

## Brief history of Mennonite involvement in Palestine-Israel<sup>1</sup>

Mennonites have been building relationships in Palestine-Israel for over 65 years, working alongside Palestinians and Israelis for peace with justice. After the horrors of the Holocaust, many Jews welcomed the creation of the State of Israel, viewing it as a potential safe haven. The establishment of Israel in 1948, however, went hand in hand with the massive dispossession and displacement of over 750,000 Palestinians and the destruction of over 500 Palestinian towns and villages. **Mennonite Central Committee** (MCC) responded in 1949 to this newly created refugee crisis with material assistance and numerous other ways including education and rural development. Another example was selling needlework made by Palestinian refugee women, one of the first products sold by what eventually grew into the alternative trading organization Ten Thousand Villages. Over the years MCC developed bonds of friendship with the Palestinian churches, joining them in their ministry, including partnerships with the Latin Patriarchate School in Zababdeh and the Bethlehem Bible College. Since Israel's occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip in 1967, MCC has supported the work of both Palestinians and Israelis committed to non-violence and a future of peace, justice, and reconciliation for both peoples. The MCC Peace Section organized its first study tour to Palestine-Israel in 1969. MCC has continued to organize delegations, currently one each year from the United States and Canada, signaling the significant role of educating North American Mennonites. MCC has produced various periodicals, books, and education resources as well as placed hundreds of workers and volunteers in Palestine-Israel. In 2013, the MCC U.S. Board decided not to invest in companies that benefit from violence against Palestinians, Israelis or others.

**Mennonite Mission Network** (MMN) has had a presence in Palestine-Israel since the mid-1950s. This work was initially focused on working with the Messianic Jewish movement in Israel. MMN staff currently serve on the faculty of Israel College of the Bible, the foremost educational institution of the Messianic movement. Since the mid-1960s, Mission Network has also partnered with Palestinian Christians at Nazareth Hospital, as well as helping to establish Nazareth Village, which has seen a steady flow of North American volunteers and visitors. Mission Network has also supported work with various Palestinian educational institutions in the Occupied Territories. Eastern Mennonite Missions and Virginia Mennonite Missions have also engaged in shorter-term ministries in Israel.

**Christian Peacemaker Teams** (CPT) has had a presence in Hebron, in the Occupied West Bank, since 1994. This presence has included school patrols that accompany children, monitoring settler violence and soldier home invasions, and working against home demolitions. CPT supports Palestinian-led nonviolent resistance to Israel's military occupation and educates people in North America. Education campaigns have included the "Campaign for Secure Dwellings" (1997-2000, in whose first year 58 churches were matched with Palestinian families), "Tent for Lent" campaign (March 1999), and "Urgent Action" international letter writing campaigns. CPT organizes several delegations to Palestine every year and endorsed the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign in 2010.

Mennonite educational institutions have exposed hundreds of Mennonite students to the situation in Palestine-Israel through course work and learning tours. **Eastern Mennonite University** (EMU) has had a Middle East Cross-Cultural semester for decades. **Bethel College**, in association with **Tabor College**,

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared by Timothy Seidel and Andre Gingerich Stoner. For more on this history, see Alain Epp Weaver and Sonia K. Weaver, *Salt & Sign: Mennonite Central Committee in Palestine, 1949-1999* (Akron, Pa: Mennonite Central Committee, 1999); Sonia K. Weaver, *What is Palestine-Israel?: Answers to Common Questions* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 2007); and LeRoy Friesen, *Mennonite Witness in the Middle East: A Missiological Introduction* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Board of Missions, 2000)

runs a delegation every other January. **Eastern Mennonite Seminary** also organizes regular learning tours. Mennonite college and university campuses have also been the site of student activism over the years. EMU students started a “Students for Morally Responsible Investment” group that organized a student gathering outside of the school’s Board of Trustees meeting in November 2010. **Goshen College** students constructed a replica of Israel’s separation wall on that campus in February 2011, and several students visited and volunteered in Palestine that summer.

In 2007, **Mennonite Church USA** (MCUSA) organized a delegation of denominational leaders from across its agencies to visit Palestine-Israel with the purpose of engaging the discussion on divestment. As a result, the delegation wrote an Open Letter “Becoming Peacemakers in Israel/Palestine.” The Open Letter was presented at the MCUSA 2007 San Jose Convention. In 2011, the MCUSA Executive Board issued a response to Kairos Palestine with a letter to Palestinian Christians as well as a letter to members of Mennonite Church USA. The first “Come and See” trip, initiated by MCUSA Executive Board with funding from MMN, **Everence**, and MCC U.S., took place in 2014 with the goal of sending 100 Mennonite Church leaders on learning tours in five years.

In 2013, a **Mennonite Palestine Israel Network** (MennoPIN) was formed to support advocacy and action, develop and promote educational resources, and join with people of faith and conscience around the world who share a passion for peace with justice in Palestine-Israel.