

**“God of Life Lead Us to Justice and Peace”
The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel:
History and Theological Foundation**

“The Church believes that it is the right as much as duty of an occupied people to struggle against injustice in order to gain freedom, although it also believes that non-violent means of struggle remain stronger and far more efficient.”

WCC Central Committee 2001, Potsdam

On the occasion of the 10th Anniversary of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), we give thanks to God Almighty for this courageous and bold initiative and feel humbled and grateful for having the opportunity to create and shape. A year before the 10th General Assembly of the WCC the theme God of Life Lead Us to Justice and Peace could not have been more relevant when we think of the mission of the EAPPI and pray that the WCC General Assembly will recommit itself to continue this ministry.

Ten years on the WCC and its partners, founders, friends, accompaniers and accompanied celebrate the EAPPI and its achievements, take stock of its learning and recommit themselves to accompany the most vulnerable and speak out and work against injustice. The EAPPI has a lot to offer to the churches in terms of challenge and responsibility.

The CCIA developed the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel with some very committed ecumenical partners and member churches based on its longstanding experience in human rights work as well as the theological basis developed by the churches for WCC’s work on human rights since 1948.

The EAPPI was developed in a unique and dynamic way as a response of the WCC and its members and ecumenical partners who came together committed to show solidarity with the victims of human rights violations, the occupied and all those who oppose unjust structures and work for the end of the occupation of Palestine.

The EAPPI was developed out of an intensive consultation process with partners and members from 2001 to 2002 but it used a plethora of CCIA’s rich history of work against human rights violations as well as deep theological basis for Christian responsibility in this work since 1937.

With all partners WCC accepted to take a risk to launch the programme already in August 2002 even though the programme was not fully established or even properly funded, only to respond in a timely manner to a human rights crisis in the OPT. The understanding was that WCC with a group of National coordinators from participating countries and the local churches would continue the reflection process while deeply involved in action.

The clarity of language used; the methodology and the reflection process, as well as the funds and partners that evolved from 2001 to early 2002, demonstrate that when the churches come together, when the WCC responds in the right time and facilitates a process, we can be prophetic and dynamic.

The EAPPI is not just any human rights program, based in the WCC it is built on a deliberate theological reflection. As we formed the EAPPI I believe it was extremely to provide theological and biblical resources to aid the Ecumenical Accompaniers and their sending churches and organizations in their efforts to end the occupation. We were also challenged to see how we could address the biblical and theological rationale offered by Christian Zionists as we looked for better ways to equip the EA’s and their sending churches.

The theological basis for any political response by the WCC to any crisis is outlined in the by-laws of the Council and its Commission of the Churches on International Affairs:

*The World Council of Churches is a community of churches on the way to visible **unity** in one faith and one fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ. It seeks to advance towards this unity, as Jesus prayed for his followers, “so that the world may believe” (John 17:21).*

WCC member churches engage in Christian service by serving human need, breaking down barriers between people, seeking justice and peace, and upholding the integrity of creation, so that all may experience the fullness of life.

The Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, CCIA, is to witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ over human beings and history by serving people in the field of international relations and promoting reconciliation and oneness of human beings by creation; to God’s gracious and redemptive action in history; and to the assurance of the coming kingdom of God in Jesus Christ.

The Commission will call the attention of churches and councils to problems which are especially claimant upon the Christian conscience at any particular time and to suggest ways in which Christians may act effectively upon those problems in their respective countries and internationally and to respond to issues raised by churches and national and regional ecumenical organizations.

In the 1970’s and 80’s human rights occupied a high priority on the ecumenical agenda. The deep concerns that were brought into the EAPPI grew out of the experience and advocacy of the churches in many parts of the world in their struggle against the effects and root causes of human rights violations, especially in Latin America and South Africa.

Redressing the pain and the suffering of the victims and providing pastoral care and concern has been an important part of the ecumenical agenda on human rights. WCC member churches have worked thoroughly to draw the attention of the world to large scale violations that had become part of a system of governance, particularly in countries of the developing world.

At one of the key CCIA consultations on human rights that took place in 1974, in St Pölten, a group of 50 people from 34 countries reached a clear consensus on what is the basis for Christian involvement in human rights. The consultation noted, the emphasis of the Gospel on the value of all human beings in the sight of God, on the atoning and redeeming work of Christ that has given to the human person true dignity, on love as motive for action, and on love for one’s neighbour as the practical expression of an active faith in Christ. With this biblical undergirding of faith the participants were able to clarify what constitutes human rights for the Christian Churches as well as Christian responsibility.

The 5th WCC General Assembly in Nairobi, a year after St Pölten, was called to draw up WCC’s human rights agenda. In laying down the basis for its work, the Assembly observed that, “*the struggle of Christians for human rights is a fundamental response to Jesus Christ. The gospel leads us to become ever more active in identifying and rectifying violations of human rights in our own societies, and to enter into new forms of ecumenical solidarity with Christians elsewhere who are similarly engaged. It leads us into the struggle of the poor and the oppressed both within and outside the church as they seek to achieve their full human rights and frees us to work together with people of other faiths and ideologies who share with us common concerns for human dignity.*”

At WCC we were guided by these theological principles when we were confronted with intensified violence in Palestine and Israel. We knew that the churches had to act and not just speak; when our member churches in Jerusalem were calling for WCC to stand by their side and when member churches and ecumenical partners from Europe and North America were reaching out their hand to the WCC to develop a response.

We are created in the image and likeness of God and deserve protection and care. Human rights remain a continuing concern of Christian churches and rightly so because the concept of human

freedom and dignity lie at the core of our Christian faith as it is in other religious persuasions. Politics is an inescapable reality and involvement in it is a Christian responsibility. The biblical promise of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21, 1), where love will prevail, invites us as Christians to engage in the world. The contrast of that vision with the reality makes that invitation compulsory and urgent.

The urgency for the international ecumenical family to be involved in the Arab- Israeli conflict did not come as a result of the Second Palestinian Intifada alone.

Since the 1996 first visit of the then General Secretary of the WCC, the CCIA had launched an intensive study and reflection process on those issues that were left for the final status negotiations within the Declaration of Principles (DOP). The primary focus was to be on the Status of Jerusalem. WCC member churches were guided to develop and adopt their policies on all those elements which would develop a common mind and guide their actions. WCC had managed to adopt and develop a programme on the **Status of Jerusalem** and start its implementation when the 2nd Uprising broke out.

The WCC Central Committee in 2001 in Potsdam in its comment on the outbreak of the Second Palestinian Uprising, stated very boldly and unanimously, “...*the Church believes that it is the right as much as duty of an occupied people to struggle against injustice in order to gain freedom, although it also believes that non-violent means of struggle remain stronger and far more efficient. In this sense, both parties must show the necessary fortitude, both in their hearts and in their minds, to look at the core of the conflict so that the Palestinian people can gain at long last its full freedom within its own sustainable state. It is imperative now to implement principles of international legitimacy by enforcing the binding UN resolutions. Such fortitude is a wise sign of foresight and an indispensable pre-requisite for long-lasting peace.*”

In addition they called the churches world-wide to accompany the churches of Jerusalem and their communities with prayers, statements, advocacy and actual presence.

The then WCC General Secretary, Rev Dr Konrad Raiser, following the call of the 2001 Central Committee and responding to the request of the 13 Eastern and Oriental, Catholic and Protestant Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, calling on the churches to come and accompany them, sent a delegation in June 2001, headed by CCIA to consult the Heads of Churches and propose WCC's response.

The report of the delegation which was confidential in nature, was discussed by WCC member churches and partners at a high level consultation CCIA organized in August 2001, where all Heads of Churches of Jerusalem were invited and was moderated by the WCC General Secretary Rev Dr K. Raiser and HH Aram I, Catholicos of the Armenian Orthodox Church, Moderator of the WCC Central and Executive Committee. Apart from WCC member churches, the Vatican had sent its Apostolic Delegate to the UN. The UN was represented by its office on Human Rights and there were two members of the Independent Inquiry Commission including Prof. R Falk. The consultation received the report of the General Secretary's delegation and reflected on the theological basis, human needs and political implications of the situation in Palestine and Israel. Among others, it recommended the establishment of a working group on accompaniment in order to study and develop such a response.

The WCC governing body that received these recommendations and reports in September 2001, not only welcomed and endorsed them, they even advised the CCIA to: ...*“Develop an accompaniment programme that would include an international ecumenical presence based on the experience of the Christian Peacemaker's Team.*

Called WCC member churches and ecumenical partners to focus the year 2002 of the DOV on ending the occupation of Palestine and to participate actively in coordinated ecumenical efforts and in this connection: To *“consider the organization of an International Conference on the Illegal Occupation*

of Palestine as part of the ecumenical efforts to end the Occupation of Palestine” and to “call for international boycott of goods produced in the illegal Israeli settlements in the OPT”

The WCC called on member churches to: *“Join in non-violent acts of resistance to the destruction of Palestinian properties and to forces evictions of people from their homes and lands” and to “join in international prayer vigils to strengthen the chain of solidarity with the Palestinian people”*

The CCIA launched the year 2002 with prayers from the 13 heads of churches of Jerusalem. A political campaign to end the occupation was based on prayers from the churches of the Holy Land itself. An educational video highlighting the voice of the churches in Jerusalem, leaflets and posters were made to raise awareness among churches and provide them with material to focus their attention on the occupation and work towards its end. In the meantime, the CCIA worked tirelessly with the support of a small group of ecumenical partners with experts, theologians, human rights activists and local groups to develop the EAPPI.

The main call to churches in political crisis is to seek a united witness. Our response to conflicts can be credible, powerful and prophetic when the church is united and able to work with integrity. It is much more difficult when the churches are not united or even part of the problem. A very important instrument for searching, developing and consolidating a common mind and united response by the churches, is public statements by the governing bodies of the WCC. The Arab-Israeli conflict has been addressed by WCC General Assemblies, Central Committees, Executive Committees, more than any other political conflict.

The first statement, primarily concerned with Palestinian refugees in the 1948 war, was made at the very first General Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948. The number of statements increased after the 1967 war, again after the outbreak of the first Intifada at the end of 1980's and significantly after the breakdown of the so called Oslo-process 10 years later. All those statements are based on theological and political insights and are developed after an intensive consultation process. They have all had relevance and were used a basis when developing the EAPPI. Only at its last meeting in Harare, 1998, the WCC General Assembly adopted two statements which have been extremely relevant to what later became the EAPPI – The statement on the Status of Jerusalem and the Statement on Human Rights.

While consistent, as mentioned earlier, on the WCC policy and position guidelines, the EAPPI is different from how we have done international affairs and peace work in the Middle East. The EAPPI adds another form of action in our efforts to prevent wars, overcome violence, resolve conflicts and advocate for justice and peace; where the global church does not only analyze, reflect, make statements, lobby, send humanitarian assistance or pastoral delegations to express its solidarity with its sisters and brothers in the struggle for freedom and justice, but it shows its solidarity through physical presence and its advocacy with engagement.

It's not only about condemning human rights violations but actually witnessing them, speaking out against them or trying to prevent them from happening.

The EAPPI clearly shows the churches' important role in peace building. The EAPPI challenges the perception that the role of the church and the civil society in the Middle East is only in the humanitarian field and clearing the mess of the wars and providing charity and assistance. The EAPPI has added a dimension that the church in Jerusalem as well as churches from around the world can be in the forefront of addressing root causes of human rights violations and violence, preventing wars and building peace. EAPPI works together with Israelis and Palestinians as well as internationals from Europe, Americas, Africa and Asia. It works with Christians, Moslems, Jews, believers and seculars.

With EAPPI: it is knowing that the task of the church is to demonstrate that an alternative, non-violent way is possible and to prove that despite the growing public disbelief in dialogue as an option to end wars and build peace, it is still relevant.

The EAPPI is a message of hope for both nations telling them that, there is no way to peace, peace is the way.

In a conflict where intergovernmental bodies have failed so far to provide an official human rights protection force and the perpetrators of human rights abuses and their victims have been left to themselves, the church through the Ecumenical Accompaniers physically present, shed light on human rights abuses that would otherwise been happening in the dark and advocate for a change in unjust policies.

The EAPPI is meant to be a clear counter witness to the loud silence; an active solidarity in the face of the passive by-standers. Its strength lies with the fact that it has a solid theological basis and the fact that it has developed out of a common developed policy and a united mind within the churches.

Ten years later the EAPPI has grown and evolved. It is one of the most successful programs of the WCC in many respects. Unfortunately the occupation of Palestinian territories has not ended. Violence continues unabated. Human Rights are violated daily.

The Ecumenical Accompaniers are a beacon of light in that darkness.

The EAPPI gives us hope in the midst of despair.

The WCC remains true to its legacy as an advocate for justice, human rights and peace.

We owe it to the churches and the people we are accompanying to continue our mission for as long as we are needed there.

*Salpy Eskidjian and Peter Weiderud
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