

From the Pastor. . .

If anyone, including me, tells you he has a good handle on the Israel-Palestine conflict, I invite you to be skeptical! The basic problem is that two groups, the Palestinian people and the Jewish people, both have more-or-less legitimate claims to the same land. Both groups have folks who have been displaced through the years by wars and by major power decisions and by the United Nations.

Back in 2000, it appeared as if President Clinton had brokered a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, but at the last moment Yasser Arafat, for what seemed like legitimate reasons to him, backed away from the deal. Right after, terror attacks began to be launched upon Israel. (These attacks have ceased.)

Israel responded with some heavy-handed tactics, including invasion of some Palestinian Territory and the building of a security wall/fence around the Palestinian Territory. Talk to an Israeli, and she will say, "We are only trying to keep our children's schools and our buses from being attacked." Talk to a Palestinian, and she will say, "The Israelis make it impossible for us to go to the other side of the wall to make a living. We are not terrorists. We are farmers and nurses."

To make matters more complicated, the Palestinian Authority has control of at least some of the West Bank (that area which includes Bethlehem and East Jerusalem), but has no control at all over Gaza (a seaside strip of land about two hours south of Tel Aviv, Israel's largest city). Gaza is controlled by Hamas, a radical group dedicated to the destruction of Israel. Israel invaded Gaza, though it has now withdrawn its troops.

So, the above too-brief and too-inadequate introduction forms the background of my trip to Israel. I went with ten other United Methodists. The trip was led by the Executive Director of Fair Witness for the Middle East, a Catholic nun (who is also a lawyer!) Through her contacts, we were able to meet with a variety of people. We met with the man who was in charge of placing the Wall around the West Bank and we met with military lawyers who are tasked with deciding the rules of engagement when civilians are living in military targets.

We met with a Palestinian leader who was one of Arafat's chief negotiators and we met with a Muslim principal of a school in Israel, and met many of the children at the school. (22% of Israel's population is Arab.) We were able to visit a factory run by a Palestinian Christian and met with the general manager of the only Christian television station in the area. (It is located in Bethlehem). We also met with the head of the Palestinian Stock Exchange, who is bullish on Palestine. (7% growth last year in the economy.)

We also met with a United Methodist missionary in Bethlehem who is working with the poor in Bethlehem and the surrounding area.

And, we also had the opportunity to visit some of the holy sites.

More about all this in two weeks. I'll be doing a presentation about my trip on Tuesdays, March 16 and 23 from 6:30 PM to 7:45 PM in the Fellowship Hall. Pictures, discussion and all that. It should be fun.

— Eric Lindblade