The Christian Exodus: Why are Christians leaving their homeland?

A visiting Palestinian Episcopal clergyman recently made the prophetic statement that he believed that soon the only evidence of a Christian presence in Israel and Palestine would be found in museums or on gravestones. Christians have lived in historic Palestine since the 1st century, but the Arab Christian population is now estimated to be 220,000 or below two percent, falling rapidly from about 20 percent when Israel became a state in 1948.

The Episcopal Church is one of ten denominations in Israel and Palestine. (These include Greek, Armenian and other Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and other protestant denominations.) in 2000, the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Olympia established the Bishop’s Committee for Justice and Peace in the Holy Land to support the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and its 24 parishes and 30 schools, hospitals, clinics and rehab facilities hospitals in Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon and to advocate for religious freedom and human rights for all peoples of the land. All 14 members have visited or volunteered in schools or medical facilities of the Diocese of Jerusalem, where services are available to all regardless of faith. We are compelled to speak up on their behalf.

Palestinian Christians cannot be regarded as a people apart from other non-Jewish people of the region. Today, the future for all Palestinians, be they Christian or Muslim, looks bleak. Israel is well on the way to becoming a state for Jews only. The new “nation-state” law (July, 2019) declares that Israel is the historic homeland of the Jews and that the “right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people.” This law implicitly excludes the 20% of the citizens of Israel who are Palestinian Arabs and invites discrimination against religious minorities. The estimated 660,000 Jewish residents of the settlements occupying nearly half of the West Bank and East Jerusalem are legal Israeli citizens with full rights and privileges. For Palestinians, at least 65 Israeli laws restrict freedom of movement, land ownership or residence, educational and economic opportunity, attendance at religious services, even the right for married couples to live together if one is an Israeli citizen and the other a Palestinian non-citizen.

On January 28, 2020, the White House rolled out a “peace plan” that heralds an inglorious end to Palestinian hopes for a viable state with contiguous areas and a fair share of natural resources, including water. Instead, Palestinians have been offered a patchwork of islands where Israel will control all borders, aquifers and territorial waters, airspace, and international access and trade. Parcels of desert will be substituted for rich agricultural land of the Jordan valley. Israeli citizens of Palestinian ethnicity may lose their citizenship and be transferred to places under Palestinian control. (The Seattle Times, Feb. 9, 2020)

Attempts to speak out and hold Israel accountable for violations of international law or abuse of human rights are often dismissed as “anti-Semitic” or even “unchristian.” In mid-December the Trump administration issued the “Executive Order on Anti-Semitism” threatening to withhold federal funding in response to Palestinian solidarity activities on college campuses. Twenty-six states have passed laws that withhold state contracts from organizations advocating for Palestinian justice and human rights by means of boycott, thereby restricting freedom of speech. Some so-called Christian “evangelicals”, many of them public officials in a position to
influence US policy, believe that God promised the land of Israel to the Jewish people and that support of Palestinians, even Christian Palestinians, is a betrayal of the Biblical faith. This viewpoint appears to be gaining traction in the Trump administration and tends to silence criticism of human rights violations by the government of Israel. Said noted American journalist Grace Helsell, “The danger...for U.S. Christians is that having made an icon of Israel, we fall into a trap of condoning whatever Israel does...as orchestrated by God.”

The members of the Bishop’s Committee are united in concern about the exodus of Christians from the Holy Land. We believe it is high time to stand up for dignity and human rights for all who live in Israel and Palestine.

Randolph Urmston, Chair
Mary Pneuman, member
Bishop’s Committee for Justice and Peace in the Holy Land
Diocese of Olympia, Western Washington