

John McCulloch - Israel December 2018

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**Church of Scotland Delegation into Gaza
(October 2018)**

**Report by Rev Dr John McCulloch
Dr Annette McCulloch (for medical input)**

*We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims
beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into
the wheel itself.*

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer

*Lie here with me
and hear my song
Of love and loss
Of dreadful wrong*

*A land of olives
A land of citron
A land of oranges and lemons*

*Lie in my arms
child of blessings
Dream of our land
with a depth of wishing and loss
Of dreadful wrong [...]*

(Una Casey Cadao)



Picture drawn on a bare wall of a Gazan home

An unexpected visit

It is early morning and we decide to walk down to the beach before breakfast. The streets are not busy, just a few donkeys pulling carts going up and down the streets collecting the rubbish. As we pass by a dilapidated make-shift house, we are greeted by smiling women and children who are curious as to who we are. We get chatting in broken Arabic (they have no English) and we are invited into their home. Their home is crumbling. They have no furniture, nothing. Just bare walls and some very thin mattresses on which they sit. The roof is corrugated iron, so it is unbearably hot in the summer months, and very cold in the winter. There are about 8 children there.

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A sack of flour from UNWRA sits in the corner, which is the only evidence of food in the house. The father of the house has an air of despair and hopelessness about him. He explains to us that he has no work.

With unemployment at around 50%, and an economy that is all but collapsed, the prospects are bleak. He just sits there day after day, with no hope that anything will change for the better. With around 80% of the Gazan population reliant on food aid, this family are not unique.

I notice on the wall a chalk drawing of a Palestinian woman wearing a headscarf, but half of her face is a dove with a flower in its beak. The picture conveys a deep sense of sadness and longing for things to be different, and it is infused with an air of melancholy.

The father of the house tells us that he sometimes draws on the walls of his house, as it is the only way of keeping himself occupied. 'Everyday is the same' he tells us, just a struggle to survive in a situation that is on the brink of humanitarian disaster. With shortages of food, medicine, electricity and no prospect of work, there is little hope.

We get chatting with the ladies and children, and manage to get the gist of what is being said. They are wanting to offer us tea, and a few minutes later we are drinking sweet black tea. The small children smile at us as they walk around bare foot.

Gaza has one of the worlds youngest populations, and children as young as 10 will have lived through 3 wars. Children born into a crisis situation for which they are not responsible, and yet forced to survive in a context of fear, privation, and with little prospect of a hopeful future.

It feels like a miserly drop in the ocean, an act of tokenism which will do nothing to help long-term, but we hand them all the money we happen to have on us, which comes to a little over £100 (around 450 shekels). But in a context

where we are told that some people work all day selling bits of scrap metal and whatever what they can, which typically brings in little more than 10-20 shekels (£2 to £5), the family are deeply grateful. What is so humbling is that later that day, over a fuzzy Whatsapp conversation, they showed us the family sitting down to a meal of rice, meat and vegetables, and the father said 'thank you'. Since then, we have received around 4-5 calls a day from him on Whatsapp, simply wanting to connect, as he sits day after day not knowing how he is going to feed his children.

We say our goodbyes to the family, and leave them with our contact details, and walk to the beach, deeply humbled by what we had just witnessed. As we walked on along the beach in the early morning, we



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saw people fishing in the stench of the polluted water. There has not been enough electricity to run the sewage works for a long time and raw sewage pours out into the sea. Those who do catch the odd fish, out of desperation and hunger, run the risk of being ill from the effects of the pollution later.

Women in burkas are everywhere, hidden from the world and cut off from the sun, with the much-needed vitamin D. They are often not allowed out without permission or need to be accompanied by their husbands. Fuel shortages mean that most of the transport is donkey-drawn carts.

The current context in Gaza



Gaza has been under siege from both Israel and Egypt for 11 years now. Israel controls the water, electricity and the movement of people and resources as a form of collective punishment to the people of Gaza for electing Hamas to power.

The situation has deteriorated significantly again since the 'Great March of Return' protests in which the Palestinian people of Gaza are demanding their right to return to the lands they were expelled from in 1948 as well as protesting their loss of human rights under the 11

year blockade.

The use of Israeli lethal military force during the largely peaceful demonstrations on Gazan soil at the perimeter fence have produced a '*crisis on top of a catastrophe*' and may well constitute war crimes, according to UN Co-ordinator for Humanitarian Aid and Development Activities, James Goldrick.

Since March 2018, 160 Palestinians have been killed and 18,739 people injured mostly by live gunfire leading to 74 limb amputations. While all this was going on, there are terrible shortages of the most basic supplies and staffing in the hospitals, insufficient pain medication and 48% of all drugs are at zero stock. There is only 4-6 hours of electricity a day, because of the siege and generators are working for sometimes 20 hours a day in hospitals at astronomical expense amid fuel shortages. Many homes have no mains drainage and no water. Rates of malnutrition amongst children have soared. The forced collapse of the economy has led to 61% unemployment amongst young people aged 15-29 (even highly qualified professionals).

Primary Care Clinics run by the Near East Council of Churches



As part of our trip to Gaza, we visited the Primary Care clinics in Gaza City and Rafah (down in the south of the Gaza strip which borders with Egypt). Here, the staff work at grassroots level with families, most of whom live in abject poverty.

We met the Project Co-ordinator, who told us about the recent deterioration in the situation. UNWRA funding cuts have led to massive shortfalls in salaries and supplies. On the day we visited there was a 'Well baby' clinic. Women often walk several miles to get to the clinic as they cannot afford transport.

In the clinic, we were shown the intake form for new patients for the clinic. The questions that they asked were very revealing of the

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utterly intolerable living conditions endured by many:

'Is there any running water or drainage in your home?'

'Is there access to electricity?'

'Has anyone got a paid job?'

'Have you had previous children with anaemia/malnutrition?'

'What access to food do you have?'

'Are you dependent on food aid?'

We were privileged to meet the most dedicated of professionals, some of whom are working as volunteers. The United States government made the decision to cut funding to UNWRA which has left a massive shortfall of essential funding.

In the clinic, nursing staff carry out health checks and observations on the babies and children, including blood tests which are processed immediately in a small laboratory. Meanwhile many more wait for their turn and are given lectures and education sessions in the waiting room by the Social Worker. There are also outreach visits into homes to assess the situation of many very vulnerable children and their families.

The staff of NECC (Near East Council of Churches) carried out a door to door survey in Rafah to assess the health of children. The results were shocking. 50% of all children are anaemic, as a result of malnutrition, 10% are stunted and will never reach their intellectual or physical potential. In addition to this, they are highly susceptible to diarrhoea, infections and other communicable diseases.

The clinic provides vitamin and iron supplementation and treats many simple primary care problems that present. In addition, there is education and support, as well as work raising awareness of gender-based violence which is on the increase in a country where huge amounts of men are unemployed and chronically stressed.



When I asked the Project Manager what a family will eat in a day, she said that they get a bag of UNWRA distributed flour and their breakfast is bread and black tea. At lunch, they may get some tinned food (tuna) also from UNWRA to have with the bread. Dairy products are very difficult to access and are expensive.

One of the employees of the clinic told us that they found one mother feeding her baby with water mixed with starch as she had no milk.

Psychological Care Centre run by NECC



Another project that we saw in Gaza city is the Psychological care centre. Children under the age of 10 have now lived through 3 wars and some suffer from PTSD from bomb attacks on the city as well as their insufferable living conditions.

We saw the work of the staff in creating a beautiful loving space for them to be themselves, do some dancing and art

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and music and share with each other about their lives in a safe space. The Social worker who runs the project goes to the homes to select the most vulnerable and traumatised children. We were overwhelmed by the warmth of the welcome they gave us and the joy of the place. It is a haven for the children we met and it has changed their lives.

Arab Ahli Hospital

On our last day, we visited the Arab Ahli Hospital which is offering to serve all who seek treatment without prejudice and in a spirit of love. They are offering high quality medical care under the most adverse circumstances in this human-made disaster.

They carry out over 3,500 outpatient visits a month and 400 surgeries and radiological examination including cancer diagnostics. In total, 36,000 patients a year are treated by the hospital.

During the 2014 War on Gaza, most hospitals closed their clinics because of security. However, Arab Ahli saw 9,000 patients in 51 days and were open day and night for all emergencies. They also opened one of their wards as a shelter for families whose homes had been bombed and gave food and water to those destitute and traumatised. Considering that they only have a regular staff of 20 doctors, this is remarkable.

Dr Maher Ayyad, the Medical Director of the hospital told us that 'Waves of desperation come towards us all the time'. He told us about one father who has to walk 3 hours each way with his sick son in his arms during the night because of an ongoing health problem. The father could not even afford the transportation costs to get to the hospital.

The hospital is severely under threat financially at the moment. \$300,000 has literally vanished in funding due to UNWRA cuts. The medical supplies and drugs are always a problem because of the blockade.

Because of the blockade of electricity, they need to run a generator for up to 20 hours a day, necessitating thousands of litres of diesel.

Dr Maher told us that Breast Cancer in Gaza is a terrible sentence for women. These women often only present at the hospital when the cancer has already spread. There is a terrible stigma attached to breast cancer in this increasingly conservative Islamic society and a woman may be divorced and left destitute by her husband and family, especially if she needs a mastectomy. Women are desperate for breast-conserving treatment which does not offer the best prognosis. Radiotherapy and Chemotherapy are not available in Gaza and many women cannot get permits to travel to the West Bank for treatment. 54 people died last year because they could not access treatment in the West Bank or East Jerusalem as a result of the blockade. Only 50% of women who are diagnosed with breast cancer in Gaza will be alive in 5 years' time. In Israel and other Western countries the rate is 80%. The work of early diagnosis of breast cancer is therefore essential (when it can be treated more easily with less invasive surgery). The hospital has a very good mammography machine and the facility to do biopsies under Ultrasound guidance. This is essential for these women.

The hospital also has a much-needed training department. Many surgeons cannot leave Gaza for training and so come to the centre and are able to practice surgical skills under expert supervision. Again, all the funding for this project has disappeared and the highly trained surgical staff are giving their time as volunteers.

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In the middle of all this, we met the most incredible people who are working tirelessly to alleviate suffering, themselves affected by every aspect of the blockade and yet full of compassion for the suffering people around them.

The entrance to Arab Ahli hospital has a large hole in the neighbouring building visible through the arch, caused by a rocket. As you walk into the grounds, there is a green space in the middle with real grass (the only grass I saw in Gaza). Dr Maher told us how he had grown up in the campus of this hospital and often played as a boy in that small space of green. It is a haven in the midst of the chaos, desperation and suffering around. When Gazan doctors come to train at the hospital, they are struck by the love and compassion of all they meet, the ethos that is at the heart of the hospital.

We were able to see that every penny that is donated by the Church of Scotland to these projects help the most vulnerable and desperate of people. The projects are run by the most inspiring and committed staff who genuinely want to do everything they can to alleviate the suffering.

The Christian witness in Gaza

The number of Christians in Gaza is believed to be around 1000, from a total population of just over 2 million. Many Christians left Gaza following the Hamas take over, and although they are small in number, their presence and witness is contributes so much to the communities across Gaza City and beyond.



During the 2014 war on Gaza, the neighbourhoods surrounding both the Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches were bombed, and the churches opened their doors to thousands who were fleeing from the destruction in the hope that they would be safe in the churches. Muslim families flocked to find refuge in the church, and all were warmly welcomed.

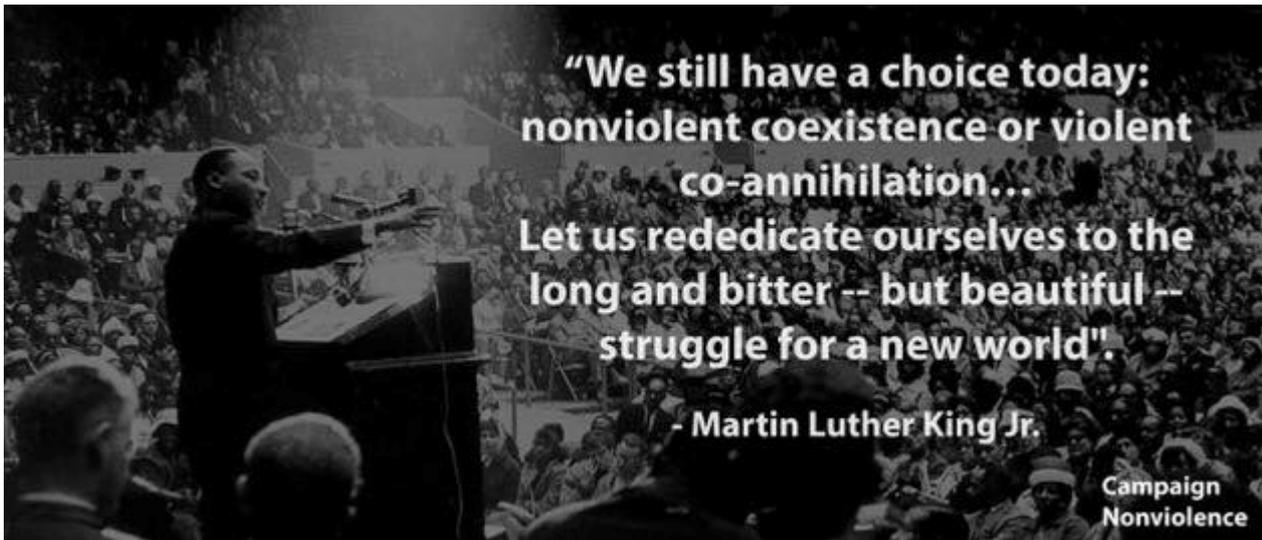


The churches run summer holiday clubs, and provide educational and humanitarian assistance. Although small in number, their ministry of presence brings real hope and hospitality, in such a difficult context.

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Conclusion

Thank you for your ongoing prayers, both for the people of Gaza and for the work of The Church of Scotland in The Holy Land. Despite all the challenges and difficulties, it is important that we continue to walk alongside those who live here, hoping beyond hope, even in a context such as Gaza.



NOTE

You are receiving John McCulloch's report along with Kate McDonald's as they were written separately but both complement each other.