

DIVING INTO THE DEEP

NCNC pastors make ecumenical visit to Palestine, Israel

By Julianne Stokstad

I was part of an ecumenical group that visited Palestine and Israel in November, along with NCNC pastoral counselor Carol Saysette and her husband Bob Reynolds, both members of Community Congregational UCC, Tiburon. Led by Presbyterian pastor Monica Styron, we met monthly for nearly a year. We read books and listened to book reviews. We heard lectures by experts in both Israeli and Palestine politics and history, but none of this prepared me adequately for our experiences there.

This trip attracted me because my family had lived in Rehovot, Israel, for seven months in 1977. It was then a quiet, peaceful time and I loved living there. The people were friendly. There were many interesting and amazing Biblical sites to visit. When I became a pastor, this experience helped make the Bible come alive for me and my parishioners.

I have been deeply disturbed by the escalating violence, and I wanted to see for myself how things had changed in the last 30 years. In addition First Congregational UCC, San Rafael, where I was, until recently, pastor, inspired in me a passion for mission and justice work. On several trips to Cuernavaca, Mexico, the Benedictine sisters taught me that there can be no peace without justice. I am neither pro-Palestine nor pro-Israel. I went with the intention of listening to both, look at the suffering both sides experience.

The central focus of our trip was the nine-day Seventh International Sabeel Conference. Sabeel (meaning "the way" in Ara-



Carol Saysette and Julianne Stokstad, NCNC ministers, flank Jean Zaru at the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem. Zaru, a Palestinian Quaker Christian who lives in Ramallah, is a board member of the Sabeel Center and president of the Jerusalem YWCA. She is the author of *Occupied with Nonviolence: A Palestinian Woman Speaks* (Augsburg Fortress Press).

bic) is an Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem. They seek a spirituality based on justice, peace, nonviolence and reconciliation, following the way of Jesus. I was impressed how many Europeans were at the conference. Though Sabeel feels strong support from our denomination, there were only four UCC attendees.

Before and after the conference our group visited holy sites in Jerusalem and around Israel, as well as West Bank cities of Bethlehem, Ramallah, Nablus, and Hebron. We also visited a number of villages. We heard many people's experiences firsthand as we spoke with university students in Nablus, people in refugee camps, and people who

work at human rights organizations in both Palestine and Israel. We had ample opportunity to get to know Christian Palestinians. I worshipped with Greek Catholics in Cana and was treated to Sunday dinner with congregants.

I was not prepared for the intense fear that seems to permeate everywhere and everyone, nor was I prepared to see the 12-foot high security wall that rings the whole of the West Bank and Gaza.

In such difficult times, the question I asked everyone I met was "what gives you hope?"

• One of founders of Breaking the Silence (a group of Israel soldiers who give testimony to what they saw and/or did illegally to Palestinians) said what gave him inspiration and hope was getting

to know CPT members (Christian Peacemaker Team who accompany Palestinians and just record what they see happen).

• An Arab at the Jaffa gate in Jerusalem told me the election of Obama gives him great hope for change

• The director of B't Selem (Israeli human rights organization) told me he doesn't have much hope and then I asked him why he does what he does and he said he can't do anything else.

• Rev. Simon Kortjass from South Africa said what gives him hope is his work with the people in the West Bank, but he said it means hard work and sacrifice

• Gila Svirsky (one of founders of the Women in Black at Hagar Square) said she finds hope in the

increasing secularization of Israel and increasing consumerism and a very small change in Israelis' awareness about how illegal settlements are now understood not as an asset but as a liability to Israel.

What gave me hope was the very high level of education in Palestine (99 percent literacy), the strong resilient spirit of the Palestinian people, and the large number of young people sacrificing to teach those younger than themselves: a Ph.D. in biology teaching theater in a refugee camp; a young Palestinian lawyer working for protection of child prisoners in Israeli jails, a young couple in a refugee camp both teaching English in high school.

And when I asked people what we can do, they said tell people what you have seen here. Tell them we are not terrorists.

Upon return I called Peter Makari, our national UCC person for Middle East. Our denomination works with and supports the organization Churches for Middle East Peace <<http://www.cmep.org>> as well as supporting a missionary working with Sabeel. Learn more about our UCC/DOC work in the Middle East at <<http://globalministries.org/mee/>>.

The most important thing I came away with is that each of us needs to become informed and decide for ourselves what is happening.

Saysette and I would be happy to share our experiences. You can contact me at <jrstokstad@jstokstad.com> or 510-548-2429.

Julianne Stokstad is now training to do chaplaincy with the mentally ill in jail.

Oakland church dedicates a new glass mosaic



In January, Dorothy Finger (far right) donated the Fingers of the Spirit memorial glass mosaic project to Plymouth UCC, Oakland, the church of her childhood. She now belongs to Skyline UCC, Oakland. Lois Mueller (left), pastor of Plymouth, helped it happen. Artists Joan Monroe and Alexandra Childs spent nine months mortaring 10,000 glass pieces to five columns in a breezeway to the sanctuary. The mosaic honors Finger's family and love of her church. Check out <<http://gallery.me.com/artsheart#100403>> for color photos.

Photos by Alexandra Childs



CALENDAR OF PRAYER

Please hold in your prayers:

- All those out of work.
- Churches struggling with their finances.
- Our kids and youth and their church leaders.
- Our Conference staff.
- UCC missionaries around the world, especially in dangerous places.
- UCC General President and Minister John Thomas as he completes his second and final term.
- NCNC delegates preparing to attend General Synod in Michigan this summer.
- Chaplains in jails and hospitals and hospices.
- Persons in discernment about the vocation of ministry and seminary students.