

PARTNERPLAN

Muriel Pearson - Israel October 2023

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Dear Friends

There's a line in a Clash song which was beating in my head for a few days following the awful attack by Hamas on communities and festival goers in southern Israel on 7th October: '*Should I stay or should I go now?*' It wasn't that I was in immediate danger, but reading the news and trying to guess what might happen next, finding the Scots' Hotel shut down overnight and feeling far from colleagues who were based in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, I took the decision first to go to Jerusalem.

At the same time, Rev Dr Stewart Gillan, my colleague, was moving from Bethlehem to Jerusalem because the West Bank was under lockdown and that was likely to increase. Our Methodist colleague Dave Hardman and two volunteers who had been living in Bethlehem and volunteering at the Tent of Nations, along with Jane Eesley our Methodist colleague from the US moved to St Andrew's House Hotel, Jerusalem.

'*Should I stay or should I go now?*' I got word from a friend at the British Consulate in Jerusalem that 'unnecessary diplomatic baggage' (ie him) was being shipped out. Airlines were cancelling. We could see it would become ever more difficult to make a move.

When the flights we had booked from Tel Aviv for Friday 13th October were cancelled, we decided as a group that we would take the offer of our friends at EAPPI (The World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment programme) to go in convoy to the Sheik Hussein crossing into Jordan and then fly from Amman on whatever flight we could get.



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Stewart and I got back to Glasgow at midnight on Friday 13th. Three of our colleagues chose to stay, Anita one of our longstanding ecumenical partners, took the very tough decision to return to South Africa, with the feeling she might not come back. And we left behind friends and partners and members of the congregation who had all lived through war before, but are finding this one very difficult.

We know from our TV screens some of the shock and grief felt by Israelis whose loved ones have been killed or kidnapped and the desperate situation in Gaza. Less immediately clear is the anxiety shared by those in the IDF, or with family who have been called up, and those whose family are trapped in Gaza with nowhere to hide from the bombardment. Stewart and I along with Doug our PCUSA colleague had been due in Gaza 10-12th October. We had been scheduled to visit Al Ahli Hospital a week before a missile struck it, and medical staff and patients and those crammed in looking for comparative safety were killed or injured or further traumatised.

Arab Israelis in the Galilee area are waiting to see what happens, with increasing fears about what Hezbollah might do in the north. Palestinians in the West Bank are experiencing long curfews, increased violence from settlers and fear. Workers from Gaza, who were stuck in Israel when war broke out, have found their work permits revoked and many have been arrested. At checkpoints soldiers are looking at mobile phones and any posts which are considered anti-Israel, and arresting young Palestinians without charge. Peace activists are finding friendships built up over years are strained as society polarises violently. They are trying to regroup and look for common ground. They are trying 'to be decent people while decent people behave indecently', as one put it.

The war will stop. Talks will start. This time the devastation, the grief and loss on both sides might be greater than at any time since 1948. Analysis will be done. Blame will be apportioned. My reflection just now is about how 'normal life' where I was meeting pilgrims and planning events and contacting partners was actually not normal at all, but a hologram of normal which was shattered on 7th October for everyone. Until the longstanding injustice of occupation and the growing annexation of the West Bank is addressed, until the 2.3m people in Gaza are free, until Israelis do not have to rely on the Iron Dome or security to feel safe, until all in Israel-Palestine have the same rights then 'normality' is really containment, and no-one is safe and no-one is free of fear.

I plan to go back to Israel-Palestine as soon as I can. Meanwhile, I am here and willing and able to speak to groups and congregations online or in person. Perhaps groups of congregations or a Presbytery would like to involve me in something already planned, or in leading worship.

Stewart and I also continue to be in contact as much as we can with members of the congregation and partners and our colleagues in the hotels and school.

Thank you for your continuing interest and your prayers.

Prayer points

- Pray for leadership to move beyond the current crisis
- Pray for all who have lost loved ones or have been injured
- Pray for a cease fire and humanitarian aid
- Pray for all those Israelis and Palestinians, displaced from their homes or who have lost their jobs overnight
- Pray for all those seeking to find ways to be 'human' in face of great inhumanity
- Pray for staff at the Scots Hotel, the St Andrew's House Hotel and Tabeetha School
- Continue to pray for peace with justice
- Continue to pray to hold both Palestinian and Israeli together in our hearts