

A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation

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Chapter 1

The Birth of Sabeel

“To give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

—Luke 1:79

I returned to Nazareth in Israel in 1966, having completed my undergraduate work and theological training in the United States. On October 20, I was ordained a deacon in the Anglican Church by Archbishop Campbell MacInnes at Christ Church, Nazareth, where I had grown up. It was a very moving and meaningful experience for me after having been abroad for seven years. Especially inspiring were the Arabic words inscribed above the altar:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18)

I was excited to begin my ministry in the church and to become immersed in the service of Christ. Yet in spite of the importance of this event, my joy could not be complete without the physical presence of my father.

On Israel’s Independence Day in 1958 the Israeli military governor had allowed the Palestinian Arabs living in Israel to move around without permits. My father took advantage of this temporary freedom to rent a pickup truck and take all of his children back for the first time to see our home in the town of Beisan, the home from which we had been forced out nine years earlier. Even today I clearly remember how we were not allowed even to look inside our home. The three houses built by my father that made up our home had been divided into smaller units, each occupied now by a Jewish immigrant family. It must have been very difficult for my father to see our home occupied by Jewish immigrants who had come from North Africa while he, the rightful owner, was prevented even from entering them. A few days after this traumatic experience, my father suffered a stroke from which he never fully recovered, leaving him unable to walk or speak clearly.¹

Shortly after, when I was ready to begin my studies in the United States, my entire family came to see me off at the Lydda Airport (Ben Gurion). My mother brought my ailing father to the airport so that he wouldn't continue to look for me or wonder where I had gone. My father knew that I wanted to study for the ministry and that I was determined to return to serve God in my own country and among my own people. Sadly, my father died a year later.

All these memories crossed my mind during my ordination in 1966. I believed that my father was there with me in spirit, proudly blessing me as I took my ordination vows to faithfully serve God. Indeed, the words of Jesus Christ spoken in the synagogue in Nazareth centuries before and inscribed in beautiful calligraphy above the altar were both inspiring and empowering. My fervent prayer on that day was to be guided by the Spirit for an enriched ministry to God's glory and honor.

Seven months later, on Trinity Sunday, May 21, 1967, I was ordained as a priest at St. John the Evangelist Church in Haifa. I still remember it was a *khamseen*, one of the hottest days of the year. The weather was hot and the political climate was even hotter. The Israeli army stood on one side of the border, and the armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan were amassed on the other as they prepared for war. On June 5, approximately two weeks later, the 1967 war broke out. Israel's preemptive strike swept through the Arab armies in an impressive victory that resulted in the occupation of the rest of Palestine, including the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip; parts of Jordan; and large territories from Egypt and Syria. The war had changed the map of the Middle East.

TWO PIVOTAL EVENTS

Two events impacted my ministry politically and theologically and contributed to the emergence of a Palestinian theology of liberation. The first was the 1967 war. I was at home in Shefa-Amr washing my car when my mother called to say the war had begun. For the next few days, like many others, I was glued to the radio (we had no televisions at the time). And, as the saying goes, the first casualty of war was the truth, which was washed away by a wave of propaganda. It later became clear that the Israeli army had destroyed the Egyptian Air Force and was able to march unhindered through Sinai. Vast Arab territories were captured by Israel and thousands of people were killed. Instead of redressing the 1948 injustice, the war further exacerbated matters.

The war brought back my childhood memories of the 1948 war, although at that time I was too young to comprehend the enormity of the tragedy. Now, as an adult, I relived the past in the lives of the people who lived in the occupied territories. Hundreds of questions rushed at me, ranging from politics to religion, from international responsibility to humanitarian anguish and need. I became keenly aware of the depth of the injustice committed against

the Palestinians and also the foolishness and futility of war in resolving the conflict. Although I felt deeply about the importance of justice and peacemaking, I was conscious of my own inadequacy. I felt the need for peace in my guts, agonized over the injustice, and prayed to God for an end to the injustice and the oppression. Everywhere I went the topics of justice and peace were on the menu. People asked questions—political and theological—and I spent many hours in discussions and debates. The political situation that was the heart of the struggle became our daily ration of food.

Unclear about what to do, my immediate response was to immerse myself in the pastoral, educational, and ecumenical ministry of the church. Indeed, the war sharpened my awareness about the importance of being involved in the work of justice and peace. At the same time, I was conscious of my immediate pastoral responsibilities. Whenever possible my sermons included an emphasis on justice, but it was not always the central theme. I gained tremendous insight from the political and religious discussions in the Shefa-Amer community, and these discussions developed my understandings of the issues of peace, social and political concerns, and our Christian responsibility of involvement.

For the next thirteen years, I was a priest, pastor, teacher, and counselor, helping people deepen their love of God and of each other. Over time my ministry transcended the denominational boundaries of my small parish as I started to bring Christians of various denominations closer to each other. When I moved to serve the church in Haifa in 1972, this ecumenical dimension became an essential part of my expanded ministry and flourished in new and exciting ways. For the first time, clergy of all the denominations in the area were meeting regularly for prayer and study, and working together we were able to initiate programs in the community that brought Christians together. It was wonderful to see the churches come alive as clergy exchanged pulpits and people's faith was deepened through interdenominational Bible study and other gifts of the Spirit.

Although I was grateful to God for what was happening in the ecumenical ministry in Haifa, something seemed to be missing. Trusting the Holy Spirit, I left Haifa with my wife Maha and our two little boys, Stefan and Sari, and returned to the United States to begin graduate studies in Berkeley, California. This is when I first began to articulate a Palestinian theology of liberation. Although I was not sure where God was leading me and how this theology would be used, I felt a deep satisfaction and comfort that God was guiding me. In 1985, after I completed my doctorate in theology, I was transferred from Haifa to St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem to serve its Palestinian congregation. This transition set my face directly toward the work of justice and peace.

The second event that defined my path was the *intifada*.² Twenty years had passed since the 1967 war and a viable solution was not yet in sight. In 1979 President Jimmy Carter had successfully brokered a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. A treaty with the strongest Arab state in the Middle East

ruled out the possibility of another war. Israel could now afford to ignore Syria and keep the Golan Heights under its control. In fact, in 1981, in a clear violation of international law, Israel belligerently annexed the Syrian territory. At the same time, it accelerated its consolidation of the West Bank (including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip) by confiscating additional Palestinian land and by building and expanding settlements. So long as the United States was on its side, Israel did not really care what the rest of the world thought or did.

In 1979 the U.N. Security Council issued Resolution 446 condemning the building of settlements, but Israel was not deterred. Neither the Arab countries nor the international community was able to stop Israeli expansion, and the U.N. resolutions went unheeded. At that time, newly arrived in Jerusalem, I witnessed firsthand the escalating violence of the Israeli army against the Palestinians. In those days, the Palestinian people had no access to weapons and arms. Although they were trapped by the ferocious and brutal fist of the Israeli army, their resistance was largely nonviolent.

At that time Yasir Arafat and the main Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leadership were based in Tunis and the PLO was still considered a terrorist organization. The Israeli government outlawed contact with any of its members. Hamas did not yet exist, and most of the Palestinian people were supportive of the PLO, considering it their sole legitimate representative. Palestinians were united by strong feelings of nationalism based not on religion but their identity as Palestinians, an identity that embraced love of people and of the land. As the Israeli oppression worsened and the international community stood inept and crippled before Israeli power, all flickers of hope were extinguished. With nowhere else to turn, the Palestinians turned to themselves, and on December 9, 1987, the *intifada* erupted, affecting the whole of the Palestinian community in the occupied territories.

The *intifada* was a spontaneous uprising of the whole Palestinian community both on the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and in the Gaza Strip. Palestinians—men and women, young and old—rose up in solidarity with one another with one clear message: the illegal Israeli occupation of their country must come to an end. Palestinians from the various political factions came together to cry out that they wanted to live in freedom in their own state—not under the domination of a foreign state. The *intifada* was a nonviolent uprising that Israel was unsuccessful in crushing. Its foundation was patriotic and nationalist and was not based on religion.

The first *intifada* still stands as one of the rare moments in Palestinian history when the nonviolent power of the people was exhibited at its best. It continued for the next five years until the Oslo Peace Process came into being. In many ways, the *intifada* established the capability of the Palestinian community to resist nonviolently the occupation of their country. In retrospect, it is unfortunate that the Palestinian leadership was unable to capitalize on and nourish this type of resistance. Israel, which tried to present the *intifada* as a violent struggle, reacted to it as such, yet it is recorded in history as a

profound illustration of the resilience of the Palestinians and the power of nonviolence in resisting an oppressive power.³ While the *intifada* did not achieve its goal, it will always stand out as a bright mark in the history of the Palestinian struggle.

These two events—the 1967 war and the first *intifada*—set the stage for what was to come. The former showed the expansionist policies of the Israeli government on the one hand, and the futility of war and violence to redress injustice on the other. The latter pointed toward the way of nonviolence as the only way to resist the occupation, and clearly showed that the Palestinian people, both Muslim and Christian, were capable of such an undertaking.

THE EMERGENCE OF HAMAS

As a popular uprising the *intifada* expressed the will of the people. One of its important demands was to recognize the PLO as the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Until then, Israel and the United States had refused to recognize the PLO and had tried unsuccessfully to create an alternative, but the Palestinians were solidly behind the PLO with Arafat as its leader.

As the *intifada* heightened, two words were heard on the Palestinian streets. “*Hamas*” stood for “The Movement of Islamic Resistance” and “*Hamam*” for “The Movement for Christian Resistance.”⁴ Some Palestinians, including myself, immediately suspected that Israel was attempting to interject religion into the conflict in order to shatter the national unity and solidarity of the Palestinians. Having failed to create a political substitute for the PLO that was acceptable to Palestinians and unable to crush the *intifada*, Israel cleverly stirred up religious rivalries.

Many of us immediately saw this as a trap. I remember vividly calling one of my friends in Bethlehem and pleading with him to do everything he could to stop the emergence of a Christian resistance movement that would be based on armed struggle. We were grateful to God that the Palestinian Christian community promptly suppressed *Hamam* and that it never saw the light of day. However, *Hamas* found fertile soil among some Palestinian Muslim groups who were already predisposed to such an idea. Religious slogans for the liberation of Palestine began to appear more frequently under the permissive guise of the Israeli soldiers. Indeed, religion was a potent force that could rally Palestinian Muslims and generate religious fervor. The implied message became clear: if Palestinian nationalism failed to achieve the liberation of Palestine, Islamic nationalism inevitably would. The emerging new slogans were religiously partisan—“Palestine is Islamic,” “Jerusalem is Islamic,” “Islam is the answer”—rather than the more religiously inclusive slogans that emphasized the nationalist character of Palestine.

Hamas proliferated rapidly within the Islamic community, and its influence spread in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Such religious partisanship

was a blow to the national unity of the Palestinians, and many Palestinian Christians recognized this. In fact, it caused not only an obstacle between Christians and Muslims, but it also brought about a split between “religious” and “progressive” Muslims. And, naturally, it contributed to feelings of fear and distrust in the Christian community. The rise of Hamas has made it easier for Israel to pit us against one another and control us.

In the Israeli daily newspaper *Ma'ariv*, journalist Ben Kaspit wrote, “I know that Israel was the one who helped Hamas emerge (the Shamir government with the support of the Minister of Defense Rabin in order to weaken Fatah⁵). And Israel supported the emergence of Hizballah (the government of Begin with the initiative and implementation of Sharon in order to drive out Arafat [from Lebanon]).”⁶ In other words, Kaspit claimed that Israel aided the emergence of Hamas in order to break the backbone of the PLO by using the power of religion, religious sentiment in its crudest and most emotional form. As Hamas developed, it became a thorn in the flesh of the PLO, but it also proved to be a spike in the spine of Israel. If, indeed, Israel contributed to the emergence of Hamas, then it would also reap the whirlwind. In the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary election, Hamas succeeded in defeating Fatah, the largest party in the PLO. Whereas the PLO was ready to make peace with Israel on the basis of UN resolutions 242 and 338, Hamas had more stringent demands.

THE BIRTH OF SABEL

In many ways, the first stirrings of Sabeel, an ecumenical center that applies a theological approach and nonviolence to address the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, took place at St. George’s Anglican Cathedral in Jerusalem several years before the name Sabeel was even adopted. As soon as the *intifada* started, I felt that my preaching had to become more relevant to our new political context. This small Anglican congregation in Jerusalem, like the rest of the Christian community on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip, was in need of comfort and courage. It needed to hear the word of God addressing their particular situation of life. If the Bible had nothing to say to them in their pain and sorrow, in the midst of injustice and oppression, then the Bible had no relevance for their lives.

The themes of my weekly sermons became centered on justice and truth. When I turned to the Bible I found a preponderance of texts that emphasized justice and righteousness as well as mercy and love. Yet it was difficult to preach peace and reconciliation when injustice and oppression were the daily ration of the Palestinians. The only response had to be a prophetic response in the spirit of the great prophets of the Old Testament, on the one hand, and, on the other, in the spirit of Jesus and the New Testament.

At the same time, I felt that my sermons could not be complete without the direct response of the people in the Christian community that gathered

there. So every Sunday after the church service most of the congregation that was present would pick up a cup of coffee and spend an additional hour in the small parish hall discussing the sermon. Without a doubt, it was then that the seeds of a Palestinian theology of liberation began to sprout and grow. The ideas I first articulated as a graduate student in Berkeley began to take form within this community of faith where the people of God wrestled with how they should apply the word of God to their daily lives. Every week they took the sermon, chewed it and digested it. They added their own illustrations from their own experience during the previous week and that of their relatives and neighbors. They talked about the people who had been killed or injured or imprisoned.

The sermon and the texts of scripture were brought to bear on all these experiences. People challenged each other, struggling with the demands of the gospel against the human tendency to respond with violence and exact revenge. They refused to dilute the gospel by lowering it to the level of hate and violence. Together we were able to hear Christ challenging us to love and not to hate. While the Israeli army was increasing its oppressive measures and Israeli soldiers were breaking the bones of Palestinian children for throwing stones, as well as humiliating and even killing them, the natural response was to give in to resentment and the desire for revenge and to be pulled down to the level of the subhuman. It was a constant challenge to our faith to resist this natural response, and to be pulled up by Christ to be the people God wants us to be. It was there that the Palestinian theology of liberation in its early stages began to be applied and tested.

The first conference on a Palestinian theology of liberation was held at Tantur, an ecumenical center in Jerusalem, in 1990—approximately a year after my first book *Justice, and Only Justice* was published. We were able to invite ten theologians from various parts of the world to Jerusalem. There, with approximately forty local Palestinian Christians, we were able to introduce a Palestinian theology of liberation that was relevant to the Palestinians, the indigenous people of the land. With the help of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Marc Ellis, we were able to publish the proceedings of that meeting.⁷ The beginnings of this movement were now sprouting through workshops, small gatherings of people, and discussions inside and outside of St. George's Cathedral.

Fortunately, Hamam, the Movement of Christian Resistance intended to be a counterpart of Hamas to recruit Christians to counter the violence of the occupation with Palestinian violence, was dead. In its stead, a new movement was born within the Palestinian Christian community; it was founded in the spirit of Jesus, the spirit of love and nonviolence. It recognized the evil and the international illegality of the Israeli domination of the Palestinians and its occupation of their country. It recognized the necessity and the importance of resisting such an evil but it chose the path of nonviolent resistance. This is the way of Jesus. Those who claim to be his followers must walk in his footsteps.

The response of the grassroots Christian community in Jerusalem was encouraging. While some people were anxious to know more about this movement of Palestinian liberation theology, some people (including some clergy) were skeptical. Most people had never heard of liberation theology and were curious to find out more about it. Others had heard the name but responded negatively. They knew it had begun in Latin America, but they immediately connected it with Marxism and totally rejected it. Thus from the beginning we faced the quite formidable task of educating people about this contextual theology of liberation that is deeply biblical and has as its main objective making the gospel relevant to Palestinian Christians. Through God's grace we were able to overcome these obstacles and attract into this movement clergy and lay members from the various churches of the land, including Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant. Toward the end of 1993, the name "Sabeel" was adopted. Sabeel is Arabic for "the way" and "the spring." We were convinced that we were and continue to be on a journey charting the way for justice, peace, and reconciliation (in that order).

Sabeel came into being as an ecumenical movement within the Palestinian Christian community of the Holy Land of Israel and Palestine. Sabeel is not a political organization and is not affiliated with any particular political party or denomination inside or outside of Israel-Palestine. Sabeel's theology, philosophy, and ideology are biblically based and founded on the life, teachings, and example of Jesus Christ. From the beginning it was important to be specific about its main objectives, which were based on the urgent needs of the Palestinian community.

First: A Theology of Liberation

The first primary objective of Sabeel is to articulate a Palestinian theology of liberation that can help Palestinian Christians and their friends and supporters address the conflict from within their faith. Although the conflict, in its origin, is political and rooted in European colonialist and imperialist ideologies, since then Zionists, both Christian and Jewish, have given Israeli expansion theological underpinnings supported by scriptural language. Since the war of 1967, the Zionist ideology that had started as a secular movement at the end of the nineteenth century gradually shifted until its most pronounced expressions became religious. Both Western Christian Zionists and Jewish religious Zionists used scripture to endorse Israeli claims over the entire land of Palestine and justify the oppressive actions of the Israeli government against the Palestinians. It is essential, therefore, to critique such a theology of militarism, domination, and injustice as a biblical aberration and emphasize instead that the authentic message of the Bible is a message of justice, mercy, and peace.

It is important that Christians see the fallacy of a Zionist approach to the Bible: the modern state of Israel cannot ignore the principles of morality and justice, and it cannot continue to defy the principles of international

law that are based on morality and justice. At the same time, there is a great need to help ordinary Christians use the Bible as a tool for justice and peace. There is a need to critique violence and evil being done in the name of God and God's word but there is also an equal need to highlight the rich biblical tradition in both the Old and New Testaments that can help in the pursuit of peace and freedom.

Such a theology can be truly liberating for people living under an occupation and can, in turn, help them work for the liberation of others. One of the most powerful and effective tools among Palestinian Christians has been their way of perceiving Jesus Christ as the ultimate paradigm of liberation. Readers who are familiar with Middle Eastern Christianity know how theologically "loaded" the Eastern churches are with a Trinitarian faith. The divinity of Christ is strongly emphasized and continuously reiterated in the various liturgies. Such an emphasis reflects the theological controversies that faced the early church during the first five centuries. In fact, Christ's divinity is emphasized so much that it is easy for many people to forget Jesus' full humanity. In many ways, a Palestinian theology of liberation has reestablished the balance between Christ's two natures—his divinity and his humanity. Palestinian liberation theology focuses on the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth, who was also a Palestinian living under an occupation.⁸ For many years, this fact was missed by Palestinian Christians. It simply escaped our attention, and we did not realize its potential impact. Perhaps because we had placed a large divine halo around Christ, we could not imagine him as a human being living at a time in history like any one of us. Once Palestinians rediscovered Jesus Christ's humanity, the relevancy of his human life became amazingly apparent; the experience of Palestinian Christians who live today in oppressive conditions under the Israeli occupation are quite similar to the experience of Jesus and his followers under the Roman occupation.

We then fleshed out the implications of such a comparison. Like many Palestinians today, Jesus was born under occupation and throughout his life knew only a life under occupation. All his travels, his eating and drinking, his teaching and healing ministry, his relationships with others—every aspect of his life—were carried out under the oppressive domination of the Romans. Finally, he was executed by the occupation forces in collusion with the religious leaders of first-century Jerusalem.

When we approach the Gospels through this lens, we discover a theology of liberation in a context that truly is relevant for Palestinian Christians who live their lives today under Israeli occupation.

Second: A Liberation of Theology

The Christian community of the Holy Land has lived there for the last two thousand years. It has not always been easy but with God's grace, it has survived. Due to many historical changes, its numbers have shrunk from a majority in Palestine by the end of the fourth century to a meager and vul-

nerable minority today. Palestinian Christians have always known that their savior and Lord Jesus Christ was not a violent person nor did he promote violence. In difficult and dangerous times, and in order to survive, their theology over time became a theology of resignation, isolation, and noninterference. Such a theology could be justified biblically: people are encouraged to “wait patiently on God” to come and rescue them. This theology was also impacted by Paul’s teaching that “all authority is from God,” so to resist the authority is to resist God (Rom. 13:1-2).

I believe these two examples, more than others, have caused members of the church to become submissive and passive. As a result, in some areas over the centuries the prophetic ministry of the church has suffered. As the church celebrated its liturgies and practiced its ceremonies and rituals, the prophetic word was silenced by a progression of oppressive governors with no qualms about crushing those who dared to raise their voices. In the Middle East, theologies tend to be imprisoned within liturgies, rites, and ceremonies that cry out for liberation. On the one hand, we give thanks that our liturgies go back to the early church fathers; however, there is a great need to express our faith in today’s language. At one point in history these liturgies were relevant to their times; the same needs to be done today. Liturgy is what the people do and it cannot be fossilized. Liturgy should help people translate their faith into everyday life and practice rather than be an expression of the past.

There is always a need to look carefully at the theology of our churches and, if necessary, liberate them from biblical misinterpretation and misunderstanding. There are, however, other dimensions of our theologies that also need to be liberated, not least of which is the de-Zionization of the Bible, that is, learning to read the Bible as a story about a loving, just, inclusive God of all people rather than as a story of one particular nation or ethnic group. The Bible has been often used to justify the injustices that have been committed by the Zionist Jews and the state of Israel. It has been equally abused by millions of Christian Zionists who use it to support Israel’s claim to the “Holy Land.” This topic is addressed in chapter 6.

These two areas—a theology of liberation and the liberation of theology—must go hand in hand. Once we have a vision of the liberator Christ, we have to critique any theology that silences the people of God in the face of evil. We must critique those biblical passages that glorify violence and present God as a god of war. Indeed, it is important to keep articulating a theology that helps liberate our theologies and, at the same time, helps us understand what it means to walk with God and do God’s work in the world today. Any theology that does not contribute to the liberation of the oppressed must be rejected as inadequate and irrelevant.

In fact, someone has suggested to me that we must begin with the liberation of theology before we can talk about a theology of liberation. She feels that so much of our theologies has shackled people instead of liberating them. One of the best examples of such an incarcerated theology is the silence of many church hierarchies in the face of the political powers that oppress and

enslave people. Such silence is deadly. The Middle East has a long history of repressive regimes that have not allowed people to express their views on public policy. Any dissent has been harshly addressed. Consequently, people's views have been suppressed as they live under the mercy of governors. In such a climate, church leaders have tried their best to be on good terms with the people who hold power, and the price of that good relationship has been their silence. Yet some have dared to speak out, and many of those have lost their lives. Today, we need to be inspired again by the early Christians who dared to stand up and speak for the poor and oppressed of the world. This demands courage and the liberation of our theologies.

Liberation continues to be at the heart of the work of Sabeel. Yet Sabeel is much more than a theological think tank. The name itself expresses action and dynamism. It means "the path" and "the way" as well as a spring of fresh water, and this implies walking the way and drinking from the spring. It is an active word. Therefore, once Sabeel came into being it had to be translated into programs. The objective of these programs has been precisely to examine two major areas: to develop a theology of liberation as well as to liberate any stagnant and dormant theologies.

Sabeel's first conference, held in 1990, focused on introducing the concept of a distinctively Palestinian theology. For us at Sabeel it was also a time for discernment. By 1993, the name Sabeel was adopted and its work began to expand. In 1996, Sabeel reached out internationally to establish Friends of Sabeel (FOS) in other countries. Today, the ministry of Sabeel is both local and international through the commitment of supporters from various racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. All are committed to justice, peace, and reconciliation for all the people of Israel and Palestine.

Sabeel emerged to make the gospel relevant to Palestinian Christians who live under Israeli occupation. As it developed, Sabeel has grown more aware of its multifaceted responsibilities and thus has devised a three-dimensional agenda. The first dimension addresses the accumulation of a two-thousand-year-old Christian tradition. It promotes ecumenical relations with all the Christians of the land, whether living within the state of Israel or in the occupied Palestinian territories. It aims to strengthen Christians' faith in Christ and their love of Christ, drawing them closer together so that they can transcend denominationalism while appreciating their own particular rich church tradition. There is a need to preserve the rich Christian mosaic in the Middle East while at the same time emphasizing the importance of working together ecumenically.

A second dimension of the work of Sabeel concerns Christian-Muslim relations. We cannot be faithful to God in our work if we do not address interfaith relations with our Muslim brothers and sisters. Although we belong to one Palestinian people, we are deeply affiliated with two religious faiths: Islam and Christianity. Throughout the vicissitudes of history, in good and bad times, we have lived together. Unfortunately, at present, due to the propensity of the oppressive Israeli occupation to drive wedges between our

two faiths and the rise of religious fundamentalism and extremism, we have been experiencing certain difficulties that have been driving some of our people apart. This is distressing for many of us, Christian and Muslim alike. It has been very important, therefore, to work together for three essential interfaith objectives: greater understanding between the two faiths, respect for one another's faith traditions, and acceptance of the religious differences between us.

A third dimension is our work for justice and peace. In many ways, this is the most important dimension and it constitutes our priority. Once peace is achieved, even the ecumenical and interfaith ministries will be easier to promote. Sabeel's work in this area takes into consideration both the demands of international law and the U.N. resolutions on the one hand, and our strong faith in the God of justice and peace on the other. We maintain that no permanent peace is possible if it is not built on justice.

On this level of Sabeel's ministry we cooperate with many different individuals and groups, Christians, Muslims, and Jews, locally and internationally, people of faith or with no faith, provided they believe in the power of nonviolence and are willing to commit to work through nonviolent methods. As a Christian movement, Sabeel believes that, following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, we cannot condone or practice violence. Therefore, we must persist in lifting a prophetic voice and taking a prophetic stand against any injustice and oppression and continue working for justice and witnessing for peace.

These three dimensions of ministry are interconnected and interrelated. Sabeel came into being to serve. Its objective is to be involved on all these levels and, with God's grace, to make a difference. Our motives and objectives must be pure and clear: we are working for a just peace that honors the God of justice and peace and respects all the people of the land whether they are Muslims, Jews, or Christians. It works to give them equally the benefits that justice and peace can provide.

The road ahead may be long and tortuous, but we are determined to tread it. Although there is an urgency to achieve change and progress on every one of the above levels, at this time Sabeel is giving priority to the achievement of a just peace between Palestinians and Israelis. A just peace must be the foundation for our future work, and, indeed, progress and change on all other fronts hinge on the establishment of peace and freedom for all the people of the land.