

Imagining the Way to Justice — Taking Action



The Seventh Annual National Gathering of the United Network for Justice and Peace in Palestine and Israel (UNJPPI)

Ottawa, Ontario, September 13–15, 2019

Our national gathering this year brought together over 70 friends and members of UNJPPI from across the country — all committed to working for a just peace in Palestine and Israel. Our gathering place was the Kanata Best Western Hotel in Ottawa’s western suburban neighbourhood of Bell’s Corners.

Many participants arrived early to attend a Thursday (September 12) event organized by Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME). Professor Noura Erakat spoke to a capacity crowd at St. Paul’s Eastern United Church on “Justice for Some: Law and the Question of Palestine” — the title of her recent book, which is a valuable resource.

First United Church sponsored a UNJPPI community lunch on Friday. Reverend Brian Cornelius welcomed everyone and then Omar Haramy spoke from Jerusalem via live video on “Living in Hope — Between a Rock and a Hard Place.” Haramy is staff of Sabeel, an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement based in East Jerusalem (www.sabeel.org). Visa complications prevented him from travelling to Canada to speak at the gathering.

Following registration that afternoon and a light dinner, we took part in a time of worship. Susan Palmai acknowledged that our gathering was taking place on unceded Algonquin land, and UNJPPI chair George Bartlett welcomed the participants. The theme for the evening session was, “The Courage to Speak Out.” Tom Beilman of the United Church of Christ (USA) screened the documentary “How are the Children? Part 2,” which detailed Israel’s abusive treatment of Palestinian children and in which top leaders of the United Church of Christ passionately described the strong actions that church is taking in support of the children. Then Zaya Kuyena eloquently spoke about the impact his recent trip to Israel and Palestine as a member of the UCC Young Pilgrims for Peace had on him and how it challenged him to be involved.

The Saturday morning session had as its theme “What has happened since the 2012 inception of UNJPPI?” Following worship, we were joined by Omar Haramy via live video from Jerusalem, who discussed how “Effective Solidarity is Costly.” The clear broadcast reminded us that great distances no longer separate us. Haramy confirmed that Palestinians want justice, not charity, and spoke about Sabeel’s Kumi Now project (www.kuminow.com) that is strengthening the resolve of Palestinians.

Barbara Lloyd then recounted how UNJPPI has been in solidarity since its inception in 2012. Conversations in small groups preceded a general discussion on what we have learned, our successes, and the challenges that face us. Tom Beilman closed the morning session with a description of two projects of the United Church of Christ — the “How Are the Children?” project that advocates for Palestinian children detained by Israeli military, and the passing of a resolution to support the Boycott Divestment Sanctions (BDS) movement. (www.hatcnow.org)

After lunch, Peter Larson joined us. He is the Chair, Ottawa Forum on Israel Palestine (www.ottawaforumip.org) and publisher of a newsletter at www.canadatalksisraelpalestine.ca). Peter facilitated a live video conversation with Ahmed Abu Rtema, a Palestinian journalist, poet, and peace activist who lives in Gaza. Ahmed spoke eloquently, affirming that the struggle of the Palestinians is the struggle of everyone who believes in freedom, justice, and equality and a world without discrimination.

The theme for the remainder of the afternoon was “What are the Blocks to Our Work?” Marianna Harris recounted how the United Church supported Israel for decades before gradually adapting a human-rights- based policy. Diana Ralph of Independent Jewish Voices (IJV) then spoke on how to support human rights for Palestinians without being antiemetic. Antisemitism is being weaponized to shut down criticism of Israel. We must regularly re-examine our attitudes about Jewish people, but keep in mind that the issue is not Judaism, but the settler-colonial state of Israel and its oppression of the Palestinians.

Former NDP Member of Parliament Libby Davies then spoke on the barriers facing politicians and how best to connect with them. The need to get elected, the narrowing of political discourse, and fear that leads to self-censorship are some of the challenges that politicians face. To overcome these, advocates should focus on staying authentic and building trust and genuine relationships. Avoid blasting politicians— instead, do your homework, educate them about the issues, and be so reasonable in your requests that they can’t turn you down.

Saturday evening General Council staffer Beth Baskin reported on the progress of the “*No Way to Treat a Child*” workshops. (www.nwttac.canada.dci-palestine.org) Participants then sampled two educational resources: one, “No Way to Treat a Child” workshop, facilitated by Debbie Hubbard and Dean Reidt, and two, “The Palestine Land Exercise” with Doug and Mary Rigby.

Sunday morning was dedicated to “What have we learned? What can we do?” The Co-ordinating Team clarified that it favoured a bottom up approach — identifying projects that energized participants and how the Co-Ordinating Team could support them. A time of brainstorming in small groups followed. Outgoing UNJPPI treasurer Susan Starkman then made her annual report and introduced the new treasurer Ken McEvoy. After George Bartlett led us in thanking the volunteers, leaders, and everyone who made the gathering possible. He also acknowledged the years of service of Steve Berube, previous co-chair of the Co-ordinating Team.

The weekend culminated with worship during which Brian Thorpe preached on *1 Kings 21:1-21*, telling the story of Naboth who owned a vineyard near the palace of King Ahab. The king wanted the vineyard which Naboth refused to sell because it was his inheritance. After Ahab and his wife Jezebel used their power to have Naboth killed they took over the vineyard. The prophet Elijah confronts Ahab with his acts of injustice and Ahab repents. It wasn’t hard to see this 2500 year old story being replayed in Canada’s treatment of indigenous peoples and Israel’s current treatment of Palestinians.

Those who did not have to leave immediately then enjoyed a delicious lunch at nearby Bells Corners United Church.

The success of the gathering was due to several individuals: Curtis Marwood; General Council staff Beth Baskin, Christie Neufeldt, Wendy Gichuru, Josie Forcadilla, Lori Neale, and Terry Beaumont; Jim Wicks; Marianna Harris; new UNJPPI admin person Natalie Maxson; Susan Palmal; Juanita Austin and Jim McConnel, who provided music leadership; Susan Starkman; and Brian McIntosh. Linda Scherzinger deserves special mention for organizing the locale and other details from afar.

UNJPPI also gratefully acknowledges the hospitality and support of First United and Bells Corners United churches as well as the generous financial support from the General Council Office and the Eastern Ontario Outaouais Regional Council of the United Church, and the Ottawa presbytery of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

UNJPPI is a network of mainly United Church of Canada people working toward the goal of a just peace in Palestine and Israel by calling for an end to the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and equal rights for all who live in Palestine/Israel through education and advocacy. (www.unjppi.org)

— submitted by Philip Sherwood