

WCC general secretary reflects on peace in Palestine and Israel



20 September 2016

The Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum of the World Council of Churches (WCC) is inviting member churches, faith-based communities, and civil society organizations around the world to join together in 2016 for a week of advocacy and action in support of an end to the illegal occupation of Palestine and a just peace for all in Palestine and Israel.

During the World Week of Peace in Palestine and Israel 2016, observed 18-24 September, congregations and individuals around the globe who share a hope for justice will take peaceful actions to create a common international public witness.

WCC general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit answered questions on a lasting peace in Palestine and Israel.

What is the main contribution of churches in building peace in Palestine and Israel?

Tveit: The WCC is committed to a just peace in Palestine and Israel with a view that this conflict is about justice with deep moral dimensions that must be given proper weight by all if we are to reach a lasting solution. Religion can both contribute to the increase of the level of conflict, or help establish peace. This is particularly so in this region. The conflict is linked to the strong relations to the Holy City for three of the world's religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It also involves a struggle for the proper interpretations and use of holy texts, as it comes to issues of rights to land and a fair distribution of natural resources.

The important contribution of the churches is to strengthen the forces of peace, constantly insisting that there must be both justice and peace for all in the region. The WCC looks critically at church history. We also are listening to the core Christian message to see the world from the perspective of the non-privileged, the impoverished and the oppressed. The Christian faith obliges us to explore justice and peace, to search for solutions that take human dignity and human rights seriously, to search for non-violent ways, to bring out the truth and to promote dialogue and understanding between people.

Do churches have a special duty to engage in this particular situation?

Tveit: We believe and see that the local churches can and do play a role in promoting peace and justice on both sides of the conflict. It is important to strengthen the church and the Christian presence in the area, so that it can be a strong witness of peace.

Moreover, the WCC has encouraged other churches in the world to deeply and critically consider what role they can play for peace and justice to reign in Israel and Palestine. We see this is also a matter of building relations with other religions, locally and globally. We as WCC need to continue sharing information about Israel and Palestine, and to nurture further theological and moral reflections about this conflict. This can happen during visits and pilgrimages, to see the reality for those who live in this conflict, and to show solidarity and support for local Christians and for peace advocates on both sides.

It has been particularly important in recent years to make the public and the churches aware of the consequences of the occupation of the Palestinian territory as so many people are suffering violations of their human rights, discrimination and the abuse of

power. This has not been well-known in many of our churches around the world. It is also important to encourage support for the decreasing Christian population in the Holy Land. In a more systematic way, following a request from local churches, the WCC initiated an Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) together with many partners, so that people could see firsthand what is going on from the inside, and contribute to the moral and practical support of those who live under this conflict.

All this can and must be done through dialogue between local churches and other players across the world. It is important that churches everywhere help promote dialogue between representatives of the two peoples and the three religions, dialogue that goes beyond politics and propaganda. Because the conflict is determined by how other countries, among them particularly the United States, but also European countries, define their politics in this region, it is important that the church stimulates this dialogue both nationally and internationally.

Next year will mark 50 years since Israel occupied the West Bank. What does this tell us about the international community's and the worldwide church's ability to end the occupation?

Tveit: Churches generally share a commitment to engage in peace and justice. In this particular conflict, it is the historical, theological and current events together that call for the churches to get involved.

Israel since 1948 has been recognized by the UN as a state, and the WCC has since then done the same, continuing to uphold the decision to recognize two states.

The WCC General Assembly has stated that anti-Semitism is a sin against God. Church leaders saw what enormous tragedies such attitudes and actions could lead to during the Second World War, and that the churches had to share the responsibility that those attitudes had manifested themselves for so long.

The WCC has supported the UN resolutions that claim that there should be an Israeli and Palestinian state and that both should be independent and legitimate. Later, the WCC has criticized forms of Christian theology that have claimed it is God's will that some people would have to leave their homes and live under occupation. This is seen in some forms of Christian Zionism.

The church is also especially committed in its engagement for peace and justice in Israel and Palestine. This is because this conflict contributes to the general impression that religion can be used to legitimize injustice, violence and conflict, which also poses a problem for peace work in other areas of the world.

The year 2017 will be one in which the international community must recognize that occupation has been allowed to become a permanent arrangement, and that international law is daily ignored. It will be painful to highlight the fact, but this is the reality. I do hope it becomes clear for policymakers, not only in Israel, and in the USA which supports Israel so substantially, but also in other countries. We should ask what it means that this occupation is not acceptable according to international law. The occupation is a disaster for the Palestinians. But it is also a tragedy for Israel, and an obstacle to lasting and just peace for all involved.

The churches should participate in searching for solutions to this dark chapter, with a self-critical attitude, asking what has happened for this situation to be legitimized and what is being done to end this injustice.

Asking if the churches are "balanced" in the discussions over the occupation is hardly relevant. Nobody can have a "balanced" approach to injustice and oppression of a people's rights. When one party is the occupying force and the other the occupied, guidelines cannot focus on talking about "balance". It is, however, important that the churches, and others, watch and try to understand all aspects of this conflict and its negative implications on all, in an attempt to mobilize peace on all sides to find a lasting non-violent solution.

What do you think about the possibility of boycotting the Israelis economically?

Tveit: It is against international law and it is immoral that someone should profit from occupation. Hence the WCC has helped to raise questions about how churches holding funds have connections with businesses that fund this occupation, or whether they support peace-keeping measures and building a sustainable Palestine after the occupation. Furthermore, the WCC and several of its member churches stated that buying goods produced in occupied territories is not a moral act. The European Union has also imposed directives for real labeling in order to know the origin of all goods. I think both these approaches are important to highlight the immoral and unlawful state of affairs brought about by the occupation. The WCC is not a member of any alliance that is generally promoting a boycott or a member of the so-called "BDS-movement."

The WCC has never called for an economic boycott on the state of Israel. But we should work with all possible non-violent, political and diplomatic means.

What should the Israeli and Palestinian groups focus on to achieve peace?

Tveit: We ought to insist on the duty to guarantee human rights and the need for peace and decent living conditions for all. This is the moral value of justice and peace that we all need to commit to. Both parties would be blessed by a lasting solution, and it would be an important contribution to world peace.

Sometimes I am deeply impressed by people who cannot give up their hope for a just peace even after decades of occupation. I am greatly impressed that so many still have a consistent non-violent attitude. Unfortunately, the picture is very often stained by the negative aspects: the brutal reality of all that is built on occupied land, ruining both landscapes and future possibilities. And what is very disturbing to me is that belief in God can be used to legitimize injustice and institutionalize violence through occupation.

In the past year, Israeli authorities blocked the entrance into the countries for participants at a conference convened by the WCC in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and the WCC was exposed to severe accusations by representatives of the border police. Is this a sign that churches are weaker than before in the work to create peace and reconciliation in the area?

Tveit: Incidents at the Ben Gurion Airport show that in Israel there is a greater focus on groups accused of being against Israel. For the WCC, it is important to highlight what we are: a community of churches working together with churches in Palestine and Israel for a just peace. We are not anti-Israeli or anti-Semitic. It remains to be seen if there is a change in policy with regard to the representatives of the church and WCC restrictions on visits to the churches in the area.

Is it conceivable that there could be a sudden change for the better in the region, as for instance was the case when the Berlin wall fell?

Tveit: Everything is possible, even in Israel and Palestine. Yes, maybe we should have even more hope that circumstances will change and contribute to a just and lasting peace in the Holy Land. It is certainly our duty to pray and work for this to happen.

** The English version of this interview was produced by WCC Communications in collaboration with Helge Kjøllesdal, Norwegian theologian and journalist. The interview has also been published in Norwegian.*

[WCC member churches in Israel and Palestine](#)

[Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel](#)

[Statement on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Peace Process, 28 June 2016](#)

[Statement by general secretaries Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit \(WCC\) and Jim Winkler \(NCCCUSA\)\(14 September 2016\)](#)