

The Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust Newsletter

No. 15 November 2018



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

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MARANATHA, COME LORD JESUS

Advent approaches..... how do we celebrate it, given the uncertainties about the future of this charity? Prayer and preparation are always key, along with confidence that if we are guided by the Spirit she will show us the way. We are starting an ADVENTure, and we are united in our desire and determination to seek the right way forward, so as to ensure there continues to be support for our Christian sisters and brothers in the Middle East.

At the last executive meeting in September two motions were agreed:

"That the Trustees, exercising due diligence, have examined the present position and future prospects of The Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust and have concluded that the ability to sustain the administrative requirements (finance and personnel) is impracticable due to finite resources. The Trustees are of the opinion that the future lies in aligning with another charity, able to secure the future of the Michael Prior Fund and the founding intentions of our charity."

"In consideration of the aforesaid motion The Trustees, having had initial conversation, wish to enter into formal discussions with The Trustees of Friends of the Holy Land Trust to explore opportunities for securing the ongoing operation of the Michael Prior Fund (Scholarship and Annual Lecture) and other activities."

With these initial motions agreed a proposal was composed to send to Friends of the Holy Land Trust (FHL). They have already helped us with the transfer of funds to Bethlehem University for scholarships, and part of their work is supporting Christian educational institutions at primary, secondary and tertiary level, so our post-graduate focus would fit neatly. An initial response has been received from their trustees, and discussions continue.

However the work of The Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust has many aspects beyond the scholarships which The Michael Prior Memorial Trust finances. Advocacy is an important aspect and FHL is cautious about being associated with that sphere of activity. Embrace the Middle East now describes itself as "The Christian development charity tackling poverty and injustice in the Middle East", and advocacy is a key part of their focus. Their wider Middle East reach reflects that of Living Stones, and at present they are planning work in Iraq. Another potential link is their Annual Lecture, similar to our Michael Prior Lecture.

This leads us to the importance of theology, always at the heart of Living Stones, so that when Friends of Sabeel UK ceased to have such a body our Theology Group took shape, and since then has provided some of the original material to be found in our Yearbook, now going since 2012. However Friends of Sabeel UK, combined with Kairos UK, have recently restarted a theology group. Further, there is also a Middle East Forum which grew out of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. It has now met for many years and remains an active and diverse ecumenical body.

Our "Living Stones" pilgrimages have been a vital way of initiating and developing friendships with local Christians, and there is already a "trial" plan to work with Christians Aware for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity visit to Jerusalem and West Bank in 2020.

Even these restricted references to the breadth of our work have raised the names of six other charities with a focus on Christians in the Middle East. All of you probably already have an interest in one or several or all of them. We are therefore looking for opinions, assistance, guidance, and prayer from our members as we take the next steps. We may assume your prayer support but we hope you will choose to share the deliberation and decision process by attending our AGM on November 24th.

Our Chair, David Toorawa adds this comment:

So much of what we pray and work for is political by its very nature. Oscar Romero in his fight for the poor and against injustice said

"I wish to affirm that my preaching is not political. It naturally touches on the political and it touches the people's real lives - but it does so in order to illuminate those realities and to tell people what it is that God wants and what He does not want."

Oscar Romero paid for his non-violent Christian message of support for the poor with his life, assassinated on March 24th 1980.

He was canonised by Pope Francis on 14th October 2018 and his feast day is the date of his death. St Oscar Romero's message remains as vital today in our struggle as ever.

Official notice of The Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust Annual General Meeting is contained later in this Newsletter, but as we have already intimated it takes place on **Saturday 24th November at Our Lady of Victories Roman Catholic Church** in Kensington High Street. There will be the usual "business", agreeing the accounts for the year and electing the executive for the new year, but even this latter item will depend on the discussions about the future. Please, please make the decision now to join us all then and be part of the way forward.



James Prior (1939 to 2018)

Duncan Macpherson writes

It is with great sadness that we learnt of the death of James Prior, a great friend and generous benefactor of Living Stones. James was the elder brother of Father Michael Prior, the founder of our charity. Both James and Michael were born in County Cork but found their way to England in the late fifties where they both excelled in their very different fields. Whereas Michael made his name as a biblical scholar and liberation theologian, James became a successful business man in the field of property investment and event management. The two remained close and they shared a characteristically mischievous sense of humour and great personal warmth.

On Michael's untimely death in 2004 James made a generous donation to Living Stones to set up the Michael Prior Memorial Fund which has been able to help a number of Palestinian students in their studies and to promote scholarly projects in the field of Holy Land Studies. In 2004 James accompanied me on a trip to the Holy Land to discover the places and people associated with Michael's project of an ethical political understanding of the Scriptures. James continued to be interested in the progress of Living Stones and the use being made of the fund and he attended a number of the annual Michael Prior Memorial Lectures.

His death came unexpectedly, after a short illness, and he will be sorely missed by his family and friends, not least by his friends in Living Stones.

Rest eternal grant to him, O Lord and let perpetual light shine upon him. May he rest in peace.



Bethlehem, house of bread

(‘O, little town of Bethlehem’ by Phillips Brookes 1835 -93)

Not such a ‘little town’ now, since Phillips Brookes, inspired,
wrote of peace and calm and stillness one Christmas.
The sights and sounds of that ancient city that Brookes admired
have grown, not only into a discordant struggle for survival,
but into a lively bustling place that Palestinians call home.

Markets and young men with flat trays of bread on their heads
striding through streets. Stalls overhung with rugs, jewellery, lamps,
a copper votive light, and, necessary for their livelihood, men
with persuasive tongues cajoling tourists to buy Christian artefacts –
tree decorations skilfully carved in olive wood for Westerners’ delight.

But the dividing walls in Bethlehem keeping men from open war are shameful
concrete blocks eight metres high. A different tale of two cities. Vibrant graffiti,
colour everywhere, and messages written in black cartoons for the world’s pity.
The wall loops round Rachel’s tomb and across men’s olive fields and tourists snap
a hundred scenes in awe. On Banksy’s Hotel walls a peaceful donkey stands puzzled, unafraid, while a
soldier with a Kalashnikov offers him a hand grenade.

Christmas 2017. In Manger Square a huge fir tree erected and covered in streams
of blue light, a bright star overhead. A thousand more lights are hung from cables strung across the
square, put up by a lighting team from Liverpool. Men who care about Bethlehem.
Men like Danny Boyle and Banksy, people with souls, who organised an Alternativity,
where kids from local schools danced and sang in all the familiar Christmas story roles.
Families watched, taking photos all around, and little children, unaware of snow machines,
hands uplifted, entranced, catching flakes of magic snow as it came whirling down.

Bethlehem’s vineyards pour wine and cash into the city’s coffers and the starlit shepherds’
fields are kept free from buildings and tourists come. They sing ‘While shepherds watched’
and Brookes’ ‘O little town of Bethlehem’ and in the church of the Nativity, the faithful
walk underground in the jewelled mosaic-lit dark. This is for them the reason for the lights
and the festivity outside. They bend to kneel and kiss the silver-star and make their pilgrim mark as
they touch the rock beneath, this bizarre sacred spot under the floor. Outside, the artist Banksy with
paints and stencils reveals two kneeling, praying angels on each door.

Christine Pope (Bread and wine) February 2018

Felicity Young writes:

Early in the year I attended a meeting in the House of Commons which was arranged in response to the withdrawal of \$3,000,000 from UNRWA by the USA. For the past 70 years the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East has been delivering effective and reliable humanitarian support to Palestine refugees. They believe their services contribute to stability in an extraordinarily insecure and tense region.

Established by the UN General Assembly in 1949, their mission is to assist Palestine refugees in achieving their full potential in human development until a just and lasting solution is found to the refugee crisis. (It was expected to have been rendered redundant within 5 years!) The Agency fulfils its humanitarian and human development mandate by providing protection and essential services to Palestine refugees in Gaza, the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Its services include basic (and in Lebanon, secondary) education, comprehensive primary health care, emergency relief, social interventions, microfinance, shelter and infrastructural support. Today some 5.3 million Palestine refugees are registered with the Agency. Often working in complex emergency situations, UNRWA is recognised for efficiently delivering one of the most sophisticated and comprehensive humanitarian services and development in the world. From emergency cash and food assistance to education and healthcare to livelihoods, UNRWA is transforming the lives of Palestine refugees every day. Dignity and hope are at the heart of their mission to foster self-sufficiency for the refugees they serve. UNRWA has over 30,000 employees who are teachers, health professionals, social workers, and labourers, among others. Almost all of them are Palestine refugees.

In January 2018 UNRWA launched "Dignity is Priceless", a global fundraising campaign, in response to unprecedented funding cuts. The campaign aims to protect the rights of millions of vulnerable Palestine refugees who are at risk of losing life-saving assistance at a time of increased tension. However, as you are aware, that was prior to President Trump stopping the US contribution completely.

So what is at stake?

*Free basic education for 525,000 boys and girls at over 700 UNRWA schools
*Free healthcare and medicine for 3.5 million Palestine refugees at 150 clinics
*Essential food and cash assistance for 1.7 million extremely vulnerable refugees
*Dignity, human security and political horizon for 5.3 million Palestine refugees
*Stability of the entire region amid conflict and escalating tensions

And what does it mean to be a Palestine refugee in 2018

--In Gaza it means being a victim of a decade-long blockade and humanitarian crisis, resulting in 1 million people dependent on food aid.

---In the West Bank it means living under occupation, fear of violence, and lack of opportunities.

--In Syria it means being trapped in a brutal armed conflict, thousands deprived of access to water, food, electricity, and basic healthcare.

--In Lebanon it means living in over-crowded camps with dire living conditions, facing systemic challenges to access to employment and business opportunities.

--In Jordan it means a challenging life in the fear of being forgotten, as poverty grows and unemployment rises.

--It means 70 years of suffering

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An article by Tarek Hamoud posted by The Palestinian Return Centre on 12 October 2018

On 31st August, in a move celebrated by Benjamin Netanyahu as a 'blessed change', the Trump administration announced it would cut all funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

It was a decision with far-reaching and catastrophic implications: the US has long been the largest individual donor to the UNRWA, which serves millions of Palestinian refugees and their dependents in the Middle East. Despite putting at risk the schooling, healthcare and social services on which these refugees rely, Jared Kushner was dismissive and unapologetic. 'This agency,' he said, 'is corrupt, inefficient, and doesn't help peace.'

That isn't the case. The move is a clumsy sweeping aside of the Palestinian right of return, a major sticking point in peace negotiations in the region. The Trump administration aims to force through a lop-sided 'peace' deal, and the decision taken in August promises immediate, severe, and tragic consequences. In the Palestinian territories, a humanitarian crisis of vast proportions now looms, job cuts to those who administer aid are certain, and the Arab governments reliant on the UNRWA to take care of the Palestinians to whom they reluctantly give asylum will likely want compensation in return for integrating these refugees. They are not responsible, they say, for the aftermath of the 1948 war.

As the US, once responsible for a third of UNRWA's budget, turns its back, it is vital that the vacuum be filled. UNRWA USA, a non-profit operating independently from the main organisation, has reported a 'tremendous increase' in funding from the US public, and aims to raise \$4 million by the end of the year. Such efforts are commendable and desirable, but these non-profits have neither the clout nor the financial power of nation-states.

In the Middle East, the UAE has announced a \$50 million contribution and an extra \$15 million for the upcoming school year; Saudi Arabia and Qatar promised to donate \$50 million each. Kuwait has announced a combined \$2,900,000 contribution, and a handful of private or state-funded foundations in the Gulf have also pledged donations.

But these donations come with a proviso, and a significant one. The Trump administration has announced 'guidelines' by which the Gulf countries can donate, and the view of the US is that, in the long-term, the nature of the UN agency must be 'redefined'.

Even before the US cut its funding to UNRWA, European states were independently and voluntarily increasing their donations. In recent years, the EU has been the second-largest contributor to the agency, pledging more than \$142 million in 2017 alone. The recognition of Palestine by a number of European nations suggests a shift in direction on the continent, but without a unified policy, and a unified strategy, independent commitment to providing humanitarian relief to the refugees reliant on the UNRWA can only go so far.

Clearly there is broad sympathy for the cause, but unless the vocal support given in Ireland or Spain or the UK evolves into a broader European commitment, the EU risks leaving the fate of the Palestinians in the hands of Gulf states freighted with their own problems. Benjamin Netanyahu has been quietly building relationships with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in an apparent effort to block wide European support for Palestine. Regional tensions, violent spasms and security concerns—to say nothing of the donation 'guidelines' imposed on these countries by the US—make the support of the Gulf states unreliable. Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, meanwhile, are unlikely to integrate Palestinian refugees without compensation.

The EU, which in a statement acknowledged the 'substantial gap' left by the US, must play a major role in the future of the UNRWA or risk letting it collapse into inconsequence and dysfunction. Benjamin Netanyahu has said it is 'necessary to abolish the refugee institution'. His former national security adviser said that in the long run, closing the UNRWA was 'no question, the right move to do.' Now the Trump administration has embraced the Israeli narrative wholesale, the issue of funding the UNRWA cannot be left to resolve itself.

The EU, at a time when its power is perceived to be waning, must take a leadership role. As for other sympathetic international players, such as New Zealand, Canada and the UK—soon to leave the EU—they must look for ways to contribute in ever-more productive ways to the international effort, and act on the conclusions drawn at the United Nations General Assembly discussions. The consequences of failing to do this cannot be overstated. Millions will suffer because of the heavy-handed tactics of the Trump administration and its allies in the Israeli government, and Europe cannot stand by and watch.

Tarek Hamoud is Executive Director of the Palestinian Return Centre (PRC)

One of the Living Stones' trustees, founder member and former President, Deacon Duncan Macpherson, shares this inspiring homily.....

Our Lady of Palestine - October 13

Isaiah 7:10-14, Psalm 112, John 2:1-14

My homily to the Westminster Chapter of the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre

Conflict: 'They have no wine.' According to the Chief Medical Officer there is no safe alcohol limit and even drinking small amounts is unsafe. Alcohol addiction is certainly a problem but most people like to celebrate with a glass of wine. GK Chesterton advised 'Drink because you are happy never because you are sad.' I once went to a wedding reception in the West Bank town of Al-Bireh where they had no wine. The two families and the guests were Muslims and they managed to celebrate with gusto without the assistance of wine. However, in the culture that Jesus lived in, as in much of our culture today, wine was an important element in celebration. To run out of wine at a wedding was a matter not just of embarrassment but of shame—very serious loss of face. Mary was concerned for the disgrace of the family providing the feast. When they ran out of wine, since the wine provided for the wedding was all finished, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.'

Without wine there would be no celebration. That relates directly to us. 'They have no wine.' For many this is the experience at the personal level. Maybe relationships are less satisfying than we expected. Or maybe Jesus was there at a wedding, but since then the relationship has gone sour—even ended in divorce. Or maybe the years are rolling on and career ambitions have not been fulfilled. We would like to celebrate but we have no wine. We would like to celebrate but whichever way we look there is no wine—no occasion to celebrate.

On the Feast of Our Lady of Palestine, those of us who love the Holy Land and care about its people might like to celebrate with her that the Middle East is becoming a kinder, fairer place—a place where children do not die of hunger in the Yemen or in besieged areas of Syria, where terrorist bombs do not blow people to bits. In a world that can spend billions of dollars on weapons and wars, children still die unnecessarily. 'They have no wine,' or, more to the point, they do not even have bread or medicine! Not even clean water.

In the Holy Land itself, there should be celebration on the Feast of Our Lady of Palestine. But they have no wine! In 1927, the Latin Patriarch founded the sanctuary of "Our Lady Queen of Palestine" at the locale of Rafat, close to the Palestinian village of Sar'a, one of more than 500 villages destroyed in 1948. When the sanctuary was founded Christians made up 9% of the population of the Holy Land. In 1948 approx. 700,000 Palestinians became refugees including 35% of all Christian Palestinians. Today Christians make up probably less than 2% of the population

They would like to celebrate but they have no wine. We thought that the Israel-Palestinian conflict might be resolved. But there has been no progress; only more settlements, house demolitions and violence, the latest examples involving hundreds of casualties on the boundary to Gaza. Of course, this is politics and we have no political answers. As citizens we may have opinions but as a charitable order we are interested in prayer and pilgrimage. But we cannot be indifferent to the sufferings of so many and the disappearance of the Church where it all began on the day of Pentecost. So, like the people at the wedding at Cana of Galilee we turn to Mary, asking her to intercede with her Son.

Sudden Shift: And his mother said to the servants; 'Do whatever he tells you.' Mary has a message that can move all the goal posts. 'Do whatever he tells you.' I have an open mind about the messages from the Mother of Jesus that some people claim to be hearing in our own time, but we can be absolutely sure about this message: 'Do whatever he tells you.' And unlike many preachers she has already lived out her message in her own experience: 'Be it done unto me according to your word.'

Good News: And we know what happened. Jesus turned the water into wine. When he says that his hour had not yet come he was talking about the hour of his death and resurrection. 'It was the third day when he and his friends and family went to the wedding in Cana of Galilee.' The dying and rising of Jesus changes everything. And it does not change it a little bit. It changes it big time-- six stone water jars...each could hold twenty or thirty gallons. We don't know how many guests there were at the wedding or how many units of alcohol each of them had, but one thing is certain; there was plenty of wine—don't tell the Chief Medical Officer! And it wasn't any kind of plonk—it was Grand Cru, Château Mouton Rothschild sort of wine--'People generally serve the best wine first, and keep the cheaper sort till the guests have had plenty to drink; but you have kept the best wine till now.'

The situation in the Holy Land looks hopeless. But God can make a way out of no way. The Berlin Wall came down, the wall of apartheid in South Africa came down. Pope John Paul II famously said that the Holy Land needs bridges and not walls.

Application: There is a richness of life on offer that we can only imagine. It is sheer gift and requires only our co-operation—'you have kept the best wine till now.' If we listen to Mary's message - to do whatever Jesus tells us—then we will find the strength to proclaim his wonders. Faced with the injustices and violence in the land where Jesus lived we can continue to show solidarity by our pilgrimage and by supporting the charitable works of the Latin Patriarchate. We can raise our voices in prayer for peace and justice. We can pray that, empowered by God's Holy Spirit, his children: Christians, Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians can begin to change the sadness and injustice in The Holy Land, so that all its peoples can truly celebrate and cry out with joy, 'you have kept the best wine till now.'

CONGRATULATIONS

to Johnny Bassous from Bethlehem who completed his MA in Pastoral Theology at Bethlehem Bible College. Johnny works at Bethlehem University and the MA course involved evening classes after work. Johnny's wife and priest also completed the same course. Michael Prior Memorial Fund funded all fees. Johnny said on more than one occasion that this was his "chance in a lifetime" for which he was indebted to Living Stones

MUHANAD AL QAISY



Muhanad Al Qaisy is a Palestinian refugee from a village called Beit Jebrin. His grandfather was forced to leave the family's original village in 1948.

Muhanad currently lives with his family in Deheishah Refugee Camp in the city of Bethlehem. He was born 28 years ago in the camp and has grown up there.

He is a graduate of Bethlehem University and has a bachelor degree in Social Work and Psychology. During his studies, he volunteered in several local and international organisations.

Along with some American friends, he was centrally involved in establishing a project helping children from the refugee camps to improve their skills in the English language, arts, and sports. He also volunteered as a social worker in the Psychological Support Unit in the YMCA, providing assistance to children who live near the security zones.

Currently, Muhanad works for the Joint Advocacy Initiative as a project officer. The project he leads is called the Olive Tree Campaign, established to raise awareness internationally about the current situation in occupied Palestine.

The Campaign also helps local Palestinian farmers to maintain their lands from Israeli confiscation by planting their land with 11.000 olive trees every year as a form of nonviolent resistance. This work also allows him to travel to different countries around the world giving lectures about the current situation of refugees and Palestinians living under the occupation.

He acts as a guide for political delegations in tours of occupied Palestine, showing them the reality of life under occupation. The purpose of this is to raise awareness of the rights of Palestinians, to show the current denial of many human rights and to work with them to change this.

Muhanad is coming to this country at the invitation of Embrace the Middle East, and is speaking at venues right across the country, starting in Scotland on 13th November. Go to their website for details of when he might be within reach of you.....

www.embrace.org



Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust

Official Notification

AGM and Open Day

10.30am to 4pm on Saturday 24th November, 2018

Our Lady of Victories, 235a Kensington High Street, LONDON, W8 6SA

Proposed Programme

- **10.30** Arrivals and Registration: Refreshments and Sales/Book Table
- **11.00** Introduction & Welcome (Chair – Dr David Toorawa)
- **11.15** Annual General Meeting including reports on all sections of our work and most importantly voting on the 2 motions highlighted on the front page
- **12.30pm** approx. Lunch Break **
- **1.30** Keynote Speaker: Dr Ang Swee Chai, Living Stones Honorary Member
“My experience on the al-Awda medical aid boat”
- **3.00** Question and Answer Session
- **3.30** Evening Worship
- **4.00** Depart

** Please bring a packed lunch. Beverages will be provided.