

Christian delegation makes pilgrimage for peace in the Holy Land

by [Paul Jeffrey](#)

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Larry Clark, a United Methodist pastor from Toledo, Ohio, (far left) participates in a prayer vigil at the Kerem Shalom crossing on the border between Israel and Gaza on August 18. (Photo by Paul Jeffrey, United Methodist News)

The Holy Land's sacred sites overflow with tourists in normal times, but with an intractable war in Gaza and the looming threat of attacks by Hezbollah and Iran, airlines have canceled most flights into the region. Ancient churches normally filled with pilgrims are as empty as Jesus' tomb. The streets of the old city of Jerusalem are deserted, merchant's stalls shuttered.

Larry Clark, a retired United Methodist pastor in Toledo, Ohio, decided it was the perfect time to visit the Holy Land.

In response to an invitation by Palestinian Christian groups, he joined 11 other Christians from the United States and flew to Jordan. From there, the group journeyed overland to Palestine and Israel in order to call for a ceasefire in Gaza and an end to mistreatment of Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

“It’s important to be a witness. This is a critical moment to be here, to be present with ordinary people as they struggle to survive,” Clark said.

Clark has made 15 trips to the Holy Land since his first as a new pastor in the 1980s. At first, he was enthralled, he said. Yet Clark quickly grew disenchanted by commercial tours that focused on holy sites but ignored the people living there.

He eventually started working with the Society for Biblical Studies, founded by a former United Methodist missionary, which wove together biblical history with the present-day experience of Palestinians and Israelis. In recent years, Clark has led several tours for the organization.

He was planning to lead another trip in February, but participants all canceled in the wake of the October attack by Hamas and the subsequent Israeli war on Gaza.

Although much of the news from the region focuses on Gaza, the delegation spent most of its time in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, where displacement and violence have grown apace with the Gaza war, yet haven’t attracted the same international attention.

The delegation’s schedule included interviews with church leaders, nonviolent activists, Palestinian farmers and urban residents whose lands have been appropriated by army-backed settlers, and families whose homes have been demolished to make way for new Israeli settlements. The delegation prayed outside a prison where Israel detains children and met with the families of Israeli hostages.

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In Rahat, a largely Bedouin city in southern Israel, the group helped local residents pack food boxes for distribution inside Gaza, despite a push by some Israeli politicians to criminalize such activity.

About 3 million Palestinians live in the West Bank, along with half a million settlers. The US government has long considered the settlements illegal, yet under current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, right-wing extremists have taken over settlement policy, accelerating land grabs, settlement expansion, home demolitions, and violent attacks against Palestinians who resist.

In Umm Jamal, a small Bedouin community near Nablus, in the north of the West Bank, the group watched as Israeli settlers harassed sheep farmers. When the US group's presence began to anger the settlers, Israeli soldiers arrived and ordered the delegation to leave. The delegation refused until a pair of Israeli peace activists promised to remain with the farmers. Clark's delegation also met with Alice Qaisiyah, a Palestinian Christian whose home in Al-Makhrur, near Bethlehem, was demolished and her land seized to construct a new military-protected Israeli settlement. Accompanied by Israeli human rights activists, who in early August set up a "resistance camp" to support the family, Qaisiyah has promised not to give up, even though she was arrested on August 25. She was released the following day after protests from Israeli and Palestinian rights groups.

Clark said he has long been impressed with Palestinian resilience in the face of settler violence. He cites the example of Iyad Burnat, whom the delegation visited in the West Bank village of Bil'in, where Burnat leads a nonviolent struggle against the Israeli separation barrier and the steady theft of Palestinian farm land.

"He and his family have been tortured and imprisoned, and yet they continue to struggle and not give up. They continue to hang in there. They're not angry or hateful, no matter what they've been through. It's remarkable," Clark said.

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Such resilience is contagious, said Clark, who has supported efforts in the UMC West Ohio Conference to promote peace in the region by divesting from corporations supporting the illegal settlements.

In May, general conference delegates approved a resolution calling on United Methodist institutions not to invest in bonds of Israel, Turkey, and Morocco because of those nations' long-term military occupations. Delegates also renewed and updated a resolution opposing Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories and approved a resolution addressing Israeli detention of Palestinian children.

On August 19, Clark and the delegation traveled to the border between Israel and Gaza to pray for peace alongside several Israeli rabbis. In an interfaith service at the ancient Maon Synagogue near Nirim, Clark and others offered prayers frequently interrupted by the sharp thud of Israeli airstrikes on nearby Khan Younis.

The service was also interrupted by an air raid siren. Jewish participants ordered delegation members to drop to the ground and cover their heads with their arms. Clark lay face down for several minutes until the all-clear signal sounded.

“The air raid siren didn’t bother me as much as the bombs, knowing that they were falling on people across the border in Gaza,” he said.

According to Rabbi Avi Dabush, who coordinated the interfaith service at the border, the delegation’s visit provided encouragement to Israelis struggling to make peace at a time when many others remain angry. As a survivor of the bloody Hamas attack on nearby Nirim, Dabush said he understood how Israelis are angry, but suggested the future of Judaism was at stake in how they respond.

“Our most important struggle right now is over our values. We need your support. We need you to partner with us as we struggle for these values of justice, equality, peace and human rights,” Rabbi Dabush told the Christian group.

“Otherwise the curse of history will remain,” Dabush continued. “Each one wants to fix the history of their people. As I suffered, I think I can fix that by killing more people and their leaders and their children and so on, again and again. But you can’t really fix history. You can only look to the future, and build another future. And we really hope that from the river to the sea, these two nations, these two peoples will find a way. We have to find a way for our children.” —United Methodist News