

Cry for Hope: Engaging support from church leaders and members in the UK

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March, 2020

Our focus over the last three years has been the [Investing for Peace Campaign](#), which challenges churches to divest from companies profiting from the occupation.

The July 2020 publication of [“Cry for Hope: A Call for Decisive Action”](#) provided the opportunity for engaging more people with the Palestinian cause and to link the direct message of the Call to the Investing for Peace campaign. We knew we had to come up with a strategy for moving the substantial grassroots support for Palestine further up the church hierarchy and find ways to challenge church leaders more directly to act. The discussion of Israeli/Palestinian issues was being made more difficult by the adoption by many major institutions including the Church of England Bishops of the International Holocaust Memorial Association’s (IHRA) definition of antisemitism. People were reluctant to criticise Israeli government policies and actions which denied Palestinians their human rights and were against international law for fear of being branded antisemitic. Church leaders worried that engagement with Palestinian human rights could jeopardize Christian-Jewish interfaith work. We realised that in order to move people from a place of disengagement, hesitancy or reluctance we had to first help people understand what was happening on the ground and how this related to Gospel teachings and human rights for all.

We decided the best way forward was to set up meetings between Palestinians and clergy and church members in the UK. We issued an [online invitation](#) to our members to sign up or encourage their local church leaders to sign up for small on-line seminars with church leaders and human rights activists living in Jerusalem and West Bank.

Between November 2020 and February 2020, we ran six seminars with between ten and fifteen participants from the UK and two or three Palestinian speakers at each event. Participants included parish priests, senior church leaders and human rights activists, men and women from a range of denominations. The majority were already engaged with Palestinian issues with different levels of commitment and knowledge. Some had signed up to the seminar on their own initiative, others had been encouraged by a member of their congregation or a Sabeel-Kairos local group. In preparation for the seminars, we sent participants brief biographies of the speakers and the “Cry for Hope.” Each session lasted one and a half hours. We started by asking each participant to introduce themselves and say what brought them to the session. The speakers then talked for about ten minutes each, followed by questions and discussion.

The speakers spoke informally and candidly about their lives under Israeli rule – the ignoring of Palestinian voices, forced dependency on Israel, feelings of isolation and abandonment, settler colonisation, peacemaking hindered by occupation, deterioration of the situation on the ground, the growing influence of Christian Zionism, daily annexation of land, democracy in disguise, inequality in the law and the making of laws, Christian complicity in the

oppression, unequal residency rights, the daily fear of living under occupation or as a second class Israeli citizen, and legalized discrimination. The speakers were very clear that it is not enough only to pray for peace. The Cry is a wake-up call. We need to act and work for peace. We cannot be neutral.

Questions and discussion gave the chance for participants to air issues and to seek clarification on terminologies such as apartheid, and Zionism, and find out how campaigns such as BDS make a difference, why some church leaders in Jerusalem have not signed the Cry, and how claims of antisemitism are closing down the human rights debate. The speakers gave a very frank exposure of the reality of the discrimination towards Palestinians and their lack of agency over their own lives.

We asked participants to complete an evaluation questionnaire. The replies show great appreciation for the openness and sincerity of the speakers' testimonies. Participants felt encouraged to continue and develop their advocacy work following the sessions. Everyone wanted to meet with Palestinians virtually again.

"I found it exceptionally powerful and challenging. It gave me a lot to think about and I now feel even more in need of trying to learn more. I found the personal 'testimony' of the speakers so profound it was so much more engaging than a factual talk".

We do not see the seminars as an end in themselves. We are putting participants in contact with other supporters where we feel this will encourage their advocacy work. Where we were able to start a conversation with senior church leaders through the seminars, we intend to follow this up and continue the dialogue, including with more input from Palestinian speakers. We plan more seminars for late spring and are looking at ideas for possibly targeting participation at particular groups for example where a motion on Palestine is being prepared for a church policy meeting.