

Don't forget the Holy Land's indigenous Christian population

By Anne K. Lynn, January 20, 2011

[Episcopal News Service] Somehow, it was not obvious to me that Christians in the Holy Land, descendents of the Apostles, are Palestinian. Those blond Jesus images from childhood take a long time to erase. Palestinian Christians did not convert to Christianity; they've lived and spread Christ's message throughout the region over the last 2000 years. And now, after decades of turmoil in the region, Palestinian Christians, once the majority, have withered to less than 2 percent of the population. That's startling news to most.

And they're suffering. One of many examples: two Israeli civil rights groups estimated late last year that East Jerusalem needs 1000 more public school classrooms than currently exist for Palestinian children. Families there must choose among inadequate facilities, private schools with unaffordable fees, or in the case of about 5,300 children just in East Jerusalem, no education at all. Travel to hospitals is difficult or impossible, turning manageable conditions into crises or permanent disabilities. Rather than contributing to a vital, growing community, the chronically ill become dependent, a drain on scarce resources.



What would you do in these circumstances? I know I'd leave. And leave they do. The result is that the remaining Palestinian Christians are statistically more likely to be elderly, poor or female than their Muslim or Jewish counterparts. Charles Sennott wrote in *The Body and the Blood* that those who remain no longer feel they belong or that they even matter. They feel forgotten by both the peace negotiators and their Christian brothers and sisters around the world. Sennott added that the more polarizing groups in the region "are drowning them out, squeezing them from the public space." Their voice of reconciliation and tolerance is barely heard. Without external support, the result will be a Holy Land with no indigenous Christian presence.

Sennott argues, and we agree, that if the Christian population vanishes, so will an important voice for religious tolerance. Christian institutions imbed respect for differences in their service delivery which is one reason those of other faiths choose Christian hospitals and attend Christian schools. The region needs as many reliable, neutral buffers as possible to

provide a sense of safety and permanence. Catholic, Orthodox and mainline Protestant congregations and institutions often provide that buffer.

Phoebe Griswold, president of the board of the American Friends of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem posed the following question recently: What goes on on the other side of the wall? While others rightly focus on political advocacy and a political solution to the hardships the wall represents, how do we address the daily human cost in lives lost to frustration and despair? AFEDJ helps to provide the Diocese of Jerusalem with resources to educate and heal those trapped in the stifling situation which they had no part in creating. Can we be observers of suffering without addressing the immediate, human need?

We've been told that providing humanitarian aid in this region is a weak response to a muscular problem. We disagree. When politics and diplomacy have been unable to deliver, we as Christians and as human beings may not walk away from the consequences of that failure. Political pressure, while important, doesn't put food on the table today. And while there's surely no peace without justice, Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem Suheil Dawani has said that you can't make peace with hungry people.

The institutions of the Diocese of Jerusalem include 14 schools, 2 full service hospitals, 4 outpatient clinics, 3 institutes for the disabled, plus facilities for the elderly and for pilgrims, in addition to 23 parishes. These institutions encourage a vibrant, stable community to retain residents, develop businesses, to prepare future leadership and to model the spirit of reconciliation and hope that will be the basis for a sustainable peace. This is nation building -- developing peace and justice from the ground up.

Some argue that developing a stronger civil society takes too long, that a negotiated peace breakthrough would be the only true and permanent fix. But sustaining peace requires an educated population with the resources to develop economic self-sufficiency. The World Bank published a report in September which began with this statement: "The viability of a future Palestinian state will be determined by the strength of its institutions and its ability to sustain economic growth."

Peace and justice and humanitarian aid are two sides of the same coin. One without the other is ineffective and temporary. Peace among hopeless people is a soulless, unacceptable victory just as well-fed people with no freedom would be. Justice is a core value, and a goal that needs to be bound to the real, overwhelming daily needs of our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land. A combined solution is a powerful engine for the future. One without the other is incomplete. By combining the hard work for a just peace with the equally hard work of developing a functioning civil society, we can claim not just a human rights victory, but a compassionate, human lives one as well.

We each have a role to play in this effort -- building presence, building peace. Let's find it and change history. A solution in the Holy Land is too important to be left to politics alone. It deserves a response from the heart as well as from the head.

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