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## WITNESSES FOR PEACE IN PALESTINE & ISRAEL

Ecumenical Accompanier (E.A.) is the un-catchy title for a volunteer who lives alongside ordinary Palestinians and Israelis to observe their difficulties, promote peaceful solutions and provide a calming presence. The mission of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) is to accompany Palestinians and Israelis in their nonviolent actions and concerted advocacy efforts to end the occupation [of Palestinian territory by Israel]. E.A.s travel under the auspices of The World Council of Churches in response to pleas by Church leaders in Jerusalem.

An E.A. who had been in parts of Palestine and Israel for three months this summer spoke at a meeting organised by WPJF and Wrexham Quakers at the Community Centre, Holt Road on 22nd October. Matt Robson, himself a Quaker, used to be a television cameraman and realised that we viewers saw only what the cameras were pointed at and what editing left for us. As an E.A. he could observe and report everyday reality as well as dramatic incidents.



Matt began by briefly describing the political history of the area since partition in 1947 and showing a map of current borders, both those 'recognised' and variations on them imposed by the large barrier now being constructed by the Israeli Government in attempts to keep terrorists out of Israel.

He went on to show photos of check points in the barrier at which local Palestinians could expect to wait for periods from an hour to half a day or several days until the gate was opened. Soldiers check identities and then decide whether to allow a person through or detain them for questioning. University students are in a suspect age group and are often delayed. Searches can be demeaning and Matt had heard of instances when goods were spilt and damaged.

The barrier, or wall as it literally is in places, sometimes cuts farmers off from their fields and many others from their places of work or study.

When farmers cannot get to harvest ripe tomatoes and cucumbers in time their crops become unsaleable. Soldiers sometimes inspected the fingernails of returning farmers, accusing them of being imposters if their nails were clean (but of course the farmers had simply washed after work). After the recent Haifa suicide bombing, check points were closed for over a week in an atmosphere of fear, tear gas and arrests. Much ripe produce could not be harvested before it spoilt.

Matt thought the presence of observers helped to calm behaviour at check points. He had seen for himself the tension in the area. Israeli soldiers would drive through Palestinian villages shooting into the air to intimidate the local people, but would then emerge from their armoured vehicles with hands shaking from anxiety. It was clear that the situation was stressful for all.

Matt saw some signs of hope: firstly, the persistence of Palestinian farmers determined to work their land, and secondly the Israeli peace activists who, though a marginalised group, demonstrated regularly against aggressive controls on Palestinians including house demolition.

He highlighted some of the things we can do:

- i. Become better informed, (he particularly recommended a Christian Aid publication called 'Losing Ground').
- ii. Write to your A.M., M.P., M.E.P.
- iii. Talk, and share information.
- iv. If possible visit Israel and Palestine.
- v. Become an Ecumenical Accompanier.
- vi. Pray.
- vii. Give money to help the E.A. programme.

After the talk, there was a lively question and answer session which touched on the following issues:

- the dire effects the conflict has on the economies of both nations with Israel spending a very high proportion of its income on defence and Palestinians struggling in a disrupted economy with high unemployment; some well-qualified people are forced to take jobs which require little skill.
- those Israelis who refuse part or all of their military service on grounds of conscience ('refuseniks').