#### The

# **Living Stones**of the Holy Land Trust

## Newsletter

No 11: October 2016



An ecumenical trust seeking to promote contacts between Christian communities in Britain and those in the Holy Land and neighbouring countries.

Contact: admin@livingstonesonline.org.uk or the editor at newsletter@livingstonesonline.org.uk Website: www.livingstonesonline.org.uk; Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/livingstonesonlineuk/



Our group with the Grand Mufti, in front of a precious section of the covering of the Kaaba in Mecca: Revd David Clark, Lord Hylton, Jo Simister, Baroness Cox, Grand Mufti of Damascus Dr Hassoun, Revd Andrew Ashdown (leader of the group), President of the Armenian Evangelical Church in Syria Revd Haroot Selimien, Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali and Simon Preston. (photo Andrew Ashdown)

#### Voices from Lebanon and Syria: September 1-7, 2016

Editor Jo Simister will be speaking at our Open Day (see back page) – here's a taste of her observations, with additional comments and photos from group leader Revd Andrew Ashdown.

From September 1<sup>st</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> 2016, I was privileged to be part of an independent, self-funded group who went to Syria: two members of the House of Lords, one Anglican bishop, one Anglican priest, one Roman Catholic priest (also an architect and archaeologist), one Quaker advisor to our government on reconciliation and community-building – and me .

The visit included Maalloula (the Christian town where Aramaic is still spoken), Aleppo (Syria's largest city and previously its industrial powerhouse) and Latakia (home to many of the fleeing families).

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#### Voices from Syria: a pastoral visit, September 1-7, 2016 (continued):

I am including three topics here:

- 1. the context of the visit and some of our conclusions;
- 2. comments from some of the people we met, especially concerning Christian communities;
- 3. observations from our visits to the Christian community in Maaloula, the Armenian Evangelical Church in Aleppo, and to Latakia.

#### 1. Context to the visit:

#### Why did we go?

We were very aware of the partial nature of reporting of the causes and consequences of the civil war, we wanted to see and hear for ourselves the voices of the people of Syria – as many different voices as we could manage in a week. It was in the nature of a pastoral visit to the suffering people of Syria – including Christians of course, but also many others.

#### Who invited us?

We were invited by Bishop Armash Nalbandian, Armenian Archbishop of Damascus of the Armenian Apostolic Church; Bishop Antoine Audo, Archbishop of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Syria; Revd. Harout Selimian, President of the Armenian Evangelical Church in Syria, and the Grand Mufti of Syria, Dr. Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun.

#### With whom did we meet?

We met with many faith, political and community leaders as well as internally displaced refugees and ordinary people from different parts of Syrian society, in Damascus, Maaloula, Aleppo and Latakia.

#### What did we conclude? (just five points out of many!)

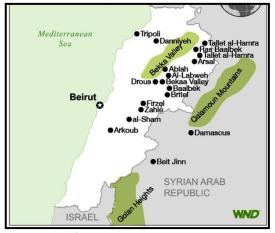
- 1. The coverage by some media of the situation in Syria is not an accurate representation of many of the realities we have observed. Many media narratives in the UK were refuted and disputed by the vast majority of people whom we have met.
- 2. Without exception, every person we met believes that current UK and international policies of commitment to 'Regime Change' will destroy the pluralistic and diverse society which has existed for hundreds of years, and the strong relationships between the communities. E.g.: There are consistently positive working relations between Christians and Muslims in Government controlled areas in Syria, and many faith-led reconciliation initiatives at local and Government levels with that have positive outcomes for whole communities for example, in enabling cease fires.
- 3. People cannot understand the support of the west for the rebel groups. Widespread concern was strongly conveyed over the UK's military support for Opposition forces which we are repeatedly told are not 'moderate' but virtually indistinguishable from those fighting for the ideologies of ISIS and Al Nusra. The people who are not in the rebel-controlled areas are in great fear of the kind of society which would be imposed if ISIS and the rebel groups win. They fear that if the west persists with is current policies, Syria will become another failed State characterised by violence and terrorism and this terrorism will be exported to other countries, including the UK.
- 4. There are many initiatives by Government and local communities to address problems of war and poverty (e.g. Government and churches' initiatives to support internally displaced persons, and the provision of free health care). However, the acute polarisation inherent in protracted war has all but destroyed the existing movement to implement greater democracy within the country. The legitimate voices of reform and opposition go unreported.
- 5. Sanctions have unintended consequences. For example, important and significant people with genuine voices of peace and reform are being prevented from visiting the UK and engaging with the British government and people.

#### 2. Comments from key observers and community and faith leaders:





As we flew over Europe, I thought about all those Syrian refugee families who had made their way through these countries – what hardships, what delays, what violence and resistance they suffered en route.



Locations of Lebanese Christian villages under threat of terrorist action (<a href="http://www.wnd.com/files/2015/02/lebanon-christians.jpg">http://www.wnd.com/files/2015/02/lebanon-christians.jpg</a>)



Dr Bouthaina Shaaban records a clip for us.

#### **Voices from Lebanon:**

<u>Charles Sarkis, Christian Democratic Party</u>, who explained that Lebanon is a delicately balanced political situation anyway, and taking in half as many people again as refugees (that's 2m refugees for a population of 4m people!) is stretching the country to breaking point. The situation of the Christian refugees has two consequences which are unbalancing the country to their detriment:

- 1. Generally the refugees are in camps, but the Christian refugees tend to be absorbed into churches and households in the community, until they take any route out, as they tend to have extensive familial networks worldwide [as seen with Palestinians].
- 2. Funding comes through for camps, but not for those out in the community [similar to the situation we met in Jordan last year], so the Christian refugees do not benefit.

There has been a suggestion to make Lebanon a safe haven for Christians to keep the numbers up, with housing in prefabs, etc – but that would admit defeat in keeping Syria a pluralist society.

Vanessa Beeley, journalist and researcher, explained about the fears of people living in the Christian villages in the north, which are very close to the Syrian border and vulnerable to attack. The Lebanese army and Hizbollah are managing to contain the situation and protect the villages, for the moment, e.g. running generators so that there is flood lighting on in the night, compensating with power cuts in the day. But the villagers know that the potential ethnic cleansing is on an horrific scale, and not just of Christians, but of anyone different, with sieges and starvation and appalling abuse, and deaths like the most gruesome mediaeval martyrdoms, should ISIS and its rebel allies come their way.

#### **Voices from Syria:**

Bouthaina Shaaban, Political and Media Adviser to the President, has a PhD from Warwick where she studied the Chartists. She was keen to stress the pluralist and secular basis of Syrian society – for example, she has three teams working under her, who are Christian, Shia and Sunni. 'We are all people of God – we pray in one another's places of worship, we visit each other's shrines and rejoice at each other's festivals. I am Muslim – but we all believe in all the

prophets without differentiating, and all are worthy of respect. God created us in different shades and wants us to cherish the differences. Every act against someone for their difference is an act of racism, of terrorism; every single act of ISIS is against the Qur'an.

#### Voices from Syria: a pastoral visit, September 1-7, 2016 (continued).

<u>The Grand Mufti of Damascus</u>, <u>Dr Hassoun</u>, is a Sunni Muslim scholar of renown and a spiritual leader of stature. He said, "Religion is a bridge to the others, not a wall. Christ summarised his teaching in 'God is love'. Any religion not based on love is made by man...God is not in temples, churches or mosques, but in human hearts."

He lamented the rise in Islamic extremism and said we should be wary of its growth in the UK. He could not understand why our Government allies with the country where the worst kind of extremist ideology is nurtured and supported. Dr. Hassoun told us that after his son was murdered by 'rebels', he publicly forgave them and asked them to talk to him. The reply they sent was that they would kill him too. He was very clear that terrorism has been imported into Syria by many countries.

Of the government he said: "I do not stand against Assad and his government, because we are secularists who separate religion from politics." He continued: "If there is a God, we will be asked one question at the day of judgement: Did you love one another? As a Muslim I love Jesus and I call you brothers. Please let us stop fighting. Let's give our children the flower of love, not the seeds of hatred, or they will ask us; ' why didn't you teach us to love?'"

Minister for Tourism, Besher Yazji is passionate about the abundant historical heritage of the country. Immediately prior to the conflict, the government had been doing a huge amount of work to restore monuments and improve the tourist infrastructure in the country. He lamented the massive destruction and looting of historical sites, most of which had taken place at the hand of extremist factions whose ideology wishes to obliterate the diverse history, culture and faith of the country.

Of course the tourism industry, a major source of income for the country, has been devastated by the conflict, with hundreds of hotels and restaurants closed. However, pilgrims continue to visit the Shia and Christian shrines in the country, and as the security situation has improved in many of the government-controlled areas of the country, Syrians themselves are wanting to return to places of interest and relaxation that are 'safe'. The ministry is working hard to restore credibility in its tourism, and gave us a selection of DVD and study materials, for example about St Paul.

He emphasised that post conflict every effort will be made to restore the ancient sites. However, whereas an earthquake will break buildings apart in large blocks which can be rebuilt, bombs pulverise them into dust which cannot be rebuilt.

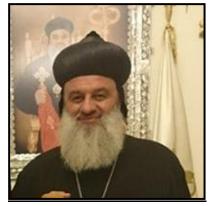
Minister for Reconciliation, Dr Ali Haidar described the reconciliation process.

- 1. We choose an area and initiate direct contact with fighting groups. If they refuse, we find local religious (Christian or Muslim) or other leaders to mediate.
- 2. The goal is to achieve a situation where the area is free of weapons and armed militias, and where local factions can start to dialogue and understand their differences.
- 3. Where there are foreign fighters we have to address this situation. If there are foreigners, the first step is to get them out of the area, because they are anti-reconciliation.
- 4. Locals are given the choice: to continue fighting with foreign fighters or to leave fighting and to join the Syrian Army or authorities such as the police. Many have chosen the former and lost their lives. Many others have chosen the latter.
- 5. The usual free education, medical care and electricity (including to former fighters and their families) are then restored. The presence of these is an indication of the success of the reconciliation.
- 6. We try to work on the much more difficult and painful issues of identifying the dead, the missing and the kidnapped. And we help the local Communications Committees to liaise with Government departments to help life to return to normal.
- 7. The ultimate target is to ease tensions and pave the way for national and international reconciliation.

<u>Syrian Orthodox Patriarch His Holiness Ignatius Aphrem</u>, Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Syria, and also with him the Bishop of Hassakeh.

As we gathered at the Patriarchate, a wedding was taking place in the Church, and a young man was receiving condolences on the death and funeral of his mother in a terrorist attack in Hassakeh. He came in to meet us. As he spoke, children were playing in a neighbouring Hall. The Patriarch commented on the cycle of life and death: a wedding; children playing; a funeral all surrounding us.

He said: "Five years ago Syria was not like this. We are a pluralistic society with freedom of religion. Do you think Saudi or Qatar will bring us 'democracy'? ...... If the regime is toppled it will be the



Syrian Orthodox Patriarch His Holiness Ignatius Aphrem

mullahs ruling like Iran or Egypt. Theirs is not a secular opposition. Bashar may be a dictator but he is secular. Christians in this country are siding with those who are defending them. We do not support Bashar as a person but as a representative of the government that is defending us. You say Christians are supporting the regime. But I am not ashamed to support the government that is protecting us, whilst western policies are helping to empty the region of Christians."

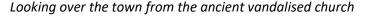
#### 3. Visits to three communities:

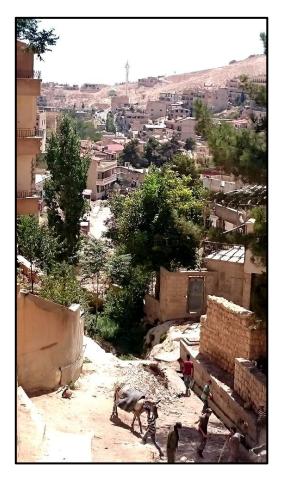
#### Maaloula:

One of the most famous Christian villages in the Middle East, famed for its early Christian shrines, and for being one of few villages in the world where Aramaic, the language of Jesus, is spoken. Occupied by 'rebel' groups in 2013, we met with leaders of the village and villagers, who spoke of the murder and kidnap the terrorists perpetrated against the Christian population (tragically aided by some of the Muslim villagers) and the attempted destruction of the ancient Christian monasteries. Famed for centuries for its religious co-existence, villagers are still traumatised by the events.

The restoration of both shrines and homes is progressing, and about half the original inhabitants have returned to help rebuild the village. The village is strong in its support of the Syrian Government and the Syrian Army, and are dismayed at the international community's support of the 'rebels', whose brutality they have experienced first hand, and whose sectarian extreme Islamist agenda and intentions are proven and explicit.

The monastery of St Sergius in Maaloula was used for months by the terrorists as their headquarters, and was badly vandalised by them. The Church is 3rd Century, and has a unique pre-Christian altar. The numerous historic and valuable icons that adorned the Church were stolen or destroyed. After visiting the monastery, we walked down the famous gorge to the Convent of St Thekla, a disciple of St Paul.







#### Voices from Syria: a pastoral visit, September 1-7, 2016 (continued).



A tyre blow-out en route through the war-torn north



Welcome party at the Armenian club

#### Aleppo:

We were the first British group to visit Aleppo since the start of the conflict. As we entered the city, we passed the City's University, where earlier in the day, four shells from the rebelcontrolled areas had landed, miraculously without loss of life on this occasion.

Our reception was deeply moving. As we arrived at the Armenian Club in the City, about four hundred people on 2 floors who had come to have dinner with us, rose to their feet and applauded. We were welcomed with a wonderful Armenian feast, and with warm hospitality. The meal was serenaded with two accompaniments: a string quintet that played for us; and the constant sound of bombing and shells (going both ways) just a few kms away. At one point, close gunfire interrupted the music, and we were told that one of the front-lines was less than a kilometre away.

In the morning, we were on the way to visit some of the Churches destroyed in the war, when our vehicle was stopped and turned back - the immediate vicinity of the Churches was being shelled by the rebels. And so we went as invited to the Bethel Armenian Evangelical Church, where we were met by over 500 local Christians, and by some of the city's leading Muslim figures.

The warmth of our reception was again humbling. Everyone was deeply grateful for us for having made the effort to visit. A service was held, attended by members of other Christian and other faith communities, and our leader Revd Andrew Ashdown preached on the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount, which received a warm response from one of the senior Muslim Sheikhs. The Sheikhs present affirmed their respect for the Christian communities; their abhorrence of extremist Wahhabi ideology, and their support for the Government. Chaldaean Catholic Bishop Audo spoke warmly about



The Sunday School children sang about their desire for peace

how we were like the apostle Thomas – we needed to see and hear and touch the situation in order to be able to speak with authority.

Before being whisked away for the next stage of our journey we were able to hear the stories of some of the local people, and meet some Yazidi refugees. We also met the Senior Doctors Council to hear the realities (very different from the media ).



Children at an IDP community centre

#### Latakia

In Latakia one enters a different world... a thriving coastal city, and heartland of the Alawite community, but not untouched by the war. There have been car bombs and attacks, and massacres in villages in the surrounding hills, most notably at Kessab in 2014. Hundreds of people have been killed and thousands injured.

The Governor of Latakia province, told us of some of the challenges facing the district, for example, that the province is sheltering 1m internally displaced people (IDPs) who have fled rebel-controlled areas. Of these, only 4000 live in simple Community Centres set up by the government; others are in houses provided by the government. Many people had come from other cities to Latakia because it is a comparatively safe area. Doctors, teachers, engineers, craftspeople and local people share their homes, food, water, schools with the families of soldiers who have gone to fight. Health care is free for all.

"What is happening in Syria is not just terrorism attacking Syria, but it is terrorism that is attacking the whole world. ... More dangerous .... is the ideology that is affecting the next generation. Syria is committed to reconciliation. We recognise that we are all Syrians and we will always welcome those who have left even if they have been fighters against us. .... I thank all people who stand with Syria and everyone who supports us with aid to support the internally displaced, and the good people who come to see the reality for themselves."

Mural on the perimeter wall of the centre



#### Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust Pilgrimage Planning For 2017

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity will run a schedule of services in churches of different denominations from Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> to Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> January. Our presence during this week is greatly appreciated and eagerly welcomed, so some trustees and members of Living Stones will go. Our priority will be to meet with Christian communities to find out about their work and life circumstances, and to worship with them.

However, because of the detrimental dollar exchange rate, we are not making plans for a formal group visit. Instead, we will make individual arrangements for flights and accommodation. This will enable us to meet up with friends and partner organisations, and to explore the city and environs at will. If you would like to join us, please contact Jo on <a href="mailto:pilgrimages@livingstonesonline.ork.uk">pilgrimages@livingstonesonline.ork.uk</a>.

There is a possibility that the Britain-Palestine Friendship and Twinning Network, of which we are a member, will organise a visit in Spring 2017. We await details of this.

#### North West Tour of Christian Aid's Art Exhibition "Through Young Eyes"

Dr Lesley Dawson was invited to speak in support of this exhibition when it visited the north west. Her talk will be posted on the website www.livingstonesonline.org.uk 'Resources' page.

This exhibition features drawings by young Palestinians who lived through the Israeli military offensive on the Gaza strip in the summer of 2014. The artists are supported by the Culture and Free Thought Association in Khan Younis, a Gazan partner of Christian Aid. You can find out more about the exhibition, which has been shown in various locations around the UK, at <a href="http://www.christianaid.org.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/august-2015/gaza-exhibition-through-young-eyes.aspx">http://www.christianaid.org.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/august-2015/gaza-exhibition-through-young-eyes.aspx</a>.

The north western tour of the exhibition was organised by Friends of Sabeel UK, NW Group and was shown in a variety of churches and faith centres during June and July. To support the exhibition and give more information about the present situation in Gaza, especially for the Christian community, I was asked to speak in three of the places where the exhibition was shown.

My talk was entitled "Are they still drinking the Sea in Gaza?" This was taken from the title of a book written by Amira Hass "Drinking the Sea at Gaza" (1996). "Go drink the Sea at Gaza" is a local saying equivalent to "Go to Hell".

The talk was based on my own experiences when visiting Gaza in 2015 and information from recent reports and publications from a variety of sources. The main focus was on the difficulties of getting into Gaza for internationals, the near impossibility for Gazans to exit Gaza, and the needs of the Christian community (Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant) in Gaza.

Most of those who came to the meetings had some understanding of the Palestinian situation and the specific issues for Christians, and many had been on pilgrimages and visits to Jerusalem and the West Bank.

This weekend demonstrated the reality of co-operation between different British organisations focussing on Palestinian Christian issues and the enthusiasm of concerned people in the North West to publicise the current situation for Christians in Gaza.



A doll caught in the rubble of a house.

## War Against the People: Israel, the Palestinians and Global Pacification: Jeff Halper A book review contributed by Dr David Toorawa



A number of things stand out in this terrifying book:-

It is a highly technical tome, not easy to digest in a cover to cover read, but to be assimilated piecemeal.

JH traces the development of Israel from a minnow to a major arms provider. By this means it has become indispensible to many, both great powers and developing countries alike. Thus has been forged the interdependence of Israel and the US. America is a major weapons supplier, and Israel is known to modify what it receives. Foreign weaponry is adapted to its own purposes. There are many joint development projects around the globe where Israel is a partner passing on its expertise.

Israel has become indispensible to the security of many nations by virtue of its technical and security input.

The nature of warfare has undergone evolution, where Israel has its own laboratory in Gaza & the West Bank over four decades of conflict with the Palestinians. Security is Israel's buzzword, and the situation in which Israel exists encourages accelerated technical development. Economic advance follows the technical development.

It is clear from the depth of study which has gone into creating this volume that Israel does not seek victory in its conflict with the Palestinians, but to manage conflict while continuing its policies of subjugation.

The Amazon blurb for this book states:

'Modern warfare has a new form. The days of international combat are fading. So how do major world powers maintain control over their people today?

War Against the People is a disturbing insight into the new ways world powers such as the US, Israel, Britain and China forge war today. It is a subliminal war of surveillance and whitewashed terror, conducted through new, high-tech military apparatuses, designed and first used in Israel against the Palestinian population. Including hidden camera systems, sophisticated sensors, information databases on civilian activity, automated targeting systems and, in some cases, unmanned drones, it is used to control the very people the nation's leaders profess to serve.

Drawing from years of research, as well as investigations and interviews conducted at international arms fairs, Jeff Halper reveals that this practice is much more insidious than was previously thought. As Western governments tighten the grip on their use of private information and claw back individual liberties, War Against the People is a timely reminder that fundamental human rights are being compromised for vast sections of the world, and that this is a subject that should concern everyone.'

#### **Theology Group**

The meetings usually take place at Heythrop College, 23 Kensington Square, London W8 5HN, and include a paper and discussion – e.g. on the mystical tradition in Islam (on 12 October 2016). Please see <a href="http://www.livingstonesonline.org.uk/theology-group">http://www.livingstonesonline.org.uk/theology-group</a> for more details.

#### Greenbelt, August 26 to 29, 2016: Silent Stars

A report from Dr Lesley Dawson who was among Living Stones representatives at the festival this year.

Our Living Stones pitch was located in the G-Source Village, which was on the edge of the festival site this year, as a street-market exhibitor village. We had intended to share with Action around Bethlehem Children with Disability and Friends of Sabeel UK, but when arrived we realised that a standard 3mx3m size tent was too small for all three of us. Fortunately we found there was an empty tent on the other side of the walk way that we were able to utilise in addition to our designated place.



The idea of this market street was that festival goers would walk up and down the walk way and pop in to any tents that caught their interest. This was fine when the weather was good, but not when it rained. Also, being on the edge of the site affected the number of people browsing, especially on Saturday when it rained most of the day.

However, we did get interested visitors and it was very good to work with

friends from ABCD and FOSUK, and those who visited were able to see that three small charities with similar interests could work together rather than compete with each other. Mark Battison, the new Director of Sabeel organised a rota so that someone from each charity was at the tent all through the three-plus days of the festival.

The small Palestinian rosaries and other items that Living Stones had for sale did encourage people to visit us and we were able to distribute information about the work of Living Stones in organising pilgrimages, providing scholarships and supporting Palestinian contextual theology.

Although there was not a special emphasis on the Middle East this year, there were other organisations working there, in addition to ourselves. Embrace the Middle East were showing photos of children from Gaza, Amos Trust was encouraging people to knock down a model of the Separation Wall. Open Doors were providing "Syrian Tea" and Quakers in Britain were highlighting the work of the EAPPIs in Israel/Palestine.

I attended a talk by Rev Nadim Nassar from Awareness Foundation. The title of his talk was "The Syrian Jesus" in which he told his audience that they could never understand the gospels unless they understood the cultural context of "Greater Syria". He was also able to answer questions about the current situation for Christians in Syria.

Also at the festival was a group from Aida Refugee Camp in Bethlehem (the one next to the Wall), called "Beautiful Resistance". The young people from this group danced and sang and spoke about their own experiences of living in a refugee camp. Their director, Dr Abdel Fattah Abusrour, a professor in the Education Faculty at Bethlehem University also spoke movingly about his own life for forty five minutes without notes or hesitation.

I feel it was worthwhile for Living Stones to be present at Greenbelt, and good to work with ABCD and FOSUK. It enabled members of the three charities to get to know each other better and see how we all linked together. I feel we need some kind of 'hook' activity to bring people to our stall – this is being discussed in preparation for attending Greenbelt (and maybe other events) next year.

Ideas gratefully received!

#### Approaching the Centenary of the Balfour Declaration:

Notes from Prof Mary Grey:

Take a look at http://www.balfourproject.org/ where you will find links to the film which was shown and discussed at the Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust Member's day last year, as well as links to key documents and discussions which led to the birth of the State of Israel.

#### Ben Macintyre in the Times writes:

'Any "marking" of the centenary needs to acknowledge that while the Jewish homeland envisaged in 1917 has been realised, the promise to protect the rights of the Palestinian people has not yet been honoured. Britain should use the centenary as an opportunity to help establish an equitable settlement respecting the rights both of Israelis and Palestinians.'

lan Black in a Guardian article entitled 'Will Palestinians sue Britain over the Balfour declaration of 1917' quotes the Balfour Project web site:

"...the Balfour Project are working to promote understanding of the declaration's continuing consequences in the coming months... I think that there is a moral responsibility on our government to complete the work that it started when Britain was the world power... It should work to deliver an outcome which respects the rights both of Israelis and Palestinians.'

You can find more at <a href="http://www.balfourproject.org/">http://www.balfourproject.org/</a>, search on <a href="Facebook">Facebook</a> or Twitter <a href="#Balfourrevisited">#Balfourrevisited</a>.

#### MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

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### Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust AGM and Open Day

10.30am – 4pm on Saturday 12th November, 2016 at Our Lady of Victories Church, 235a Kensington High St, London W8 6SA

#### including:



## between monsters

## observations from a week in Syria, September 2016

#### Proposed programme for the day:

- 10.30 Gather, register, refreshments
- 11.00 AGM including reports on all sections of our work
- 12.30 Lunch break (beverages available); book and craft stalls open
- 13.30 'Between Monsters' talk with slides, followed by discussion
- 15.00 Refreshments
- 15.15 Ecumenical act of worship
- 16.00 Close