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**5th International Sabeel Conference--Challenging Christian Zionism**

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International theologians, religious leaders, and peace activists gather for Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center conference in Jerusalem, *Challenging Christian Zionism: Theology, Politics, and the Palestine-Israel Conflict*

Over 600 Christian bible scholars, religious leaders and peace activists representing 32 countries, gathered in Jerusalem's Notre Dame Center April 14-18 for The Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center's conference, "Challenging Christian Zionism: Theology, Politics, and the Palestine-Israel Conflict. The conference included a pre-conference pilgrimage from April 4-11 blending traditions of eastern and western Christianity and post-conference day trips in the West Bank and Galilee April 19-23.

The conference theme of Christian Zionism addressed a worldwide theological and political movement that embraces extreme ideological positions based on selected scriptural texts and which, according to conference presenters, form a worldview that is detrimental to a just peace in the Holy Land. Sabeel Jerusalem director, Rev. Canon Naim Ateek, said Christian Zionism "is a worldview where the Gospel is identified with the ideology of empire, colonialism, and militarism."

Over 20 presentations by international theologians, political scientists and legal experts covered a range of topics. Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, who is Carpenter Professor of Feminist Theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, and co-author with her husband Herman Ruether of *The Wrath of Jonah: The Crisis of Religious Nationalism in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, criticized what she sees in Christian Zionism as the "language of apocalyptic warfare and messianic nationalism" which she believes is an "enormously dangerous" theology that should be rejected.

The Rev. Dr. Stephen Sizer, an Anglican and Chairman of the International Bible Society in the U.K. who is author of *Christian Zionism: Justifying Apartheid in the Name of God*, to be released this fall, helped to define Christian Zionism, stating that at its simplest it is a "political form of philo-Semitism" or just "Christian support for Zionism," meaning the political and expansionist aims of the State of Israel, its policies and its military. Christian Zionists believe the Jewish people have "a divine right to possess the land of Palestine," Sizer stated.

He added that Christian Zionism can be considerably more complex, with some leading agencies committed to both a prophetic plan as well as an evangelistic plan for the Jewish people." Sizer

named groups such as Jews for Jesus, Churches Ministry Among Jewish People (CMJ), and the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, which sees Biblical Zionism as cutting edge theology for “the Last Days.” Sizer claims that Christian Zionism has become the most powerful and destructive force at work in America today, shaping foreign policy on the Middle East and inciting hatred between Jews and Muslims.

Central to Christian Zionism is a literal reading of the Book of Revelation, popularized by the Left Behind series of fictional apocalyptic thrillers written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins about events following the Second Coming of Christ and the “rapture” in which Christians are taken up to heaven. Conference presenter Barbara R. Rossing, Associate Professor of New Testament at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and author of *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*, says the rapture is theologically “all wrong.” Rossing explored the bible sources of rapturist theology in her presentation as “modern literalist interpretations based on selective passages of the bible taken out of context.”

Other presenters included Donald Wagner, professor of the Middle East studies at North Park University in Chicago; Dr. Gary Burge, professor of New Testament at Wheaton College and Graduate School in Chicago; Gershom Gorenberg, associate editor of *The Jerusalem Report* and founder of the Israeli religious peace movement, Netivot Shalom; Marc Ellis, Director of the Center for American and Jewish Studies at Baylor University in Waco, Texas; Father Peter DuBrul, an American Jesuit teaching Scripture, Philosophy, and Cultural Studies at Bethlehem University, West Bank; and Father Michael Prior, CM, professor of the Bible and Theology at St. Mary’s College, University of Surrey, U.K. who is author of *Zionism and the State of Israel: A Moral Inquiry*. Palestinians from the West Bank could not participate in the Jerusalem conference because of military closures, so organizers scheduled presentations in Ramallah and Bethlehem to take the conference to them. The Bethlehem trip had to be cancelled, however, as it fell on the day following Israel’s assassination of Hamas leader Abdul Aziz Rantisi when access to Bethlehem was deemed too dangerous by conference planners.

Outcomes of the conference included participants’ commitment to return to their respective countries to help pursue a political solution to the conflict in the Holy Land based on the enforcement of existing international law and United Nations resolutions. A conference statement is to be distributed by all participants in their respective localities explaining objections to Christian Zionism and calling upon Christians to liberate themselves from ideologies of militarism and occupation and instead to pursue the healing of the world. And discussions have begun among the Sabeel leadership to form an international institute for the study of Christian Zionism.

Sabeel is an effort of the Palestinian Christians to educate and work alongside Christians of the west. The Arabic name means “the way” and refers to the name given to first-century Christians in Palestine, who were called “the people of The Way.” Friends of Sabeel—North America works with Sabeel and other Friends of Sabeel in the U.K. Scandinavia, Ireland, Europe, and Australia. Friends of Sabeel—South Africa will be formed in 2005 with the support of Sabeel’s international patron, Archbishop Desmond Tutu.