

PEACE AND PEDAGOGY IN ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

Don Knueve, Ph.D., Associate McMaster Fellow
L. Michael Spath, D.M.N., Ph.D.

From the various schools that make up Mar Elias Educational Institutions, we want to strengthen the spirit of unity with diversity (Jews, Arabs, Muslims, Christians, Druze) of common sojourners in the land rather than that of householders and foreigners. It is vital for democratic societies to overcome the attitude and the status of minority versus majority. People must begin to deal with each other as partner citizens in one country.

Abuna Elias Chacour, Mar Elias Educational Institutions

My hope is that twenty years from now, most of the artists, musicians, journalists, religious educators and communication specialists in this area will be graduates of the Dar al-Kalima Academy and College, as well as from the programs of the International Center of Bethlehem. The symbols of a society are shaped by these people. Developing an identity is like an olive tree which is deeply rooted but whose branches grow out and spread in different directions.

Rev. Mitri Raheb, International Center of Bethlehem

Wi'am Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center as a grassroots organization strives to build a democratic and just society. The Center aims to improve the quality of relationships by: addressing injustices rather than avenging them; dignifying persons on all sides of the conflict; promoting human rights and advocating for peace among all people.

Zoughbi Zoughbi, Wi'am Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center

The above epigraphs highlight the dreams of the founders of three faith-based educational institutions in what Western Christians call "The Holy Land," the land of Israel and the Palestinian Territories: Mitri Raheb, Pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church and Director of the International Center of Bethlehem; Abuna Elias Chacour, Melkite Catholic Archbishop of the Galilee and Founder and President of Mar Elias Educational Institutions; and Zoughbi Zoughbi, Founder and Director of the Wi'am Palestinian

Conflict Resolution Center, also in Bethlehem. Raheb, Chacour, and Zoughbi are each dynamic and visionary leaders, three of the more prominent “Living Stones,” the designation for the indigenous Christians of the Holy Land. Working within their respective institutions and organizations, they have pursued a dream of peace with justice through the education of children and the transformation of an entire society through the continuing education and empowerment of adults, especially women.

The relationship between the McMaster School and faith-based institutions in Israel and the Palestinian Territories is a natural fit. As an institution affiliated with the United Church of Christ, Defiance College promotes multi-faith dialogue and cooperation, human rights for all citizens of the region, and a just peace. These are consistent with the McMaster School mission of advancing humanity.

The development of projects connected to Israel and the Palestinian Territories began in the 2004–2005 academic year and has continued since that time. Raheb and Chacour both visited Defiance College, and the framework was established for creative institutional partnerships as well as opportunities for faculty and student research and service in the Holy Land. In the first phase Defiance College sponsored multi-faith events to help develop an ecumenical strategy so that all can feel welcome in dealing with the complex issues of Israel and the Palestinian Territories, stressing respect for all faiths and all peoples connected with the conflicts of this region.

Defiance College faculty members traveled through the McMaster School to several programs and sites in Israel and the Palestinian Territories as part of two “Study and Solidarity Tours.” Under the leadership of Michael Spath, who teaches religious studies at Defiance College, contacts were established with religious (Christian, Muslim, and Jewish), educational, and peace-and-justice advocacy leaders, institutions, and organizations. Spath has a long academic and personal history in the Holy Land, having served as a Fulbright Scholar and National Security Education Program Fellow in Amman, Jordan. Through his work, he established friendships and partnerships with many religious and political leaders in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, including the three mentioned above.

Israel and the Palestinian Territories remain one of the most conflict-filled regions of the world. The history and causes of this conflict are myriad. Ethnic, political, and religious groups of this region have a long history of disputes over land, each claiming proprietary rights, complicated by designations of certain sites as sacred. Many groups and individuals have dedicated themselves to efforts to reduce conflict in this region. In this

article we focus on Bethlehem in the Palestinian Territories and Ibillin in the Galilee, Israel, and especially on three programs in these two villages that are involved in non-violent social transformation, education, the empowerment of women, conflict resolution, and the creation of conditions leading to peace grounded in justice.

MAR ELIAS EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Chacour is the driving force behind Mar Elias Educational Institutions (MEEI). He has won numerous international peace awards, including the French Legion of Honor and the Buddhist Niwano Peace Award, and has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize three times. The story of the founding of MEEI and Chacour's own story are documented in his two books, translated into over thirty languages: *Blood Brothers* (1984) and *We Belong to the Land* (2001). MEEI is an experiment in multicultural and multi-religious education in Israel; it brings together Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Druze faculty and students. Newly appointed by Pope Benedict XVI as the Melkite Catholic Archbishop of the Galilee, Chacour has access to the highest levels of the educational and other ministries in the Israeli government.



MEEI serves 4,200 students and has 200 faculty members—over one-third of whom have Ph.D.s—in the Mariam Bawardi Kindergarten begun in 1968, Mar Elias High School (1982), Mar Elias College (1994), Mariam Bawardi Elementary School, Mar Elias School for Gifted Children and Arab Regional Teachers Center (1998), Mar Elias University (2002), and Mar Elias Peace Center, newly constituted in 2005. The university is a satellite campus of the University of Indianapolis and therefore accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Universities in the U.S. Its vision is to serve all peoples in the region: “MEEI is an oasis for all

regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or religious affiliation” (2002). This educational complex provides opportunities for students and faculty of Defiance College to work with a wide range of students. Opportunity for McMaster projects involving a variety of disciplines is possible because Mar Elias University Peace Center is being developed as a place for dialogue within Israel not only for the various faith traditions but also for business, education, industry, and science.

With these possibilities in mind, in November of 2004 three members of Defiance College—assistant professor of history Donald Buerk, associate academic dean Don Knueve, and vice president for academic affairs Catharine O’Connell, –met with Raed Mualem, Vice President of Mar Elias University in Fort Wayne. Spath and Knueve formed a committee to plan for the November 15, 2005 visit of Chacour to Defiance College. President Wood welcomed Chacour warmly and, at his community lecture sponsored by the college, presented him with the college’s Humanitarian Award. Chacour’s community lecture, “Bridges of Hope: Connecting Faith Communities in the Holy Land” (2005), detailed the history of the region and the many ordeals he underwent to create, fund, and build MEEI. Most importantly, Chacour painted a picture of hope and promise as he described the opportunities created for his students at MEEI.

During two subsequent trips to MEEI, Knueve met with Chacour and others of the Mar Elias University and its Research Center. Buerk, Knueve, Spath, and art professor Steve Smith also met with individuals there, including students. The goal was to identify needs of the school and the region and discuss possible future projects at MEEI.

BETHLEHEM

Bethlehem is not in Israel; it is in the Palestinian Territories. The issues facing the Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim, are different from those within Israel. Over 60% of the population of the Palestinian Territories is under eighteen years of age. Unemployment across the West Bank is close to 65%, and in Bethlehem is closer to 70–75%. Within both Israel and the Palestinian Territories, the Christian population has dwindled to less than 1.5%. And finally, the “little town of Bethlehem” is presently surrounded by a twenty-eight foot high cement wall with only two or three entrances/exits, military “settler only” access roads, or highly controversial settlements. Consequently, many Bethlehemites are separated from their sources of livelihood, whether orchards, fields, or jobs, and have their mobility heavily curtailed throughout their own land.

Given this economic, cultural, demographic, religious, and social unrest under which the citizens of Bethlehem live, Bethlehem is a site where there is much opportunity to fulfill the goals of the McMaster School to improve the human condition. There are two institutions in Bethlehem with which Defiance College has established important relationships, the International Center of Bethlehem (ICB) and the Wi'am Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center. The ICB is a Christian yet "ecumenically-oriented institution serving the whole Palestinian community" under the direction of Raheb. ICB provides numerous programs for all ages that are designed to empower the local community, develop human resources, cultivate artistic talents, and facilitate intercultural communication.

Dar al-Kalima College, opened in the fall of 2006, is the newest addition to ICB. It is the only fine arts college in the entire region, presently offering associate degrees in arts, multimedia, communications, and tourism, with an eye to offering bachelor degrees within five years. Finally, a growing program, both in staff as well as usage, is the Dar al-Kalima Health and Wellness Center. Providing for the whole person—body, mind, and spirit—the center brings hope and healing. It is one of the only places in the West Bank that offers audiology testing, provides counseling services, and has opportunities for organized exercise, aerobic, and swimming classes. People travel from all over the Palestinian Territories to make use of these services.

Key individuals from Defiance College met with Raheb in April 2005 to discuss partnerships with the International Center of Bethlehem. While in Israel and the Palestinian Territories in June 2006, Knueve, Smith, Buerk, and Spath held subsequent meetings with Raheb and Nuha Khoury, the dean of the new Dar al-Kalima Fine Arts College at the ICB. Smith taught ceramics to both Muslim and Christian women students at the ICB's art studio and consulted with Raheb and the administration of the ICB arts program about their equipment, materials, curricula, and library resources.

The Wi'am Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center—*Wi'am* means "cordial relationships"—began in Bethlehem in March of 1995. Under the direction of Zoughbi, the programs focus on mediation, conflict resolution in the community, and building positive self-images in young people throughout the region. Specific programs include trauma coping and recreational projects for over 3,000 elementary and high school-aged children annually, facilitation of weekly parent-teacher-child discussion groups, school kits for over 5,000 children, and over 4,000 Christmas gifts. The center includes advocacy programs in conjunction with other interfaith organizations for human rights for Palestinians; it provides job training skills to the unemployed and empowers women with entrepreneurial skills to create

and market traditional crafts; and it offers training for volunteer mediators who act as community leaders in the resolution of disputes.

For this latter program *Wi'am* is known as one of the most credible and authoritative voices throughout the Middle East in conflict resolution. Once *Wi'am* opened in 1995, it has been involved in mediating over 1,800 disputes, resolving close to 85% of them successfully. *Wi'am* employs a marriage of a traditional Arab mediation technique (*Sulha*) with Western models of conflict resolution. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Arabs have used *Sulha* to resolve conflicts for thousands of years. The goal of the *Sulha* process is to redress injustices rather than avenging them, to affirm the human dignity and rights of all sides to a conflict, and to promote the quality of relationships.

Because of the ongoing violence in this region, an important component of the on-campus work of McMaster fellows is the promotion of dialogue among the three Abrahamic religious traditions. To this end, Knueve and Spath were co-leaders of the planning committee to develop a multi-faith service of prayer for peace in November, 2006, at the Defiance College affiliate church, St. John United Church of Christ. The service featured Bishop Leonard P. Blair of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Toledo, Imam Farooq Aboelzahab of the Greater Toledo Islamic Center, and Rabbi Barry Leff of Congregation B'nai Israel. The messages of these three spiritual leaders were very timely in helping the attendees focus their prayers and work toward a just peace in the Middle East as well as throughout their lives.

The foundation has been laid for Defiance College to engage in meaningful projects in Bethlehem and Ibillin, and to be a force for education and understanding about this troubled region of the world. Whether working in the Galilee at MEEI or in Bethlehem at ICB or *Wi'am*, Defiance College and the McMaster School have established partnerships with credible leaders for peace. The Living Stones Abuna Chacour, Rev. Mitri Raheb, and Zoughbi Zoughbi are each visionary leaders. The McMaster fellows and scholars who interact with them are able to gain insights into the tensions that exist in the region and knowledge of the relationships among the peoples of the region.

These Living Stones and their organizations serve the principles and goals on which the McMaster School for Advancing Humanity was founded. The McMaster fellows and scholars are committed to working with them to serve the causes of a just peace for all peoples in the region through



education, service, empowerment of women, inter-faith dialogue, conflict resolution, and non-violent social transformation.

REFERENCES

- Chacour, Elias. 1984. *Blood brothers*. With David Hazard. Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books.
- — —. 2005. *Bridges of hope: Connecting faith communities in the Holy Land*. Lecture presented at Defiance College, Defiance, Ohio.
- — —. 2001. *We belong to the land: The story of a Palestinian Israeli who lives for peace and reconciliation*. With Mary E. Jensen. Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press.
- Mar Elias Educational Institutions (MEEI). 2002. *Our history and dreams*. <http://www.meei.org/about/history.html>.

