

Salvaging Endangered Christianity in the Holy Land

The indigenous Christian presence in Palestine-Israel, the very land where Jesus lived and died for us, is diminishing at an alarming rate—not, as many believe, because of hostility from Muslims, but because of decades of Israeli oppression. When Israel was created in 1948, Christian Palestinian Arabs made up 10-15 percent of the Arab population. Because of ethnic cleansing and other Israeli injustices, however, large numbers of Christians have emigrated. Palestinian Christians now number only about two percent. They have begun to speak out urgently for support from the Church for their nonviolent struggle against Israeli injustice— injustice that prevents them from practicing their faith and that inexorably leads to an ever greater Christian exodus from the land of Christianity’s birth.

Palestinian Christians have been a presence in the land since Jesus’ time—part of an indigenous population, now largely Muslim, numbering in the millions in Palestine-Israel and in exile. This population is descended from the original followers of Jesus, as well as from all peoples who have populated Palestine over millennia: ancient Jews, Jews of Jesus’ era, successive conquerors such as Egyptians, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs. Christian and Muslim Palestinians speak the same Arabic language and, importantly, both use the same Arabic word for God, *Allah*.

In December 2009, when the Palestinians’ situation under Israeli rule had become desperate, Palestine’s multi-denominational Christian community came together to issue *Kairos Palestine*.¹ The document was a collective cry “from the heart of Palestinian [including Muslim] suffering” and a call to the world, *particularly to Christian churches*, to recognize that the Palestinians had “reached a dead end”: efforts to resolve the conflict had stalled, and the Palestinian-Israeli issue had moved from being only a political problem to one “in which human beings are destroyed.”

After a decade that saw no progress and *little response to the Palestinian cri de cœur to Christian churches*, Palestinian Christian leaders convened again, in November 2019, and issued a statement, *Kairos Palestine 10th Anniversary Conference Statement and Call to the Church*,² concluding that “life in Palestine has rapidly deteriorated.” No progress had been made toward achieving justice or peace, and Israeli oppression had become “more aggressive and brutal”— with US enablement. The leaders further lamented that “the global Church is failing us.” In a pointed reference to the growing political influence of pro-Zionist Christian evangelicals, especially at policymaking levels in the United States, the statement condemned the increasing use of the Bible “to justify the occupation and... unquestioningly support the State of Israel.”

¹ *Kairos Palestine* (December 2009) can be accessed at www.kairospalestine.ps/sites/default/files/English.pdf.

² The 10th anniversary statement (December 2019) can be accessed at www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/resources/statements/kairos-palestine-10th-anniversary-conference-statement-call-to-the-church