of this story today?

**John Hamer 09:09**

So, yeah, our tradition, Latter Day Saint movement began as an idea of restoring all things, and one of those ideas was a restoration of the Jewish people who have been in diaspora since all the way back, frankly, since the destruction of Solomon's temple, but more especially again, since the Roman destruction of the Second Temple and so early on in the Restoration, there was a an apostle that was sent to dedicate this Palestine, this part of the Ottoman Empire, this area that had included the historic biblical lands for a regathering of the Jewish people. And part of that was that all of the earliest members of our movement were apocalyptic literalists, and so they believed that the end of the world was at hand and was going to happen, very likely in their own lifetime. And so when it didn't happen in the first generation, a smaller Latter Day Saint group that was not affiliated with Brigham Young or the Reorganization, but later had members who were gathered into the Reorganization, decided to bring this about by building a model colony, and so they pre-fabricated homes and businesses and gathered seeds and other kinds of agricultural implements in their homes in Maine, and they chartered a ship, and they made it all the way across to Palestine, part of The Ottoman Empire. They got the US Secretary of State to write a letter to the Ottoman Sultan to try to get them permission for settling there. They weren't very successful at that. They prefabricated all of these homes. They built what was called the American colony, and they tried to do farming and things. They were completely unaware of how agriculture worked in a different climate. Maine, as you can imagine, has a very different climate than Israel/Palestine. And so, the colony, in a lot of sense, didn't work. And yet, in some senses, it actually provided a model, then for later, Jewish Europeans who were looking at this and looking for a homeland, and indeed, the the place where the, the Latter Day Saint colony, the American colony, was founded, actually grows into where Tel Aviv is. And so, there is an important echoes of what ended up happening. And some of the members, including members who were became part of the Reorganization stayed there. And the RLDS church, in fact, had a, had a school in Jerusalem at the beginning of the 20th century. And so we have a part in this story, and we wanted to honor that in our trip. And so, before we joined with the rest of Canadian, I'm sorry, of Churches for Middle East Peace, the other delegation, we started at the American colony, also called the German colony, but in some ways, the Latter Day Saint colony, the Community of Christ, historic district of Joppa, of Tel Aviv.

**Robin Linkhart 12:26**

Thanks, John. Then for ten days you were part of a study tour with Churches for Middle East Peace, based in Washington DC. I understand Community of Christ is a member of this ecumenical organization and that you Steve Kellogg represent the church on the board. Please tell us a bit about Churches for Middle East Peace and the tour that began in Jerusalem. I understand your tour was dual narrative – tell us more about what that means Steve?

**Steve Kellogg** 13:00 Well, thank you, Robin, at the recommendation of the World Church Peace and Justice Team, Community of Christ did become a member of Churches for Middle East Peace, one of the some 35 member communions in 2022 and that recommendation and the decision to join was in response to World Conference resolution 1311 which says that Community of Christ should join with other Christian, Jewish, Muslim, ecumenical and secular peace movements in the call for peace in Israel and Palestine. So, Churches for Middle East Peace, or CMEP, as we like to abbreviate it. CMEP is a collaboration of member communities with a broad range of perspectives, and I'll just name a few to give you an example. For example, the Alliance of Baptists, the Antioch and Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Christian Church, or Disciples of Christ, the Mennonite Central Committee, the Presbyterian Church, the United Methodist Church. The United Methodist Church is board of Church and Society, and there are some non, non-denominational groups, but nonetheless, religiously affiliated, like Friends Committee on National Legislation, the arm, the American Friends Service Committee, Pax Christi and so on. What CMEP does is mobilize Christians in the United States to advocate for equality, human rights, security and justice for Israelis and Palestinians and all the people of the Middle East. And CMEP uses three avenues for engaging Christian understanding of the response to the conditions that are in the Middle East. Those are educate, elevate and advocate. And by educate, we're talking about having webinars and lectures that they produce. They do daily news updates about the conditions in the Middle East. They provide a whole curriculum on the holy land that churches can work through in about a five week period. They have movie and reading list recommendations to watch to get information about the conditions and how they developed. They do Lenten and Advent devotionals that people can use in their preparations for Easter and Advent, and they lead guided tours to the Middle East and to the Holy Land, which is what we participated in, as well. In terms of elevation, they like to uplift the voices of Palestinian peacemakers in the Middle East, and they're connected with many who are trying to promote peace in spite of all the conflicts. They do this through having gatherings and conferences like the And Still We Rise Women's Conference, which is what ended the tour that we took in November. And they also try to help congregations partner with them to bring about awareness in their congregations, to promote peace, for advocacy. They provide opportunities for individuals, groups, churches and communion to advocate for just peace policies in the Middle East by raising individual constituent voices and going to Capitol Hill and attending government meetings, and they produce an Advocacy Summit every year for people to come to Washington and make their voices heard about what needs to be done to bring about peace. So, following our visit in Jaffa, which was already educational, includes very insightful moments with not only visiting the American colony, but because of the connections of Jean Holmes, who was a welcome guest for us there a welcome to host for us there. She connected up, connected us up with the former Israeli ambassador of the US, Ambassador Michael Oren. And so, we had an insightful discussion with him, from an Israeli ambassador's perspective on what was going on and some of the causes and needs to help resolve the conflicts. And then we began the CMEP, or the Churches for Middle East Peace portion of the trip with education, again, by visiting Jerusalem and

seeing the holy sites that included not only the Temple Mount, but the Chapel of Dominus Flevit, which commemorate, commemorating where Jesus wept over Jerusalem, we went to the Church of all Nations, which was built over the rock of agony, committed commemorating where Jesus, you know, wept and blood, where Jesus sweat blood in agony before his crucifixion. We went to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which commemorated the site of Jesus's crucifixion burial, the church of the ascension on the Mount of Olives and many more. And we walk through the many quarters of Jerusalem, the four quarters that are specifically designated as the Muslim Quarter, the Christian Quarter, the Armenian Quarter and the Jewish Quarter, that portion of the tour was led by an Israeli and a Palestinian tour guide who shared the significance of those places and the current situation surrounding them and their family and religious perspectives giving us two insights, or dual insights, or dual narratives, as we like to call it about what we were seeing and what has happened since the time that began that created the conditions that currently exist in the Holy Land. CMEP is also part of meetings with Israeli and Palestinian peacemakers from the Israeli Committee Against Home Demolitions. We and the Palestinian Conflict Transformation Center and the Holy Land Trust, which fosters peace and justice and understanding in Palestine. And we got Christian perspectives by meeting with Palestinian Christians at the Bethlehem Bible college the Dar Al khalimi University, and shared an evening with Christian pastors and leaders elevating their stories and hopes for a peaceful future in the midst of this current conflict. We walked the separation barrier between Israel and Palestine. We passed through Israeli checkpoints to visit sites in the occupied territories of the West Bank, and we ended the tour, as I mentioned earlier at the And Still We Rise Conference, elevating the voices of Palestinian women and their efforts to encourage each other to act in hope and work for peace in the future.

**Robin Linkhart 19:38**

Thank you. Steve, Paul Bethel, you and your wife, Jackie, are pastors in a Los Angeles congregation. What did you learn and what really stands out for you?

**Paul Bethel 19:54**

Yeah, well, unlike some of the people on our trip, I'm not an educator, I'm not a theologian, I'm not a historian or a writer, so my perspectives might have been maybe from a position of being least informed, but there are a couple things that were kind of eye opening for me and I'll have to kind of admit to being naive. But you know, one thing was the whole concept of an Arab Christian, I think our media sometimes portrays the whole issue in the Middle East as between Muslims and the rest of the universe, generally portraying Muslims/Arabs, as the bad guys. So having grown up in a country with kind of a shared colonist paradigm, without thinking about it, I kind of considered Christians in Palestine, having been converted by some do good or missionary in the last 100 years or whatever. But at one of our meetings, a young Palestinian man shared that his people, for as long as the family can remember, were from a little town called Beit Sahour, and we would call it "shepherd's field," and this is where the angels first came to announce the good news. And he claimed, and he considered that his people were the first Christians. They were the first to hear the good news that the angels were singing about. They were the first to witness and see the baby Jesus. And he made the comment that his people have been the Christian stewards of that holy land for the last 2000 years. So, nobody converted anybody here. They were Christians long before we were. The other realization, I think, was the difference between Latin Christians and the rest of the world, for whatever reason, the stories that I've heard in the movies I've seen, you know when, when the Crusades came about, in my mind, it was



like a volleyball team. They all switched sides. So, now everybody on one side is wearing the same outfit. The other side of the net's wearing another but that's not really the case. There have been Christians in Jerusalem for since out 2- 300. The Armenian Quarter that we visited, and Armenia was evidently the first nation to adopt Christianity, before Rome, and they've had a Christian presence there since around, I don't know, 300. And, when the Crusades came in, my idea that, you know, there were no Christians. There were Christians in Jerusalem all during this time. And that was kind of a realization, that it was a paradigm shift for me. But then the stories that we heard from people about living as a Palestinian in occupied Palestine was kind of unnerving. A young woman who actually has a US passport, she grew up in the states, but she felt the need to go back to her roots. She said she went to visit a friend, I think, in Ramallah, and she was coming home. And if this is 50 miles away, she's coming home. And of course, she had to go through several checkpoints. And so, she showed her US passport to the, to the young soldier who stopped her and he saw her Palestinian ID card in the bottom of her purse, and he said, No, put your passport away. I want your Palestinian ID card. And she was kept waiting at that checkpoint for eight hours before she was allowed to go on her way. A pastor in Bethlehem, He was on his way home with his son, and he's, I think he's Methodist, but he has the collar. He was going home from work and but by the checkpoint that he passes twice a day, and the soldier on duty looked at his ID card and told him he can't pass. And he explained, I I'm going home. I passed this checkpoint every day, twice a day, and you know, why would I not be allowed to go through? And he just said, because I don't want to let you, so you can't. And so, he had to take a roundabout way to bypass that checkpoint. Add another hour to his drive. But he finally got home an hour later. You know, there's, there's zones where Palestinians cannot go into. The realization that it's kind of disturbingly similar to the gold star that Jews were forced to wear in Europe in World War Two. But Palestinian vehicles have different color license plates, so the Palestinian vehicles either have white or green, and Israeli license plates are kind of a yellowish or orange. But this allows the police, the army, the crossing guards, to at a glance, know who's approaching, they know who to wave through and who they can stop and question, hold up or harass. It was interesting on our, we were flying home before everyone else, and we were in Jericho, and our hotel was about a mile away from route one, the main road that goes into Jerusalem to the airport. And in that mile and a half distance, our cab picked us up at 7pm our we had a midnight flight, so we had plenty of time and the driver said, well, the army just closed the road between our hotel and route one. You almost felt like, well, why don't I just carry my luggage around and pick us up on the other side? But he said, Don't worry, we still have plenty of time. So, we had to go through Jericho and circle around on back roads, and about an hour later, we hit, got on route one, about 300 yards south of where that checkpoint was that stopped, stopped the road. So, you know, we're, we have a personal testimony about the arbitrary road closures that Palestinians have to endure as part of their life every day. And I'll just unscripted, but having been there now, I can visualize how the Hamdan Billal, the director of the documentary that won the Academy Award, how he can go home and he can be surrounded by masked settlers who drag him out and beat him and then on his, in the, in the ambulance on his way to the hospital, the army stops him and holds him for another day before he can get medical attention. It's mind boggling, but it's an awareness that now I can't, I can't ignore it, and when I see these news stories, I feel like I have to whenever I can. I have to share my perspective that Goliath and David, it's Israel is no longer David, they're the giant. So anyway, let's move on to someone else.

**Robin Linkhart 28:53**

Thank you so much. Paul. Chris Peters, you live in Omaha, Nebraska. I hear you had difficulties with flights and then had a really rough start on the tour. Please tell us more about that. After all your hassle, was the trip worthwhile for you?

**Chris Peters** 30:19

Yes, that's right, and yes, it was. I had originally booked my flight to leave Omaha a day early to spend some time in Europe, to acclimate myself to the time zone before I moved on to Tel Aviv the next day. My first flight was booked with layover in Amsterdam. I chose them specifically because I have some family there, and I wanted to start my trip, kind of framing myself by visiting the Anne Frank House. That flight was canceled due to security concerns by the airline. I rebooked with option number two, which was an Air France flight through Paris. That one also got canceled just the day before departure. I finally rebooked a successful flight on my third attempt with a layover in Dubai. That finally was successful, and I made it through an 18-hour layover at their airport, and I arrived in Tel Aviv the day after the rest of our group. Now, I had been prepared in advance for what to expect through customs. I did not anticipate my actual experience as a first-time visitor to their country. I got redirected to an interview with the most threatening immigration agent you could ever expect. The guy even looked like a biker. I mean, I know we support as a church, the worth and dignity of all people, but this was not a man I would want to meet in a dark alley, and he had the personality to match. From the outset, he treated me like I was unwanted, as someone who actually wanted to visit Israel in the middle of wartime. He was absolutely convinced I had some kind of criminal intent. He was suspicious, because out of this group, Andrew was the only person I'd ever spent time with in person, and I had no record of any kind of social media friendship with any of these people before the, before the trip, this agent threatened to deport me, threatened to report me to Interpol so that I could never travel internationally again, and I do some charity work in other countries. So, if he'd followed through in that threat, that could have put a serious crimp in our other work that we do around the world. But in the end, he didn't hear whatever keyword it was that he was looking for, and he finally let me move on to another agent. If this guy was the bad cop, the next person was the good cop, and our conversation was entirely friendly. After 10 minutes, she gave me my entry card and I finally made it out to the arrivals lobby, lobby to meet Steve, who had hired a taxi to take me to meet the rest of the group. Was it worth it? Absolutely. I would absolutely do this again, because there's so much more to learn, but hopefully next time, without the immigration hassle, like I said, I learned so much more than I ever expected, which Paul has already explained better than I ever could. But of course, we only scratched the surface. I do hope to have the opportunity again, if it comes up. Ironically, my way out of the country was relatively easy, especially compared to what Paul just described. The road was not closed for me. We got to the checkpoint, the guard stopped my taxi and looked inside, saw from my complexion that I was not local, and I was sent on my way without any further issue. That's not the kind of treatment that any Palestinian could ever hope for, and that is what we know now that we did not know before. And Robin back to you.

**Robin Linkhart** 32:53

Thank you so much, Chris. John Hamer, you live in Toronto, Canada, and as you said earlier, you pastor a large online congregation. We're interested to hear your key learnings from this trip, and I understand you were sharing moments through video during the trip. Is that right?

**John Hamer** 34:22

Yeah, absolutely. The ministry's called Beyond the Walls. And part of that means is that we take it on the road and so it is not, we have a headquarters at our facility in downtown Toronto, which we call our center place after the Restoration tradition idea of have, of the center place in Independence, Missouri, but, but we have done live streams from everywhere, from Haiti to Australia and England and also um. Uh, Rome, and also now from Palestine, Jerusalem and from Israel. And so, one of the reasons why I did want to be part of this is that this, one of the things that we can actually do, you know, as individuals, we're a small church, is raise awareness. And one of the ways that we can, I think, get to a place where there's actually a basis for change, where we can actually, you know, plant acorns that can be eventually build oaks of peace, is through the sharing of stories and so, and so, that media the ability to actually get a sense of it by actually sharing video. So, we were able to do one of I was able to record one of our peace lessons from the hostile that we were able to stay at the hotel, which is actually in the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem and so from the rooftop of that, with the Temple Mount, the Dome of the Rock, and also all of this, the incredible sites, the Mount of Olives, everything in the background, you know, people were able to experience that, you know, really, in the midst of an ongoing, you know, nearby war. It wasn't a war immediately in within Jerusalem, in that sense, but in other words, they were able to experience that with us while we were there. We were able to walk along the security barrier in, in the video and also in a, you know, to Paul, to Paul's learning, you know, his insight, that he had the idea that, that there is a population of Christian Palestinians who go all the way back to the very beginning, to the first Christians. So, being able to, we were able to go to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which is one of these remarkable, shared ecumenical churches where different parts are maintained by different churches. And we went to the Grotto of the Nativity itself, and with permission from the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, with permission of the Armenian patriarch, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, all of the different leaders, they allowed us to film a scripture service, prayer and meditation service that we had in the Grotto of the, of the meditation of the, of the Nativity for our Christmas Eve service. And so, it was just a remarkable outpouring. I thought of Christian unity that we were, we were treated so well by the Christians there who were, who were sharing their story with us and one of the things that was just so remarkable to me was a meeting that we went to in Bethlehem, of all of these Christian leaders of multiple generations, and they're now in a situation where the original war that saw the birth of the State of Israel back in the 1940s you know, this is now 80 years later. The war where the rest of the Palestinian lands have been occupied by Israel, is now 60 years that we're in a place where for the Palestinian people, there is real generational despair, because there has been, there has been only a downward trend. There has been very little way to hold out hope. And so, we saw within the, within the generations of the Christian community, the old timers, let's say, who still were trying to hold out that hope, but saying we're told, sort of told us we feel abandoned by Christians in the West. And I, my job has been as a pastor, as a priest, as a bishop, my job has been to hold out that hope for all of my congregants, and also for the broader community. And I, and I'm feeling unable to do that anymore. We're out of any more energy like that. And the youngest members were saying, Yeah, we have, we've been told this by our parents for all these times. But there's no hope. Why wouldn't I immigrate now to the west? I know that's what the occupier, what the Israelis want us to do. They want



us all to leave so that we will abandon our communities, our land, but I could go to a university in the west and have a normal life, or I can live here as a prisoner with no hope. And so, that was a, we were treated to a very open conversation. Conversation that was heart rending, and I was able to go back not only to our community or Beyond the Walls and share that there, but also, I was able to meet the very next week with the Canadian Council of Churches and share those same stories and messages with the leaders of all of the denominations, Christian denominations in Canada. And that was very much listened to and the council took up, you know, made us, took up a shared statement. And you know, we're also working on what more can Christians in Canada do to help bring about Middle East peace and specifically to have solidarity with Christians in Palestine. And so, the one other takeaway that I guess I had that I knew about, because I'm by profession, I've been a map maker, and maps are something that I've loved since I was very young. So, I was very aware of, you know, the situation of the occupation from maps, what that, what that looks like on maps, the decline of Palestinian control over lands, and movement of Palestinians. But when I saw it on the ground, it's just remarkable, the inability to have any kind of freedom of movement, any kind of you know, where you are making your own town increasingly becomes a prison that you're kept in and you have no say and in control ever. And although the Israel/Palestine conflict is sometimes gaged, I think, in the West, only as a, an argument. Well, Israel has a right to defend itself, and that is always as if that's the, as if that's the only question here. The reality is, is that when you are a military occupying power, which the Israeli military has been since that 1948 war, since that 1967 war. So, for 58 and 77 years, you are subject under the Geneva Convention to ensure some basic human rights, and one of those is you're not allowed to expropriate land from occupied people, and you're not allowed to transfer populations out or transfer populations in. And that is completely the, been the program, unfortunately, of the Israeli government ever since Netanyahu really has been in charge. And so, the reality of settlements is that is contrary to the Geneva Conventions. It's a war crime. It does nothing to further the defense of Israel, but it is does everything to make this problem completely intractable. As long as those war crimes continue from the Israeli side, there's it's almost impossible to imagine any kind of peace.

**Robin Linkhart** 41:54

Thank you, John. Diana Bethel, you are a PhD anthropologist. You hang out with Quakers, and you are a lifetime Community of Christ member. You and Jackie attended a three-day Christian Palestinian Women's Summit at the end of your tour. Now we've laid it on the table that many of us think, or have thought in the past, that all Palestinians are Muslim. So, tell us more about Christian Palestinians, and specifically, what did you learn from your Palestinian Christian sisters over the three days of that particular summit.

**Diana Bethel** 42:38

Yeah, it does surprise people to learn that there are Palestinian Christians. It's probably because we know so little about Palestine in general, and we rarely hear Palestinian voices in our mainstream media. As Paul mentioned, Palestinian Christians were among the earliest Christians, and some of the oldest Christian communities in the world are in Palestine. In fact, many of Christianity's holiest sites are in Palestine, and there used to be a lot of Christians in Palestine. 100 years ago, 10% of the total population was Christian in 1950 in Bethlehem, for example, 86% were Christian. That's way down today, and that decline is mirrored throughout Israel and Palestine. This is mainly because of the Israeli

military occupation land seizures and the many restrictions on freedom of speech and freedom of movement, which have led to high unemployment and have stifled economic development, but also especially in the case of Bethlehem and other religious tourism destinations. It's because of the near total collapse in religious tourism after the horrific Hamas led attack on October 7, 2023. So, we attended the conference, so we felt incredibly blessed and grateful. The Palestinian Women's Summit was called And Still We Rise. And it was a celebration of the strength and leadership of Palestinian women in their families, communities and churches, and it created a safe space to connect, share and organize around peace, human rights and spiritual growth. The gathering fostered a powerful sense of solidarity and collective purpose among women committed to peace and liberation. One of my major takeaways was the central role of *samud*, the Arabic word for resilience. We saw it throughout our trip in Palestine city and culture, art and song, as well as in theology. It's a defining principle that expresses spiritual and cultural perseverance in the face of oppression. We saw it articulated in the liberation theologies developed by Palestinian theologians from Christian colleges and universities represented at the summit. One theology, the theology of the wall, views the separation barrier as a tool of domination and symbol of injustice. But Palestinian graffiti artists have turned the wall into a massive canvas, sending a powerful message to the world that expresses their grief, hope and struggle for Palestinian freedom. Another is Christ at the checkpoint, which teaches that Jesus stands with the oppressed and calls the church to respond with truth, love and non-violence. These frameworks reject dehumanization and affirm dignity, faith, and the sacredness of Palestinian life. Palestinian leaders consider the Israeli occupation a sin and call for global Christian solidarity and leadership grounded in justice and hope. In our discussion of Palestinian liberation theologies, an emotionally charged and complex conversation emerged around forgiveness, forgiveness in the face of ongoing abuse and trauma. Many participants expressed that forgiveness toward oppressors who continue to inflict trauma felt impossible, yet there was a consensus that collective liberation requires seeing the humanity of all people, including oppressors, and that real peace demands justice. This guiding principle is clear, none of us are free until Palestinians are free. On another takeaway was how Palestinian Christians reclaimed the Bible as a source of inspiration and hope. In contrast to Zionist readings of texts like Joshua, which are used to justify conquest and displacement, Palestinian Christians highlight verses that speak to liberation and healing. We reflected on passages like God's words in Exodus. I've seen the misery of my people in Egypt, and I've come to rescue them, and Jesus, quoting Isaiah in Luke chapter four, he has sent me to set the oppressed free. For these women, the Bible is not about conquest, but about but about a God who hears the cries of the suffering and who seeks to alleviate it, not inflict it. But perhaps one of the most compelling sessions focused on women in resistance and human rights work. It featured a human rights lawyer and organization documented documenting Israeli human rights abuses. The lawyer stressed the power of education and storytelling and exposing how the occupation harms Palestinians and disproportionately harms women and their families. She shared harrowing examples, sudden home demolitions that leave mothers and children homeless and indebted for the cost of the demolition if they don't do it themselves; checkpoints that delay or prevent access to schools, jobs and hospitals, sometimes with fatal consequences for Palestinians; militant settler violence and the constant threat of arrest make daily life a persistent struggle. Palestinian women also suffer when loved ones are detained, often in night raids and without explanation. Many, including the speaker herself, lived with packed bags ready for sudden arrest, some sleep in their clothes and have emergency plans for their children. And the war in Gaza has left unimaginable devastation. Has touched nearly every family, friends and relatives have been killed, injured or displaced. Entire families have been wiped out with no

one to bury them, and a haunting new acronym, acronym has emerged, WCNSF, "Wounded child, no surviving family." Gaza now has the highest per capita number of child amputees, many operated on without anesthesia due to severe medical shortages. So, we listened to our Palestinian Christian sisters in disbelief, the depth and breadth of the discrimination and suffering was greater than we'd even imagined, yet the conference was a profound witness to their strength, their wisdom and their leadership despite unimaginable adversity. Palestinian women continue to rise with courage, vision and resilience through liberation theology, life affirming scripture and tireless human rights advocacy, they're not just telling their stories, they're shaping their futures, and they urge us also to share their stories to the world.

**Robin Linkhart 49:47**

Thank you so much, Diana. So, we started this interview talking about three kinds of Zion. Andrew, please say more about Jewish Zionism, Christian Zionism and Zion in the Community of Christ/Latter Day Saint tradition.

**Andrew Bolton 50:07**

So, Zion is this wonderful word in Latter Day Saintism. It's a four letter word that says everything is right, peace, justice, social relationships, harmony with nature. It's all there. So, it's a word I love, Zionism. So, Zion is also a word that is used 152 times in the Hebrew Bible. It's a word that means Jerusalem, or the Land of Israel, so it has that biblical meaning as well that Latter Day Saints developed further. So, Zionism is also a word that's used and Jewish Zionism really begins as a political force with Theodor Herzl in 1897. It's a secular movement, a political movement, and Jewish, religious Jewish people are resistant to this movement. They oppose it. But after the Holocaust and the terrible, gut-wrenching stories of what happened in Auschwitz and so on, it changed after World War Two. And so, the 1948 War of Independence brought into being the State of Israel as, and part of its purpose is to be a safe haven for Jews from around the world. So, Jewish Zionism is the establishment of Jewish communities, a state in the former land of Israel. So that's Jewish Zionism. It was catastrophe, however, for the Palestinians. So, in 1948 in the War of Independence, 700,000 Palestinians became refugees. The Arabic word they used for this event is Nakba, the catastrophe. And since 1967, as John has already mentioned, Israel has occupied the West Bank and Gaza, either directly or indirectly, and it's been horrendous. So, it also means that the Knesset, the Jewish parliament, rules 12 million people, but 5 million can't vote. They're the Palestinians. Christian Zionism is much older than Jewish Zionism. It goes back to the Reformation. It's a Protestant movement. There's many different kinds. Just as there are different kinds of Jewish Zionism, and it was also supportive of the return of Jews to the Holy Land to begin with. This was a matter for God to do. But then it was seen that the return of Jews to the Holy Land was the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. It proves their Bible or their interpretation of the Bible, to be true. So Christian Zionism is a really strong movement in the United States. There are, according to some accounts, 50 million Christian Zionists, one of the largest organization is CUFI, the Christians United for Israel, 10 million members, led by Pastor John Hagee in Texas. So, Christian Zionism is supportive of the State of Israel. There are posts opposed to the Palestinian presence. They refuse to use the term West Bank. It should be Judea or Samaria. They're not at all sympathetic to the plight of Christian Palestinians. So, if I'm impatient, it's particularly with Christian Zionism. And then there's Latter Day Saint Zionism. We were soft Zionists, supportive of the return of Jews to their ancient homeland, supportive because we were compassionate

about the persecution that Jews had suffered. But then also, Zion is this big, big mission of Latter Day Saintism, to create a society where there's justice, where people are united, where people are reconciled, and where poverty is abolished, and all as the worth of all persons, is celebrated today in Community of Christ. We would talk about at the heart of Zion is the work equal worth of all persons. So, we don't have is, we don't have Zion in a Latter Day Saint form in Israel/Palestine, because we don't have the equal dignity, the equal worth of all persons being celebrated. So, there's a rejection by both Christian Zionists and Israel Zionists of human rights, equal human rights for Palestinians, and also rejection of reports like Amnesty International's report that Israel is an apartheid state, or that genocide is happening in Gaza at the moment. And there's also, they would also reject the judgments of the international courts that have ruled recently on what's happening. So, three kinds of Zion, Jewish Zionism, Christian Zionism, and that's about the return of Jews to the Holy Land, and then Latter Day Saint Zion. Our Community of Christ Zionism is about a condition of reconciliation, where all people are of equal worth. Everybody enjoys equal human rights.

**Robin Linkhart** 56:05

Thank you. Andrew, that's very helpful. This was a Community of Christ peace delegation. You were interested in finding out what is going on and to also make some kind of contribution to peace in a very difficult, complicated conflict. Could each of you in just a few words, share what you have been able to do for peace in the Middle East since coming back? Paul?

**Paul Bethel** 56:39

Well, I've shared my story with our congregation and a few other congregations. I'm getting some newsletters that kind of keep me abreast of the ongoing struggles. They're one of them, the United Nations newsletter on refugees. But I, I feel like sharing, sharing that story is a church thing, I think it's a calling that as a church, we need to be spreading this message. I wrote to both of my state senators in California, asking or sharing my disappointment that they failed to support Bernie Sanders' charge to defund the arms sales to Israel, And the replies I got were so cookie cutter, you know, Israel has the right to defend itself and October was terrible. So, whatever we do is justified. So, I think there's a need for all of us to become involved in our local you know, we each have parliamentarians or congress people, whatever, whatever country we're in, and we need to be contacting those people and saying, Hey, I don't support this genocide. I want you to acknowledge the ethnic cleansing that's going on. And I've been in touch with some other local groups of people that are taking action along those lines and that are marshaling forces to contact legislators.

**Robin Linkhart** 58:59

So, thank you. Chris?

**Chris Peters** 58:53

Yes, thank you. My actually, I actually have my major plan coming up in just a couple of weeks. Earlier, at the beginning of this this group, I mentioned that I belong to a congregation that meets in a retreat format four times a year. I have my membership there. I've also been called as their CFO, but for this retreat later in April, they've also called me as their guest minister, sharing my experiences, experiences and perspectives through three different hour-long sessions on a Saturday. Uh, I'm currently head deep in uh, arranging my photos, my uh, my narrative, the way that I want to frame that

story. And we'll follow that Saturday with a Sunday morning service before we all head home to our various cities where we live. I'm hopeful that we can have some good discussions. I'm expecting I might even learn some new things based on feedback I received from them, people who are still learning this for the first time, and I'll be happy to report back later when we're done.

**Robin Linkhart** 59:57

Thank you, Chris. Diana?

**Diana Bethel** 59:58

We have a heavy responsibility as members of Community of Christ peace delegation. Our church's guiding principles require us to promote peace and justice and to embrace dignity and the worth of all persons, but we face a difficult political climate in which any hint of criticism of Israeli policy is condemned and suppressed. This is on top of an insidious strain of Christian Zionism and biblical literalism that refuses to see the humanity of Palestinians and their right to exist. Since returning to the US, I've continued to educate myself on many aspects of past, of the Palestinian situation, trying to make sense of what I saw and heard. I look for opportunities to share what I've learned, both in conversations with individuals and groups and by writing to my elected representatives in the hope of influencing us policy related to Israel and Palestine. In this regard, I follow the Friends Committee on National Legislation closely and keep in touch with our local Friends Committee Advocacy Team that keeps us informed about chances to engage with our congressional delegation on matters of peace and justice. The most recent effort we followed was a joint resolution of disapproval introduced by Bernie Sanders, which called for halting the sale of offensive weapons to Israel for use against civilians. This was the second time a resolution on this topic was introduced, and it was rejected both times, but it will undoubtedly resurface in some form as public opinion continues to shift toward greater support for Palestinian rights. And so generally speaking, I talk to everyone I can and make a point of encourage everyone I know to speak out on issues of peace and justice with their friends as well as their elected officials.

**Robin Linkhart** 1:01:48

Thank you, Diana. John?

**John Hamer** 1:01:52

We of course, have shared videos and of both lessons, but also sacred experiences, worship at the holy sites with the Beyond the Walls community or online ministry. Beyond the Walls, also as part of its internet outreach, our YouTube channel, which is Centre Place TV, center place in our is spelled the Canadian way for us. So it's C, E, N, T, R, E, center place TV, and that now has over 80,000 subscribers. And so, every Tuesday, I do a lecture on a broad range of topics in history, church history, religious history, philosophy, theology. And so, we have done several that, several lectures that are on these topics, so that we can kind of have a grounding, or grounding in education that is deeper and less fraught with, kind of the surface of the news cycle. Now, the hostage taking, the that what's going on in Gaza immediately. But rather, let's look at some of the some of the deeper, longer issues. And so, for example, we had a lecture since I got back on Christian Zionism. So, we told our little part of the story that we talked about the American colony, but in the broader thing about how the movement of Christian Zionism has worked, like Andrew was already describing, but we have had other topics too.



They're related to that. So how components? How would the phrasing and the writing of, for example, the Gospel of John? Uh, by a Christian community at the end of the first century that has now become part of our canon, how that became foundational for Christian antisemitism, and so being aware of that side, but also then other interfaith work. So, the, a lecture on the Muslim perspective of Jesus, how Jesus is seen in Islam, so that we can have broader roots of understanding. And so, we're trying to build that, those kind of things more generally. So that's the kind of way I'm feeling called to do my little part in this. We also, like I said, was, we're able to bring the messages directly to the Canadian Council of Churches. So, Churches for Middle East Peace is primarily a US ecumenical organization, but after some of the Canadian denominations became very interested, they're wondering, well, can we, can we maybe piggyback Canada into that too? And so maybe, and so one of the, one of the delegates from one of the Protestant churches here in Canada actually then went and became a member directly of Churches for Middle East Peace. And so, we're working on expanding that ecumenism across the border to the north here.

**Robin Linkhart** 1:04:58

Thank you, John. Andrew?

**Andrew Bolton** 1:06:23

So, I came back enormously energized, and we've had a Gazan student at the University of Leicester come and speak to our congregation. We had Muslims, Quakers, as well as Community of Christ members there. We took part in a Friends of Bethlehem event organized by a Jewish woman, an organization that's been going for 20 years here in Leicester. I've written an article, an essay, on Christian Zionism, for dialog, the Mormon journal that's looking at the underlying issues. We hear the news cycle, but we need to understand what's going on the bigger, deeper story, as it were, we're going to hold a conference on UN Peace Day, the 21st of September, here in Leicester, and we'll have Christian speakers, we'll have Jewish speakers, and we'll have Muslim speakers. I meet Jews, Muslims and Christians all the time, both in Israel and in Britain, who are working for a just peace. And so, we can work side by side with each other on this task. And so, I'm excited that we're doing that as well.

**Robin Linkhart** 1:06:20

Thank you, Andrew. Steve, you will have the last word today. You represent Community of Christ on the board of churches for Middle East Peace. You are involved in speaking to your senators and representatives on peace and justice issues through the Quaker Friends Committee on National Legislation group in your hometown of Independence, Missouri. What is your challenge to our podcast audience about contributing to peace in the Middle East?

**Steve Kellogg** 1:06:57

Well, thank you again, Robin. I think, as our speakers have indicated, the most important thing we can do is to decide whether or not this conflict that's going on in Israel and Palestine is relevant to us, to us and our future, the future we want for our world, the future we want for our family. And that I can do something to influence what happens. We just saw recently how the imposition of tariffs was reversed

because people across the spectrum here in the United States began to speak up and say, Wait a minute, this is not good for me, and so we need people who are educated and aware of some of these issues to begin speaking up across the spectrum of people to help turn the tide, if you will, on the policies and the weaponization of some of the policies that are being used to Continue the conflict that's going on. In our own Community of Christ, we have our enduring principles about the worth of all persons. And of course, we have the enduring principle of pursue peace, and we have the pursuing enduring principle that all are called and, response, making responsible choices. So, there's so many issues and problems, I think that many of us recognize in the world that becomes kind of overwhelming and a challenge to say, you know, I can't, I can't do anything about these things because they're so big and so many you know, and What can a little person like me do? But the reality is, we can become informed, right? Where we can decide what it is that's going on and where we fit in order to keep our lives balanced, and what those issues are that we have some art that we can play in, just like all the people who rose up and said tariffs aren't going to work for us, and somehow that managed to make a change. So, how do we get informed? Well, we can certainly make a trip like we did, which opened many of our eyes to a broader range of the issues there, and that copy of that report will be posted on the peace and justice team Facebook page, so you can go read more about the things that we've been talking about. But more important is to become aware and learn more about the perspectives I think, that have affected this conflict in the Middle East, from organizations that are very active in identifying the challenges and trying to grow peace. As Andrew said, there's a lot of people who are out there who are working on peace, and the more people we can engage, or the more people can support, the more impact we're going to have to try and bring peace in the future. Some that we mentioned, of course, are Churches for Middle East Peace, which sponsored our trip, the we end the Palestinian Conflict Transformation Center, the Holy Land Trust, Bethlehem Bible College. But there's many others, as Andrew mentioned, you can read the assessment of Amnesty International, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, or UNRWA, puts out a situation report every week on what's happening in the occupied territories, what the Palestinians are experiencing. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA also puts out reports, and there's a report by the Special Rapporteur on the Palestinian territories. It was commissioned by the United Nations as an independent repertoire. But what's been going on since 1967 and what, what the implications are right now for Palestinian lives? And you can read assessments by the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish advocacy organizations like a street J Street, excuse me, and AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, and get a broader perspective from different points of view on what's going on. And then, of course, there's non-governmental reports for organizations that are working in the Middle East, like the AFSC, the American Friends Service Committee, and CWS Church World Service, which runs an accompaniment program, takes people there to spend three months accompanying Palestinians to try and help, not only bring awareness of what's going on, but help shield them, because there are international monitors keeping track of what's going on, and even if you're not able, after becoming informed, to engage with any one of those organizations, whether it's writing letters or talking to your congressperson, you can support them financially to do the work that maybe you don't have the time to do or the inclination to do. But you know that this is important and needs to get done. And certainly, if you're coming to World Conference in June, the Peace and Justice Team will be having lunch and learn sessions, and you can meet us and talk about our experiences. You can drop by the table for the Human Rights Team, and Peace and Justice team and meet Destiny Magnet, who is a Churches for Middle East Peace outreach

coordinator, and talk to her about what Churches for Middle East Peace is doing. Your congregation can become a member of Churches for Middle East Peace. It doesn't have to just be the whole denomination and provide not only financial support, but provide opportunities for Churches for Middle East Peace to come in and present programs and help educate congregations and help provide opportunities to take action, whether it's what we call the walking the length of Gaza, for, for Advent, or, excuse me, for, for Lent, the Lenten journey, for walking the path of Gaza over Lent to help keep people aware of the fact that there are people who are suffering. And what we can do as individuals to try and help not only be aware of that suffering, but help move others who are sort of got their fingers on the trigger, so to speak, to think about things in a different way. And of course, you can take a trip yourself, as we did with Churches, for Middle East Peace, or others walking not only in the steps of Jesus and listening to his voice of peace today in the Holy Land, but seeing the ministry of Jesus that is being continued, continues to be lived out by the people who are in Palestine, and some of the implications of the steps that are currently being taken militarily and how that's impacting the lives of people in the ways of their suffering.

**Robin Linkhart** 1:14:42

Thank you, Steve, I want to thank all of you for being our guest today. Your stories have truly opened our eyes to understanding more about a very complicated, multi-faceted issue in our world today. And the magnitude of what we need to learn to be aware and understand the role that we can play to bring the world closer to peace, the peace we understand Jesus invites us to live. So, thank you so much. As always, a very special thanks to all of you, our listeners, for spending a portion of your day with us. This is your host, Robin Linkhart, and you are listening to Project Zion Podcast. Go out and make the world a Better Place. Take Good care. Bye. Bye.