

Address by Dr. Bernard Sabella
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2016 Dr. E. H. Johnson Memorial Fund Award Recipient
for the Cutting Edge of Mission
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It is indeed a privilege and an honor to be here as recipient of the E. H. Johnson Award for this year's General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. I represent the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees of the Middle East Council of Churches and as such the Award is not to my person but to all those who have worked diligently over the years with Palestinian and nowadays also with Syrian refugees. The Award is an acknowledgement of the work of colleagues, friends and fellow compatriots in Gaza where we work with over 100,000 of our fellow countrymen and women offering quality health care and vocational training; in Lebanon where we reach to hundreds of Palestinian refugees and we cater to the educational needs of hundreds of Syrian students, many from Palestinian origin and refugees for the third time; in Galilee where we reach out, among other activities, to youth as they acquire leadership skills and we work hard to open up to Jewish groups, organizations and institutions who believe like us in equal rights in a State for all of its citizens; in Jerusalem and the West Bank where our concern for water access of our fellow Palestinians is one of our priorities; in Jordan where important work is carried out with Palestinian refugee families and with the Syrian "newcomers" who often find accommodation in the established Palestinian refugee camps set up in the early fifties of the last century.

The invigorating thing about receiving this Award is the knowledge that the memory of Dr. Johnson "man of mission" is recognized and kept alive. The exchange undertaken with people of mission across the globe since 1983 reinforces determination and will to go on in spite of odds and difficulties. The Award translates into partnership, ecumenical fraternity and the insistence that witnessing is the essence of our faith; a faith that is open to others, irrespective of any particular background, belief, national origin or political and ideological preferences. As our world these days is experiencing a refugee problem of magnitude and as hundreds and thousands drown trying to cross the Mediterranean and other shores, one needs to question: are we all doing enough to reach out to these refugees and are our societies with their values and advocacy for Human Rights extending the needed help? Or are we making of our professed prophetic voice "a cry in the wilderness?"

In the Middle East, or what was known for long as the Near East, the social, political and economic environments have always been precarious. The injustice done to my people in 1948 meant that the disintegration of Palestinian society and institutions, the refugee trauma and the dislocation of 726,000 Palestinians, including my own family and well over 50,000 Christian Palestinians became integral to our life experiences. The challenge was to how to overcome and on how to live a "normal" life without centering our lives on victimhood. I remember as a young boy the conversations that my late father and mother carried on while sipping their early morning coffee in the one room in the old city of Jerusalem that became home for ten of us after our refugee experience. They spoke mostly about their home in Qatamon west of Jerusalem that became part of the newly created state of Israel. In one of their conversations they spoke about how Jews were victims for what Nazism and rampant anti-Semitism in Europe did to them. The message of my parents that came across was that we were all, Jews and Arab Palestinians, victims and that we cannot blame each other for what befell us. But my father was always accustomed to say that the blame for what befell us should be put

squarely on the shoulders of the United States and British governments because, with the establishment of Israel and the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem, these two governments turned their back to “Christian” values, as my father would put it. When we speak of governments, we should also address our own responsibility in advocating with our own governments and societies, without fear or intimidation. The recent example of deportation of five WCC Ecumenical Water Network participants upon arrival and long investigation in Tel Aviv airport together with conditioning the entry to Israel upon signature of the other five members that they will not visit the Palestinian Territories is an example where there are no bounds of what the Israeli authorities would do in order to limit any non-violent opposition to its policies of military occupation. Sometimes, I feel that Western Churches are easily intimidated into silence by the fear that they will be labeled as anti-Semitic if they criticize Israel and any of its control measures on the Palestinian population. I am not going to detail these measures as Btselem and Al Haq Human Rights organizations, one Israeli and the second Palestinian, document these measures with their human, social and personal dire consequences. There are other organizations, such as the prominent Israeli Association for Civil Rights in Israel that document the infractions that go on with Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem. The prophetic voice is a voice that challenges the wilderness of injustice and that is courageous in its call for a reconciliation based on respecting the rights of an oppressed and occupied people.

The Churches of the Holy Land together with the Churches in the United States came together as recently as April 19 – 20 2016 at the Carter Center to discuss the yet unresolved political conflict between Israelis and Palestinians and the role of the Churches in the just and lasting resolution of this century old conflict. As they acknowledged in the concluding statement “the spiritual kinship we share with other children of Abraham, we have a responsibility to take an active role in bringing this chronic conflict to a just peace.” The prophetic voice of the Church was affirmed as well as the belief “that working towards a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict would not only serve the cause of peace and justice in the Holy Land but also promote peace in the Middle East region in general. A just peace would take away from those who take advantage by exploiting this conflict to serve their own motives, thereby compounding the perpetuation of injustices.” The conferees at the Carter Center signed their commitment to a two-state solution at a time when voices are being heard locally and at an international level stating that the two – state solution is no longer viable because of the ongoing expansion and construction of illegally built Israeli settlements on Palestinian lands. Israeli occupation needs to end and the measures of population control that apply collective punishment, denial of free movement, infractions on basic political and human rights and other methods of human and physical constraints and restrictions on social and economic development need to stop. The Atlanta Church leaders called on Churches and Church Related Organizations to work jointly and proactively to protect the existing and future presence of Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land. Of interest is the call to support “initiatives to nurture deeper insight and understanding of existing and future opportunities for inter-religious collaboration especially in providing humanitarian assistance to all people in need, including those in Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem and all areas of the Holy Land.” Jerusalem is to be the shared and open capital of both Palestine and Israel with no walls and where rights, beliefs and traditions of the three monotheistic faiths are respected and mutually acknowledged.

The Atlanta Statement can become a reference point not simply from an ecclesiastical perspective but also for practical purposes. Much needs to be done by Churches and faith-based organizations and communities in order to bring peace forward not simply between Israelis and Palestinians but also across faith communities themselves. Allow me here to address the role of Churches and Faith Groups in promoting the kind of economics that would make peace with justice possible. There are those in the center of power in Israel who are quite comfortable with the status quo of occupation because it is not costly, in fact it may be beneficial. How do you convince these people that occupation is eventually a costly enterprise not only on economic grounds but also on moral, ethical and socio-political values of their

own society? The recent statement by no other than the Assistant Chief of Staff of Israel that the environment today in Israel is similar to that prevalent in Germany prior to the rise of the Nazi regime. This is a serious statement that should be considered as churches and church groups look into how they can apply pressure on Israel to desist from its illegal acts of occupation and in order to preserve those values in its own society that can promote eventual peace and reconciliation with their Palestinian neighbors.

While I understand your position on boycotting Israel, I like to challenge you on two counts: First, there is an urgent need for economic support of Palestinians, particularly targeting youth in order that they may have opportunities that are denied them today by Israel because it does not allow the free economic development of Palestine. With economic support of Palestinians, there is the second related challenge to divest from those companies and multinational corporations that do business with the illegal settlements in the Occupied Territories. Labeling of products that come out of the settlements is a must in order for the average consumer to make a choice. The Presbyterian Church in Canada has expressed support for labeling of settlement products and this is a first step. There is a need to examine the issue of divestment and to elaborate a policy on it. While some would argue that this is tantamount to boycott, it should really be seen as a pressure tactic to force some in Israel to wake up to the reality that settlements cannot go on expanding and making profit out of an illegal occupation. Companies that do business in the illegally built settlements should also realize that there are economic costs, regardless of how big or small, to continuing with their illegal involvement in these settlements. The argument that Palestinian workers benefit from the economic activities in the settlements hide an unjust situation where the Israeli government is making of the occupied territory a hostage economy and is not allowing us Palestinians to develop economically as we should. By so doing the Israeli government is denying the opportunity for thousands of Palestinians to work and develop their own economy and society. I want to encourage you on your support of Palestinian products such as olive oil and your encouragement to visit with Christian and Palestinian partners when on visits to the Holy Land. These steps are laudable but they should be placed in a broader policy context of working together with other Church and Civil Society groups to encourage the overall economic development of Palestinians. Once again you should not be intimidated by the abuse of the anti-Semitic accusation as this is a purely political ploy to silence you and to equate the legitimate criticism of Israel with repugnant and unacceptable racist ideologies.

On another pressing topic, today we witness an odd interpretation and justification for acts against religious and ethnic communities across the Middle East, in particular in Iraq and Syria, using or rather abusing the lofty dogmas and traditions of Islam. We Palestinian Christians are disheartened by this development and while we cannot dream of going back to the era when Arab Nationalism brought Christians, Jews and Moslems together to dwell on the issues and concerns of newly independent Arab states after long periods of colonial rule, we continue to be determined to serve our societies as an integral and vibrant part, in spite of everything else. We cannot turn our backs to the history and heritage of our forefathers who were proud to be rooted in the land and who persisted in their witnessing to the life and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We and Moslems are twin brothers and sisters in Palestine and elsewhere in the region. The work of fanatic groups abusing Islam whether in destroying communities that have existed for long in Iraq and Syria or in putting all kinds of pressures on them to convert and turn away from their own religion and beliefs is absolutely and categorically unacceptable not simply by us Palestinian Christians but also by all loving people, irrespective of religious background.

While we ask the Churches and Church Related Organizations to do their role in promoting the inter-religious and inter-faith openness and acknowledgment in Western societies, especially now that hundreds of thousands of refugees are knocking on the gates of Europe and North America, we also address our brothers and sisters in the

Moslem world asking them to stand up and to interact positively with the prophetic voices of the Churches on issues touching the quality of life for all of us on this planet. We cannot and should not excuse violence and terrorism, irrespective of background of perpetrators, by being silent. We should all join together to emphasize that unless we work together for the benefit of a humanitarian world, we will all lose and only the small minority of fanatics will take over. This is our challenge all of us without exception.

In this environment of injustice in Palestine and instability and violence across the region, the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees of the Middle East Council of Churches assure you of our willingness to go on with our work and witness as an ecumenical organization intent to serve all without consideration of belief or national and political affiliation. We are the children of the East and we are proud of it. But we are also part of the Christian heritage that extends for centuries and across continents. Your partnership, support and solidarity to us over the last thirty years plus enable and empower us to go on with our work in spite of all impediments. My presence here today is testimony to our partnership and to the fact that without our joint witness, partnership and solidarity no miracle of continuity can take place neither in our needed work nor in the hope that someday the Middle East region will witness once again an environment of peace, justice, mutual acknowledgement and reconciliation across communities and within our societies.

Thank you once again for this honor bestowed on the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees and thank you for your support throughout the years. We count on you, Sisters and Brothers, for our being together brings all of us hope.

In Jerusalem, there is one church that I have loved since childhood. It is the Church of ***Pater Noster*** "Our Father" on the Mount of Olives. Whenever I enter the Church to pray or to meditate, I am struck by the over 230 white and blue glazed tiles on which the Our Father is inscribed. As I move from the Aramaic tile to the Arabic and Hebrew tiles to the English and French tiles and to those tiles belonging to dialects of original inhabitants of North America, Africa, Australia, Europe and New Zealand and Asia I am always awed by the fact that Our Father is the Father of us All, irrespective of dialect, background or any particular characteristic. We are all children of God created in His image. Whenever I recite the Our Father in Arabic I am reminded that the bond that links me to all living and nonliving is much stronger than the narrow identifications I hold. It helps me to open up to others.

Allow me to recite the Our Father in my own language, Arabic, in order to affirm both my faith and my commitment, together with you, to the one world in which we live.

أبنا الذي في السموات
ليتقدس اسمك
ليأتي ملكوتك
لتكن مشيئتك
كما في السماء
كذلك على الأرض
أعطنا خبزنا كفاف يومنا
و اغفر لنا خطايانا
كما نحن نغفر لمن أخطأ إلينا
ولا تدخلنا في التجارب
لكن نجنا من الشرير
أمين