

**A MOMENT OF TRUTH:
A WORD OF FAITH AND HOPE FROM THE HEART OF PALESTINIAN SUFFERING**

**A Study Guide for the Palestine Kairos Document
(adapted from a guide produced by the National Council of Churches of Christ USA)**

Background and Commentary

In December 2009, Palestinian Christians joined together in Bethlehem to launch the Palestine *Kairos* document, “A Moment of Truth: A word of faith and hope from the heart of Palestinian suffering”. The document comes after a long period of discernment about what to say, given the ongoing realities of Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. It is part of the tradition of other *Kairos* documents, including the 1985 South African *Kairos* document in the context of the Apartheid regime there; the 1988 Central American *Kairos* America document concerning the neocolonial presence of the U.S. in the region; the Zimbabwe Kairos of 1998 concerning poverty, ill-health, bad governance, corruption, fear and hopelessness in that country; and *Kairos* India 2000, denouncing the socio-political crisis in India, especially as it relates to the *dalits* and other oppressed people.

In the words of the drafters, “Inspired by the mystery of God’s love for all, the mystery of His divine presence in the history of all peoples and, in a particular way, in the history of our country, we proclaim our word based on our Christian faith and our sense of Palestinian belonging—a word of faith, hope, and love.” This *kairos* moment—a time representing the possibility of substantive change if seized—comes at “a dead end” in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and is a call to the Church to take meaningful action.

“A Moment of Truth” starts by setting the **context** of “Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, deprivation of our freedom and all that results.” It speaks of the separation barrier, settlements, humiliation at checkpoints, restrictions of religious liberty, refugees, and prisoners. Issues of access to Jerusalem and international law are commented upon, as are the realities of Palestinian Arab Israelis (more than 20% of the Israeli population) and factors of emigration. Internal Palestinian political conflict as well as the misuse of religion are discussed and admitted. While there have been different Palestinian responses to all of this, the Christian authors state, “we repeat and proclaim that our Christian word in the midst of all this, in the midst of catastrophe, is a word of faith, hope, and love.”

The second section of the document is **theological** in nature. It affirms a trinitarian belief in God “who loves each one of his creatures;” Jesus Christ, “Saviour of the world;” and the Holy Spirit, “who accompanies the Church and all humanity on their journey”. Palestinian Christians take pride in the way God came to the land of Palestine through the prophets and incarnate in Jesus, and that the same land has “a universal mission”—the “initiation of the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God on earth. On this land, Palestinians claim deep roots, but lament having been driven out. They are connected, and this connectedness is existential, something different theologies cannot deny. Israeli occupation, they state, “is a sin against God and humanity because it deprives the Palestinians of their basic human rights, bestowed by God.” They call for its end.

“Despite the lack of even a glimmer of positive expectation, our **hope** remains strong.” Hope is both faith and expectation for a better future. There are signs of hope:

- Local congregations and parishes are vibrant;
- There is active interfaith dialogue and action;
- Memory perseveres, particularly that of dispossession;
- “We see a determination...to overcome the resentments of the past and to be ready for reconciliation once justice has been restored.”

For all times and places, **the Church is called** to pray and serve; to be prophetic and speak “courageously, honestly, and lovingly...in the midst of daily events;” to proclaim the Kingdom of God, “a kingdom of justice, peace and dignity;” to promote human dignity instead of the interest of a political regime; and to embody the “presence of God among us.”

The Palestinian Christian drafters then focus on **love** which is “Christ’s commandment to love our friends and enemies.” To “see the face of God in every human being” does not mean “accepting evil or aggression” but “seeks to correct the evil and stop the aggression”. Christians are called to resist the Israeli occupation as a “right and a duty” but based on Christ’s example: “we cannot resist evil with evil” but “through respect of life—our lives and the lives of our opponents.” Resistance must be courageous and peaceful, they write, and may include advocacy campaigns and economic measures. “Through our **love**, we will overcome injustices and establish foundations for a new society both for us and for our opponents.”

These Palestinian Christians issue **a word to various communities** that “human beings were not made for hatred.”

- To Christians: “Our word is that all of us in this land carry a message and we will continue to carry it despite the thorns, despite blood and daily difficulties. We place our hope in God.” This is a time for repentance for “silence, indifference, [and] lack of communion.” It is a time “to remain steadfast” and “be active.”
- To Muslims: “A message of love and living together and a call to reject fanaticism and extremism.”
- To Jews: “We lived in the past without fighting one another....We are able to love and live together.”
- To the Churches of the world: “Come and see” in order to “understand our reality.” It is a word of gratitude and solidarity, and a challenge to “say a word of truth...with regard to Israel’s occupation of Palestinian land. Such a position may include “boycott and disinvestment as tools of justice, peace and security for both Israel and us.”
- To the international community: Stop using double standards and “insist on the international resolutions,” seeking a “just and definitive peace that will put an end to Israeli occupation.”
- To Jewish and Muslim religious leaders: “Let us together try to rise up above the political positions that have failed so far and continue to lead us on the path of failure and suffering.”
- To the Palestinian people and to the Israelis: “This is a call to see the face of God in each one of His creatures...to reach a common vision, based on equality and sharing...Love is possible and mutual trust is possible.” “Educational programs must help us to get to know the other as he or she is rather than through the prism of conflict.” The state should be “constructed on respect for religion but also equality, justice, liberty and respect for pluralism and not on domination by a religion or numerical majority.” Jerusalem is a city that “belongs to two peoples and three religions” and is “the foundation of our vision and our entire life.”

They conclude by stating, “In the absence of hope, we cry out our cry of hope. We believe in God, good and just. We believe that his goodness will finally triumph over the evil of hate and of death that still persist in our land. We will see here ‘a new land’ and ‘a new human being’, capable of rising up in the spirit to love each one of his or her brothers and sisters.”

Questions

1. The Kairos Palestine document, as you have read, was written by Christians in the Palestinian territories: the West Bank and Gaza. Was it surprising to you to learn that there is a vibrant, though numerically dwindling, community of Christians in this part of the world? A brief survey of the churches of the Middle East can be found at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4499668.stm.

Does it change the way you think about the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians to know that this conflict involves Christians, not just Jews and Muslims?

2. The Kairos Palestine document speaks about the checkpoints, the separation barrier, Israeli settlements, and other signs of Israel's control of land occupied following the "Six-Day War" of 1967. Maps showing the route of the separation barrier, as well as the series of checkpoints and settlements, can be found at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,OCHA,,ISR,,4875de625,0.html>.

Is this new information for you? If persons in your congregation have travelled to the region and have seen some of these realities, they could share their impressions. If there are Palestinians living in your community, invite them to share their experience of daily life in the Palestinian territories.

3. The Kairos Palestine document has provoked a strong negative reaction in some quarter, especially by some Jewish groups for being insensitive to the security needs of Israel, and even for failing to affirm explicitly (as our church has done) Israel's right to exist. An example of this criticism can be found in the response of the Canadian Jewish Congress. Does such criticism seem warranted? How does it affect your reading of the document? If you have a strong, trusting relationship with a neighboring synagogue, you may want to suggest a joint discussion of Kairos Palestine. Be prepared for hard questions and genuine disagreement! But also be sure to talk about how to maintain good relationships even when you disagree.
4. The Kairos Palestine document emphasizes several biblical themes, including:
 - God is the universal Creator who has fashioned all people in the divine image (see Genesis 1:1-27).
 - While the land of Israel and Palestine has been blessed by the historical presence of the patriarchs, prophets, and Jesus Christ and his disciples, all land belongs ultimately to God (see Psalm 24).
 - Followers of Christ are called to hope even when there seems no earthly reason for it (see Romans 8:31-39).
 - Followers of Christ are called to love even enemies and to resist evil nonviolently (see Matthew 5:38-48).

Read these passages carefully together. What implications do you see for your life, as well as that of Christians in the Middle East?

For Additional Study

Kairos Palestine website with much more information and other responses:

<http://www.kairospalestine.ps/>

Kairos: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives provides an extensive list of materials for study and advocacy on their web site at:

<http://www.kairoscanada.org/en/rights-and-trade/focus-countries/palestine-israel/i-p-resources/>

Kairos Canada is also developing a workshop on the situation in Israel-Palestine.

Gregory Baum, "Is Denouncing the Occupation Antisemitic?" in *The Ecumenist*, Volume: Vol. 47 No. 3, Summer 2010

Gary A Anderson, "Does the promise still hold?" in *The Christian Century*, January 13, 2009.

A few books on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

- Gary Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians are not being told about Israel and the Palestinians.*
- Sandy Tolán, *The Lemon Tree*
- Saree Makdisi, *Palestine Inside Out: An Everyday Occupation*
- Neve Gordon, *Israel's Occupation*
- René Backmann, *A Wall in Palestine*

Books that give a sense of the Christian communities in the Middle East more generally, including sections on Palestinian Christians are:

- William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain*
- Charles Sennott, *The Body and the Blood*

To get some insight on the reality of Palestinian Christians, and a vision for peace:

- Elias Chacour, *Blood Brothers and We Belong to the Land.*

Archbishop Elias Chacour was The Presbyterian Church in Canada's E.H. Johnson Award Recipient in 2009.

More deeply theological and reflective books, written by Palestinian Christians:

- Naim Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*
- Naim Ateek, *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation*
- Mitri Raheb, *I am a Palestinian Christian*
- Mitri Raheb, *Bethlehem Besieged*
- Bishop. Munib Younan, *Witnessing for Peace*
- Jean Zaru, *Occupied with Nonviolence*