

Report for Inspire: RE in Palestine: How can it inspire moral courage and leadership in young people? Bethlehem 4-5th March

Introduction: this conference has been organized by the Arab Education Institute, Bethlehem. It aimed to bring together Religious Education teachers in Palestine, (especially West Bank and East Jerusalem teachers), policy and decision makers in Palestinian education and educators: international guests were there to make inputs, as well as to reflect and advise.

The venue for the first day was the Peace Centre in Manger square; for the second day it was the "Sumud Story House", built by AEI and designed as a venue for bringing group together, especially women.

Participants were welcomed by Abdalla Shakereny, District officer of Bethlehem Ministry of Education. He emphasized the importance of place "This blessed spot" – as well as the need for people of faith to agree. "The realities on the ground emphasize our brotherhood". He called for no more fragmentation and for looking for common points of agreement.

This sense of harmony was somewhat upset by the Roman Catholic scholar, Fr Peter Tadros,¹ who felt very strongly that not enough attention has been paid to the Christian presence and history in the holy Land in the 6 centuries before Mohammed. This was a great injustice and made Christians into second class citizens. He felt there was a great need to expose teachers to a ministry of truth.

Sheik Maher Assaf – an RE teacher in Beit Sahour- followed him. He stressed the lack of harmony in the land and called for RE (Muslim) to be less about harmony and more about the "ordinary things of life". The example he gave was "hygiene" of body, mind, heart. He had many good ideas, but in talking to him afterwards, he felt that there was no good education in Islam in Bethlehem that really touched the hearts of young people - that there was too much learning by rote of verses of the Koran.

After a short break there was input from Dr Thom Geurts, the Netherlands, advocating a post-traditional model of RE that sought to empower young people in their "search for meaning in life". He was cut short by the Friday Muslim prayer- impressive to see Manger Square entirely filled by praying Muslims, listening to the sermon booming out from the Mosque of Omar: during this break we watched films produced

1. Fr Peter Tadros is an eminent scholar,¹

by the Arab Education Institute. One in particular was striking. The story of a little girl, (clearly influenced by both Red Riding hood and Pippi Longstocking), it showed how her weekly visit to her grandmother was blocked by the sudden appearance of the Israeli Security Wall. The child draws a picture of a large bird on the Wall – which obligingly comes to life and carries her over the Wall!

After a fantastic lunch Bridget Rees contributed on inter-faith organising in Bradford, UK. This was followed by a plea from young people for more imaginative methods in RE and then by some teachers themselves, (both Christian and Muslim). These gave a very varied performances: some were expert in drama, story-telling and music, and used interactive methods. Others were more conservative. Those interacting with AEI were keen to show how their stories showed moral courage, enhancing imagination and hope. The teacher involved in the “Living in the Holy Land” project was inspirational in showing how the activities helped interreligious understanding between Jews, Christians and Muslims- especially by groups visiting the Holy Sites. I was asked to reflect on all the presentation –with Prof. Riet Bons Storm from the Netherlands, whom I have known for many years. The day ended with the AEI Women’s *Sumud* Choir singing – in their beautiful traditional Palestinian dresses.

The second day was planned for the *Sumud* Story house. “Sumud” is a key concept for Palestinian spirituality, meaning steadfastness, perseverance and moral courage. The discussion on the second day was far more focused. Dr Barakat Fawzi, (the coordinator of Islamic-Christian –Religious Studies in the Palestinian ministry of education), spoke movingly on the Kairos document from a Muslim perspective. He said there was no family in Palestine without wounds and suffering. He called for more support for AEI in its work of “promoting the sumud of our people”. Toine van Teeffelen (AEI’s Education director) then linked with Kairos document both with *sumud* and RE. This was a visionary presentation, which really drew out many dimensions of integrating *sumud* into the curriculum. There we had inputs from David Clements on drama in RE and Dr Hakan Bengtsston from the Swedish Theological Institute in Jerusalem. Dr Walid Mustafa, (Bethlehem University) who coordinates the Living in the Holy Land programme for AEI, tried to put non-violent education in the context of the revolutionary movements in Egypt and Tunisia.

The whole experience was felt to be worthwhile, provided that more teachers could be involved and that all could reach agreement on the small projects that could immediately be implemented.

Mary Grey, Bethlehem, March 2011