

# SABEEL'S 6<sup>TH</sup> INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE STATEMENT

November 2-9, 2006

Sabeel's 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference was held November 2-9, 2006 under the theme of the *FORGOTTEN FAITHFUL – a Window into the Life and Witness of Christians in the Holy Land*. Meetings were held in various venues starting in Jerusalem and including Bethlehem, Jericho, Ramallah, and Nazareth. It was a truly ecumenical experience. The cumulative number of international and local participants in the different settings was more than 500. Approximately 200 people from 29 countries came from abroad.

Most of the speakers were local Palestinian Christians. The Orthodox Patriarch gave the initial greetings at the opening celebration and the Latin Patriarch gave a presentation on the topic of "Palestinian Christianity: The Challenges and the Vision for the Future." In addition, Archbishops and Bishops from the Orthodox, Armenian, Coptic, Syrian, Latin, Maronite, Anglican, and Lutheran churches addressed the conference. The conference also included prayers, songs, and chants from the various church traditions presented by clergy, church choirs, and soloists.

In addition to the 40 lectures given during the conference, there were special greetings given by the Governor of Jericho and the Mayors of Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Nazareth. Furthermore, the participants worshiped in and visited 32 churches in 13 villages and came in contact with more than 50 clergy of the various church denominations in the different towns and villages. They experienced fellowship with their local sisters and brothers and had a taste of Palestinian hospitality in the meals they shared. In both Ramallah and Nazareth special cultural events were presented by young local musicians and performers who are keeping Palestinian arts alive and vibrant.

An important feature of the conference was the presentation of a survey of the Christians of the Holy Land conducted specially for Sabeel. The survey covered the areas of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as well as Israel. Due to political instability in Gaza, it was impossible to complete the survey there. Various aspects of the survey were analyzed by a team of professors from the Bethlehem University.

Two highlights of the conference were the opening lecture by Christian Qur'anic scholar Dr. Kenneth Cragg and the series of Bible studies presented by Dr. Kenneth Bailey in which he examined three parables in light of their cultural context and their meaning today.

Special mention must be made of the opening celebration of the conference in which the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilos III welcomed and greeted the participants. A message from the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, the Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia, was read. Through power point, music, song, and dance, the opening celebration reminded the participants of the origins of the Christian Faith. It emphasized the death and resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Through the power of the Spirit, the Church came into being and the Gospel of freedom and love was spread from Jerusalem to the various parts of the world.

## **POINTS OF EMPHASIS**

1. The Palestinian Christians are the descendants of the first community of believers who loved, believed in, and followed Jesus Christ. From the beginning they were a mixture of many ethnic and racial groups but all became members of the One Body of Christ, the Church.
2. In spite of the vicissitudes of history, they have maintained their faith in Christ during the last 2000 years amidst excruciating circumstances and in spite of the religious and political upheavals. Yet they have preserved the beautiful mosaic of their rich liturgical traditions and continue to bear witness. In order to strengthen the Christian presence and witness, it is mandatory, therefore, for Palestinian Christians to work together ecumenically. The hierarchies of the churches have a great responsibility to rise above denominationalism and commit themselves to nourishing closer bonds of love and acceptance among themselves.
3. Due to political and economic instability, many Palestinian Christians have been emigrating to the West. Internal as well as external factors have undermined their presence. Those who are in the Holy Land today make up less than 2% of the population.
4. Palestinian Christians are an integral part of the Palestinian people. They share the same aspirations and destiny as their Muslim sisters and brothers. All Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza have been living under an illegal Israeli occupation for almost 40 years. With many peace-loving people from around the world, whether faith-based or secular, Muslims and Christians continue to work for the end of the Israeli occupation and the establishment of a viable, independent and sovereign state in Palestine.
5. The Israeli Arab community – Christian and Muslim – continues to struggle for total equality with its Jewish counterpart. The obstacle, however, is the nature of the state of Israel. It is a Jewish state and not a state for all its citizens. Therefore, the struggle will continue until total equality is achieved.
6. Participants also observed the daily suffering of Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and were acutely aware of the plight of Gazans, about 80 of whom (half of them civilians) were killed during the week of the conference. Conference participants were shocked by news of the Israeli army attack on an apartment building in Beit Hanoun in the Gaza Strip that resulted in the deaths of 19 civilians, primarily women and children. Moreover, during the conference day in Bethlehem, participants were unable to visit the Church of Nativity or to view the Wall in central Bethlehem because of funerals being held for 2 Palestinians who had been killed and had their family homes demolished by the Israeli army. Special prayers were raised for the victims and their families.
7. It was clear to participants that Palestinians and Israelis – Christians, Muslims, and Jews can live together in peace. The greatest obstacle to genuine reconciliation, however, stems from Israel's refusal to accept Palestinian rights to a state of their own within the 1967 borders, i.e. all of the West Bank including

- East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. The conference called for strong response against the Israeli government policies of confiscation of Palestinian land in the West Bank, building and expanding of settlements, the presence of hundreds of checkpoints, and the building of the segregation Wall which separates Palestinians from Palestinians and takes their land and water. All these measures are eroding the possibility of the two state solution to the conflict.
8. Such obstacles to peace must be actively resisted both locally and internationally through nonviolent methods like boycotts and Morally Responsible Investment. Moreover, international sanctions that make life untenable for people in the occupied territories must be immediately lifted.
  9. Palestinian Christians have a mandate from Christ to be salt of the earth and light of the world. They have a vocation to remain in the land and maintain a prophetic voice for justice, peace, and reconciliation.

The conference ended on the shores of the Sea of Galilee with a Communion Service and the commissioning of the participants to commit themselves to strive for peace with justice. Sabeel calls on all our friends:

1. To establish bonds of fellowship with Palestinian Christians and to stand in solidarity with all Palestinians in their struggle for liberation.
2. To commit themselves to active prayer, education, and advocacy on behalf of the Palestinian people
3. To campaign for truth and justice with the energy and consistency of an ever-flowing stream
4. To work without ceasing to bring healing and reconciliation to all people with God's joy and peace in their hearts, especially to the people of the land where the first message of peace was proclaimed.

Sabeel, Jerusalem  
November 15, 2006