

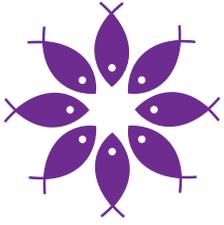
Stories of Mission

LIVING FAITH




The
Presbyterian
Church
in Canada





The Prison Experience

The Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) began in 2002 after local church leaders asked the World Council of Churches to create an international presence in the country. Ecumenical Accompaniers provide protective presence to Palestinians as they witness life under occupation. Upon returning home they share their experiences and advocate for a just peace in Palestine and Israel. With support from Presbyterians Sharing, Shaun MacDonald served as an Ecumenical Accompanier in Hebron from late 2019 to early 2020.



“Empty everything out of your pockets,” our host, Salwa, advised us. “No cell phones, keys, anything metal, even leave your wallets and money in the car, I will lock it while we’re in there.” Salwa is a member of a group called Military Court Watch, a small team of Palestinian, Israeli and international lawyers who monitor the court cases of detained Palestinian children. She escorted me and two colleagues to the notorious Ofer Prison, near the Palestinian capital of Ramallah. This is an Israeli military prison—with the military courts on the premises—and we were there to witness the judicial proceedings in action.

After a thorough screening at the entrance, we were allowed into an outdoor waiting area where family members of those on trial anxiously waited for

word on the status of their loved ones. We chatted and tried to be supportive. Salwa pointed out the “court rooms” where we would view the proceedings: seven cramped shipping containers converted into expedited sentencing rooms. Salwa informed us that up to 40 cases per day are conducted in these rooms, with a conviction rate of over 95%. Palestinian detainees are generally advised to plead guilty. The judges are often military men from the settlements, the Israeli towns and villages established in Palestinian territory.¹

We entered one of the containers and sat in the gallery. There were two people on trial, one adult and one teenager, no more than 14 years old. We were there specifically to see the children. The minimum age for criminal responsibility for Palestinians under



Israeli military law is 12 years old (although the maximum sentence they can receive is six months) but over the age of 14 they can be sentenced as adults. What complicates this matter is that ID cards are only issued at age 16, so arresting soldiers often detain even younger children.

We sat with the family of the young boy on trial. His father was stoic, but his mother's body was wracked with convulsions as she wrung her hands and cried quietly. The boy stood, shackled, staring at the floor the entire time. I noticed the prosecuting attorneys scrolling through their phones, while the court reporter was literally sound asleep, head on his desk. The judge banged his gavel and as the prisoners were escorted out, the boy's father rushed up to him and grabbed him by the shoulders, speaking quickly in Arabic. I imagine he was telling him to be strong. The boy gave his father a look of resolution, but then turned to face his mother and we saw tears streaming down his face as he was led away.

In the 45 minutes I spent at Ofer Prison, I witnessed seven convictions, three of them children. The details of the cases aren't important. What is important is that they were children on trial, as adults, in military

courts, which lack fundamental fair trial rights and protections. Israel is the only country in the world that automatically and systematically prosecutes children in military courts.

Currently there are 185 Palestinian children in detention, but the number has been as high as 400 recently. Nearly half of these children are transferred to prisons outside of Palestinian territory—a war crime. They may not see their family members for months. Upon release they are often branded as collaborators, rejected by their home communities and traumatized from the experience of incarceration.

On the drive back to Jerusalem, I asked Salwa, "How do you do it? How do you keep coming here, fighting day after day and often seeing the situation get worse?" She paused, pensively, for a moment before replying: "No one predicted the Berlin wall would come down. No one predicted the Arab Spring uprisings. Often these large shifts in the tide of history are at work without us even realizing it. You just have to keep putting your little cracks in the wall. You have to have faith."

— *Shaun MacDonald*

1 Settlements refer to Israeli towns and villages established in Palestinian territory after the 1967 War. To move one's own citizens onto occupied territory is illegal under international law as per the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949.

In 2019, The Presbyterian Church in Canada voted to endorse the No Way to Treat a Child campaign, which is committed to securing a just and viable future for Palestinian children living in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and envisions a world where all children attain rights in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Since 1967, Israel has operated two separate legal systems in the same territory. In the occupied West Bank, Israeli settlers are subject to the civilian and criminal legal system whereas Palestinians live under military law. Israel applies civilian criminal law to Palestinian children in East Jerusalem. No Israeli child comes into contact with the military courts.

According to affidavits collected from 739 West Bank children detained between 2013 and 2018, 73% of Palestinian children experienced physical violence following arrest. Many also faced verbal abuse. In 96% of the cases, children had no parent present during the interrogation. Israeli police also did not properly inform them of their rights in 74% of the cases.

Despite sustained engagement by UNICEF, Israeli authorities have persistently failed to implement practical changes to stop violence against child detainees. The No Way to Treat a Child campaign draws attention to these human rights abuses. Find out more at www.nwttac.canada.dci-palestine.org.



Read: Matthew 18: 1-10

Reflect

Being an Ecumenical Accompanier has two main objectives: witnessing life under occupation and providing protective presence. My team provided protective presence for vulnerable school children in the heart of Hebron daily and we felt good about this; the children responded well to us. But then we would hear about the night raids, and even witness the detention of youths. Seeing young boys being led away in shackles made me feel furious and helpless.

Even so, I was reminded of Christ's words to his disciples: there is but one ultimate authority. Christ is clear: "Unless you become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." We need to stop jockeying for wealth, power and status, and serve God by serving the most vulnerable of his children. The Lord's warning is also stark: to be the vehicle that causes an innocent child to have their faith corrupted is a sin of the highest magnitude.

Discuss

1. Why is it important for us, as members of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, to work to oppose injustice and protect children wherever in the world they are threatened?
2. Where do we see children hurting in our own country? What can we do as a faith community to help alleviate that suffering?
3. What do you think can drive the actions of an oppressor? How can we work to find understanding and forgiveness?

Sing

743 – You walk along the shoreline

373 – Jesus loves me

624 – Blest are they

Prayer Focus

Pray for the peacemakers: internationals, Palestinians and Israelis who share a common thread of love, compassion and hope. Pray for the youth who are led astray and must suffer challenges to their faith and to their very identities. May they find their way back to God. And pray for their persecutors, that they, like many of their fellow citizens, will find the light of a just peace in their hearts.

Pray

We pray to you O Lord, to strengthen and guide those who work for peace and justice wherever fear and pain occur. We know that you love all people equally, Lord. Open our minds and hearts to your love. Guide our beliefs and actions with everyone we meet each day. Strengthen our will to reach out to all, seeking to forgive as we are forgiven, and love as we are loved. We pray that those who are in conflict may seek a new way forward, that common respect and care may replace hatred and trauma, and that children will be cherished and supported to a life of purpose and love.

In Jesus' name we pray,
Amen.

Learn more about EAPPI:
eappi.org/en

Find out more about the No Way to Treat a Child campaign:
www.nwttac.canada.dci-palestine.org

Read about the PCC and Palestine/Israel:
presbyterian.ca/justice/israel-palestine

Plant an olive tree in Palestine through Gifts of Change:
presbyterian.ca/olive-tree



Mission Around the World

Through Presbyterians Sharing and Presbyterian World Service & Development, The Presbyterian Church in Canada is sharing Christ's love in 25 countries.

Gifts to Presbyterians Sharing provide grants and mission staff to encourage, equip and accompany our mission partners in areas such as Bible translation, leadership development, evangelism, outreach and Christian service.

PWS&D supports development work and provides relief in times of emergency. Inspired by God's promise of abundant life, PWS&D envisions a sustainable, compassionate and just world.

