

From 1988 to 1997 I served as minister of St Andrew's, the Scots Church in Jerusalem, where Christ's Church had existed since Pentecost, and Christian mission began. Memories of the crusades and of Jewish persecution are very much alive and inform attitudes to Western Christian mission. The word mission itself is best avoided. Conflicting histories clash, and religion and politics are inextricably entwined.

While the Ottoman Empire lasted the Holy Land was seen as the preserve of Episcopalian and Lutheran Protestant mission, supported by the British and German governments. The British government claimed to be the protecting power of the Jews to match the Russian and French claims for Orthodox and Catholic Christians respectively. Nevertheless there was considerable Scottish interest in the Holy Land – with important medical and educational work, going along with an evangelistic purpose and an interest in biblical geography. Although in Scotland there was strong concern for Jewish mission and there were indeed some notable Jewish converts, most work was with the majority Arab population and most of the local people who adhered to the Scottish church were from the Eastern churches.

St Andrew's, Jerusalem, was built in the early 1930s as a memorial to the Scottish soldiers who died in the Palestinian campaigns of the First World War. It was never a mission church and did not look for converts, but as long as the British mandate continued it served expatriates. After 1948 The Church of Scotland was left with three institutions, all in Israel, St Andrew's Church and Hospice in West Jerusalem, Tabitha School in Jaffa, and the hospital in Tiberias (which later became a guest house, then a hotel). In 1948 St Andrew's was separated from practically all the other Churches in Jerusalem, situated as they were in the Old City in East Jerusalem. The work in Israel came under the aegis of the Jewish Mission Committee, which later changed its name and became part of the Overseas Board. The Church's object in Israel ceased to be one of conversion and became one of reaching new and better understanding of and relations with Judaism. This went along with support for the state of Israel. Holy Land tours were becoming very popular, and St Andrew's and Tiberias were well placed and able to cater to them.

When I was appointed in 1988 there were many in the Church and on the Board who were increasingly uncomfortable with our lack of relations with the Palestinian Christian community, critical of where Zionism was in practice leading the state of Israel, and more aware of and concerned about the effect of the continued occupation. Some approaches had already been made to the Middle East Council of Churches. Elsewhere in the world partnership and the transfer of ownership was the policy, and there was thinking about how this might be followed in the particular circumstances of Israel and Palestine.

When we came in 1988 the first Palestinian *intifada* was in full flow without guns or suicide bombing, but plenty of stones and civil disobedience. There were no check-points, but counter-measures were harsh, the Palestinian colours were banned and the word *Palestine* was anathema in Israel. The Christian community was prominent in acts of civil disobedience and Christian Beit Sahour endured a prolonged siege for non-payment of taxes. Both sides saw everyone as either for or against, and the Israeli government worked to divide Christians from Muslims. Pilgrimages dried up, but many fact-finding tours came out. The Board invited a number of prominent Palestinians to Scotland and their visit strengthened the view that more support of the Christian community was needed. Because of the links we were making, not least the marketing of Palestinian crafts from women's groups and the like by Carol, we were pressed by the Israeli authorities not to depart from traditional strong support of the State of Israel. On the other hand we gained credibility with the Palestinian Christian community. After a strongly contested debate the Church's General Assembly approved a partnership with the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem. St Andrew's became a place where Palestinians and Israelis, Christians, Muslims and Jews could meet, and much was done to encourage pilgrims and tourists not only to visit the dead stones, but also to meet the living stones of the land.

There followed the first Gulf War, the Madrid conference and the Oslo agreement. The high hopes of the great majority of Israelis and Palestinians that this would lead to their being able to lead normal and peaceful lives have come to nothing. There have been egregious failures on many sides, and there is no peace, but occupied territories beset by walls and innumerable check-points, and an Israel increasingly living in a bubble. It is impossible for most Palestinians to meet an Israeli Jew not carrying a gun. In the conflict which is exacerbated by religious extremism, the Church of Scotland had been among those who have steadily argued for achieving the vital conditions of a just and lasting peace with Jerusalem changed to being a sign of hope for the world.

There is still massive Christian emigration from Israel and Palestine and the whole Middle East. These Christian communities are largely ignored, almost written off by the West in its often ill-judged involvement in the region, and this neglect is true even of British churches. If Christians disappear from the Middle East it would be an immeasurable loss for the whole Church of Christ and a severe blow to the hopes of peace in the region and in the world. I was vastly privileged to serve those years in Jerusalem; our hearts are with the people there; I enjoyed the debates in the Board and in the Church at home and the dedication of many people, their wrestling with complex theological and practical issues. There were disagreements and some were hurt. I hope and have good grounds to believe that the Scottish church and people will maintain a living presence in the area, stronger links with the local church, and will grow in understanding and concern.