



The Interfaith Peace-Builders Experience and the Good Samaritan: **Whose Side Are You On?**

"Opening eyes, hearts, and possibilities. . ."

David LaMarre-Vincent, Executive Director of New Hampshire Council of Churches and participant on IFPB's 28th Delegation in July-August 2008, comments on the role of the global citizen and the transformative power of an IFPB delegation:

A month has passed since the intensive and emotional experience of Palestine and Israel. This Holy Land pilgrimage was a walk in the steps of the living Jesus encountered in the lives of Palestinians and Israelis: Jews, Christians and Muslims. **The pain and sadness of being bombarded by new realities has passed. The question of how to deal with a totally new experience of violence and injustice lingers on.**

My earlier pilgrimage to the Holy Land seventeen years ago was a more traditional spiritual experience of walking in the steps of Jesus. Then the Hebrew and Greek scriptures came alive by following the historical Jesus. Ever since, the Holy Scriptures have called up the heat and glare of the desert sun, the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem, and the beauty of the verdant Galilee. The burden laid on my soul by that pilgrimage has stayed with me: to be faithful to the experience of the spiritual reality of Jesus and his disciples in Roman times.

In Luke's gospel the Parable of the Good Samaritan appears as Jesus' answer to a lawyer's question "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells him that to inherit eternal life, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." In the parable a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers who stripped him, beat him and left him on the side of the road half dead. A priest was going down the road and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite saw him and passed by on the other side. Was the priest in a hurry to make an important appointment? Was the Levite fearful of a foreigner in dire straits? The parable is silent. But a Samaritan, someone from a different country and religion, came near, saw the beaten man, and was moved with pity. The story goes on to relate the care given the victim by the Samaritan. Jesus concludes the story by asking the lawyer who of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? The lawyer responds, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus concludes, "Go and do likewise."



Interfaith Peace-Builders and US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation's "Investing in Peace" delegation at Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem with guide Sa'id Rabieh (photo: Jacob Pace)

"Just as I have been moved by simple stories of everyday life under occupation, now I accept that being a loving neighbor requires me to retell these stories in order to widen the circle of compassion and concern . . ."

Why does this parable accompany my reflections upon the recent experience of listening to the simple stories of Christians, Jews and

Muslims working for justice in Israel/Palestine? Put most simply, it seems to hold the key to discerning what responsibility has been laid upon me by being there as an active listener. Just as the priest and Levite passed by on the other side, so too I could go on with my life unmoved and unchanged. There is so much to do . . . work, family and personal life . . . there is no time to add one more cause. This could remain a special experience in which the suffering of the Palestinians and the domination of the Israelis enriches my understanding of the historical rule of the Romans over the Jews at the time of Jesus. But what am I called to do if, like the Samaritan, I am moved. . . both figuratively and literally. . . by this experience?

What does one do when, totally out of the blue while busy leading one's life, an experience that is foreign to all you know comes upon you? You have had that experience. You carry it with you forever. Is it a life changing experience or simply another personal growth moment? Are these oppressed people, experiencing severe pain daily, my neighbors? If

so, what responsibility do I have to stop along the road? How does my compassion for suffering Palestinians, my neighbors in the parable's telling, affect me upon my return to the United States?

Over and over Interfaith Peace-Builders called us to stop, listen, and return to the US and tell their story. I can ignore but cannot evade this burden laid upon my soul by the experience of meeting Jesus in the people of Palestine. The obligation to be faithful to the experience by telling the story is now an integral part of loving my neighbor. Just as the lawyer in the parable desired to be faithful by loving God and neighbor, my desire to live faithfully loving God and neighbor now extends to people in places I cannot forget, ignore or rationalize away.



Eyad Burnat of the Bil'in village Popular Committee observes Israeli soldiers through the separation wall (here in the form of an electrified fence). The Popular Committee has led the village in more than three years of nonviolent protests against the wall which cuts through Bil'in's lands, separating families from their livelihoods (photo: David LaMotte).

Palestinian elders remember the catastrophe of leaving home and land during the fighting of 1948 and never being allowed to return. The right of return of refugees now has a human face for me. The Israeli mothers and fathers whose children are called upon to enforce the occupation of Palestinian lands have told painful stories of what this does to the oppressor. Israeli combatants for peace are real people. Palestinian villagers, students and entrepreneurs tell of how they refuse to go away, refuse to be forgotten, refuse to be powerless but will use creative nonviolent means to resist the continued ethnic cleansing and separation (dare we say *apartheid*?) imposed upon them daily.

Peace in the Holy Land is not black and white, no good guys and bad guys, no easy resolution to the claims of the Israeli and the Palestinian. What is clear is that the way I used to think about peace in the Holy Land has become much more complex. There is a vocabulary, geography, and history that do not fit into the common understanding of this conflict in the US. Just as I have been moved by simple stories of everyday life under occupation, now I accept that being a loving neighbor requires me to relate these stories in order to widen the circle of compassion and concern for the desperate lives of oppression that the occupation imposes upon our Palestinian neighbors. It is their responsibility to sort out how to live together, Israeli and Palestinian - Christian, Jew, Muslim - in the Holy Land. **It is our responsibility as US citizens to require our government to work for a just peace acceptable to all.**



David Lamarre-Vincent has served as Executive Director of the New Hampshire Council of Churches since 1990 and has also sat on numerous New Hampshire government and nonprofit Boards of Directors and Advisory Councils and provided consultation services to government, business, religious, and volunteer sectors. He has been instrumental in the establishment of unique advocacy coalitions whose disparate members share one common mission for service and justice. Lamarre-Vincent also serves nationally as a consultant on social policy and organizational development within the religious community. His efforts have led to the formation of several national ecumenical and interreligious organizations for a just, peaceful and environmentally healthy world.



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