

A Picture of Life in the Middle East



BY ELIZABETH SANDERS

Miriam and Nora were inseparable—riding the school bus from Jenin together, walking arm-in-arm around the playground at recess and passing occasional notes in class. Finally, several months after first seeing the girls, I learned Miriam was Muslim and Nora was Christian. Even though I knew that half the school’s students were Muslim, the other half, Christian, I was still a bit surprised that the girls would be so close.

For the three years I taught at the Latin Patriarchate School in Zababdeh, in the northern West Bank—here I learned as much as I taught. Soon after my husband and I arrived in the West Bank, I realized that I carried a number of misconceptions of Palestinian society. I had assumed that Christians and Muslims were not supposed to associate with each other; that Christians lived in a precarious, fearful relationship to the Muslim majority; that Muslim girls and women were unlikely to get good educations and get good jobs; that Christian girls and women were obliged to follow Muslim dress codes and gender roles. However, our experience with students and the wider community painted a different picture—a picture of hope.

The Christian and Muslim students played, studied and competed freely with one another. My colleagues were Muslim and Christian men and women. Among our closest friends were Laila and Lara. They introduced us to their circle of friends, other young professional women, both Christian and Muslim. We went on picnics, visited their homes and discussed religion and politics. We attended weddings, funerals and religious celebrations, where people of different faiths celebrated or mourned



Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Sanders

Elizabeth Sanders and girls from the Latin Patriarchate School in Zebabdeh, in the West Bank, Palestine.

together. The lines of separation were not as immutable as I had thought.

While our experiences with Lara, Laila and many others gradually dissolved my preconceptions, they also taught me about the problems that do exist. Christians compose only 2 percent of the population, and face the challenges of being a minority—ignorance, prejudice, invisibility or being a scapegoat. Religious, ethnic or racial differences can escalate from a simple disagreement between a few people into a community-wide divisive conflict.

Regardless of their religious beliefs, many people in Zababdeh and the rest of Israel/Palestine find common ground of living in an environment that can feel dominated by despair. Nora and Miriam live in a city with frequent military incursions; bullets have passed through Miriam’s bedroom. Often they cannot get to school because of Israeli-enforced curfews or impassable checkpoints. Fatalities continue to rise. According to B’Tselem, the Israeli Center for Human Rights in the Occupied

Territories, more than 900 Israelis and 3,000 Palestinians have been killed over the last four years, the vast majority of them civilians, including more than 700 children.

In spite of these dire realities, there is still hope. Hope that persists through God’s immense grace and through our faithful witness to reconciliation and peace. As individuals and as a church we can all strengthen that hope in a number of ways.

- Pray for peace and justice for all God’s children. Encourage your PW group or whole congregation to join the nationwide ecumenical prayer vigil for peace in the Middle East organized by Peaceful Ends through Peaceful Means (www.pepm.org).
- Learn more about Israel and Palestine. A good place to start is by studying the *Church & Society* magazines focused on Palestine and Israel—September/October 2004 (item # 72-630-04-605) and September/October 2003 (item # 72-630-03-605). Call 800/524-2612 or visit www.pcusa.org/marketplace to order.
- Support the Interfaith Listening Project. See pages 10–13 for more details.

More ideas, resources, and information about interfaith relations can be found at www.pcusa.org/interfaith and about Israel and Palestine at www.pcusa.org/pcusa/wmd/ep/country/isrhome.htm.

From August 2000 to December 2003, Elizabeth Sanders and her husband Marthame were Presbyterian mission workers in Zababdeh, in the northern West Bank. Learn more about their ministry at www.saltfilms.net.