

## Sumud as survival

### Arab Christian civil organizations in Israel and the Palestinian Territories

Paul Rowe<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract

The flight of Christians from Middle Eastern states has been a concern to regional and international audiences throughout the past two decades. However, in spite of the significant challenges to the Christian population, their organizational responses to societal problems have grown in strength. This paper explores the ways in which Christian civil organizations help to preserve Christian communities among the Palestinians in Israel and the West Bank. They provide economic and spiritual supports, opportunities to network and build relationships across denominational divides, and a sense of purpose that helps the community survive and have an impact on their own societies.

**Keywords** Civil Society, Palestinian Christians, Christianity in the Middle East, Israel, Palestine.

At an international conference convened in November 2006, Palestinian Anglican theologian Naim Ateek reflected on “The Future of Palestinian Christianity.” In his lecture he addressed what is for most Palestinian Christians the defining issue of the early twenty-first century: the declining relative numbers of Christians in Israel and the Palestinian territories. In 2006, there were approximately 160 000 Palestinian Christians left in the Holy Land. Of these, about 50 000 lived in the West Bank and Gaza, the rest scattered among the Arab cities of Israel, most notably in the city of Nazareth. What is more, these numbers were dwindling fast. Ateek went on to assert that Christians needed to address their demographic decline as a matter of top priority: “The challenges facing our community are so great they demand earnest

<sup>1</sup> Paul S. Rowe (\*1972) is Associate Professor, Political and International Studies, Trinity Western University, Langley BC Canada. He is the author of *Religion and global politics* (Oxford University Press, 2012) and co-editor of *Christians and the Middle East conflict* (Routledge, 2014) and *Politics and the religious imagination* (Routledge, 2010). He has written extensively on the politics of Christian minority populations in the Middle East and pursues an active research program in religion and global politics. Research for this article was supported financially by a SSHRC institutional grant funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. An early version of this article was presented to the British Society for Middle East Studies in June 2014. Contact: Trinity Western University, 7600 Glover Road, Langley BC V2Y 1Y1, Canada, e-mail: paul.rowe@twu.ca.

and dedicated action,” he stated. “Unless we are self-critical, no change can take place” (Ateek, Duaybis & Tobin 2007: 137).

Ateek went on to lay out the various threats that he saw to the Palestinian community: these included internal threats, such as demoralization, division, and the erosion of Christian institutions, as well as external threats, such as the alienation of the community from Christians abroad, the ongoing Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, and the need to speak for democratic reform within the Palestinian authority and the state of Israel (140-148). Crediting the longstanding work of Christian organizations in the land, he also observed:

It is of utmost importance to raise the standard of all our institutions. We need to offer the finest services, the best quality education, and the highest standard of excellence. . . . The witness of our institutions not only benefits our Christian people but can also be our window for other faith communities in the land. Through our institutions, they can really know who we are and what we stand for and this can contribute to the creation of greater openness, tolerance, and goodwill (146).

If such institutions help to explain how Palestinian Christians have had an impact on their society for centuries, it stands to reason that they would continue to have a key role in preserving the community into the future. At the same conference, Lutheran clergyman Munib Younan emphasized specific aspects of Christian civil initiatives that the churches of the Holy Land had stressed as means of helping Christians stay in the Holy Land. These included support for community-based education, job creation, provision of low-cost housing, and the strengthening of Christian social institutions that ministered to the needs of all in Palestinian society (Ateek, Duaybis & Tobin 2007: 127). Put simply, while Christian emigration has become a flood, the only thing keeping Christians present and involved in their home societies is their participation in civil society initiatives that give them efficacy and relevance.

The gradual – and in some cases dramatic – disappearance of Christian populations in Middle Eastern states has been a topic of some interest throughout the past two decades. Popular media and books have drawn a dark picture of the status of Christians in Middle Eastern society, where low natural increase, high emigration flows, and intolerance have all had an impact (Dalrymple 1998; Belt 2009). Christians are disproportionately represented among these immigrant and refugee populations from the Iraqi and Syrian civil conflicts of the last 15 years. Perhaps the most dramatic decline is that of Palestinian Christians, whose numbers have dwindled to such an extent that they constitute a tiny minority in both Israel and the Palestinian territories. In his 2006 survey, Bernard Sabella found that Christians remain

in small enclaves in the Holy Land, including significant populations in Nazareth, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem, as well as a smattering of smaller concentrations in the West Bank and various parts of Israel (Sabeel 2006).

However, in spite of the serious challenges to the Christian population, over the past three decades there has been a paradoxical strengthening of organized Christian responses to the societal problems that beset Arab citizens. Throughout the region, Christian civil organizations have enjoyed something of a renaissance. In Egypt, such civil organizations have buttressed the community and afforded Christians a high level of civic participation even though they suffer from systematized discrimination and marginalization (Rowe 2009). Christian minority populations pose little threat to non-democratic and majoritarian regimes. They are united by institutionalized churches that have survived for centuries. They enjoy good relationships with coreligionists abroad who support their efforts. And they are usually better educated and better resourced than many of their compatriots.

Civil society initiatives among minority communities are therefore effective ways to survive in authoritarian and majoritarian environments. Writing in the *International Journal for Religious Freedom*, Silvio Ferrari observes that civil society contributes to a strong state by providing subsidiary services to the greater public. He goes on to note that civil society organizations also provide an opportunity for Christians to engage in the exercise of their religious freedom (Ferrari 2011: 33). To these points I would add that civil initiatives provide a neutral if not positive means by which minority religious groups may seek to survive in otherwise hostile environments. In spite of the challenges that Christians face, growing civil society activities provide ways for Palestinian Christians to contribute to their own societies, improve their own status, and find survival mechanisms for their own community. They become essential to the persistence of religious pluralism and provide a template for other communities where religious cleavages are a focus of political division.

## **1. Research methodology**

In an effort to investigate the ways in which Christian civil organizations contribute to the continued preservation and survival of Christian communities among the Palestinian population in Israel and the West Bank, the author and a team of two research assistants conducted qualitative, unstructured interviews with several organizations led by Palestinian Christians in Israel and the West Bank in the summer of 2013. The research team interviewed 18 participants and leaders of organizations based primarily in Nazareth, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem gathered through a snowball sample. Of these interviewees seven were female and eleven were male.

Given the locations involved, the respondents represented a mixture of Arab citizens of Israel, Palestinians with Jerusalem residency (permanent residents of

the city of Jerusalem who have not taken out Israeli citizenship) and Palestinians living in the West Bank. Interviewees were selected to represent multiple levels of the organizations concerned, from employees and volunteers delivering services or ministry to the local population to directors and leaders of the organization. Interviews were conducted in English. While this did impose limits on the ability of the respondents to communicate, there were no cases in which the research team was unable to conduct an interview due to inadequate language comprehension. The research team also conducted ethnographic research within the organizations, experiencing the work of the groups and witnessing daily life among Palestinian Christians and non-Christians. The interviews conducted in 2013 were combined with prior interview research conducted by the author in the region in 2008 and one interview conducted with an organizational leader in the autumn of 2013.

## **2. Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land**

Christianity began as a Jewish sect and spread from Roman Judea to the rest of the world beginning in the first century of the Common Era. Since that time, there has always been a Christian presence in the Holy Land. Following the Muslim conquest of the region in the seventh century, the Christian population went into long-term relative decline. But at the beginning of the twentieth century, Christians remained about 10% of the native Arab population of what is now Israel-Palestine (Baumgarten 2004: 82). During the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the community was geographically divided. Many Christians remained within the borders of the state of Israel and later became Arab citizens of the state. Of these, a large number were compelled to leave their homes and settled in internal exile in selected urban areas, most importantly the city of Nazareth. As a result, Nazareth has become an important centre of the Palestinian Christian community today.

Other Palestinian Christians joined the thousands of refugees who fled the country to other countries in the Middle East and abroad. Those who remained in areas administered by Jordan and Egypt were clustered in the cities and towns of Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour, East Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Gaza. These communities came under occupation after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, in which Israeli forces overran and took control of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights.

In the years since the 1967 war the relative numbers of Christians have declined dramatically. Even so, Christians remained important in Palestinian social and political life. They were instrumental in the non-violent resistance that arose during the first intifada from 1987-1990. However, the challenges of the post-Oslo period from 1993 proved increasingly difficult for Christians. In his survey conducted for the *Sabeel* Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center at the time of the 2006 conference, Bernard Sabella observed that the decline in Christian numbers from the West

Bank had accelerated most notably during the time of the second intifada beginning in 2000 (Sabeel 2006: 50-51). The reasons for the acceleration of Christian emigration are numerous and vigorously debated (Reidy 2010, 2011).<sup>2</sup> However, they certainly include economic struggles, the difficulty of living in a country where Christians form a minority within a minority, the desire to flee conflict and occupation, and the precarious position of Christians within a community increasingly mobilized under the banner of political Islam (O'Mahony 2005: 95). Today Palestinian Christians are a marginal community, accounting for about 2% of the Palestinian population in Israel and in the Palestinian territories.

The small number of Christians among the Palestinian population limits their direct political influence. There have been many influential Christians within the Palestinian national movement, and Christians are on average wealthier than their Muslim compatriots. However, they are such a small group that they possess little power in electoral or mass politics. Their status as a minority community in the midst of a zone of persistent social and political conflict between the Jewish and Arab communities enhances their feeling of alienation. One interviewee for this study put it this way: "In a lot of the Arab world, they see you as Christians, [but] the Jewish [people] see you as an Arab. So however you look at it, you are second class" (Boutros [pseudonym] 2013, interview 27 May). The state of Israel is a majoritarian Jewish democracy where Palestinian citizens are typically denied participation in governing coalitions. The increasing insistence of Jewish state leaders that Arabs accept the Jewish character of the state has enhanced the sense of alienation felt by most non-Jewish citizens (Peleg and Waxman 2011: 173). What is more, Israeli policy divides Arab citizens by religious sect (23) – a practice that has recently been deepened by official Israeli efforts to recruit Arab Christians to serve in the Israeli Defence Forces. This, along with the natural divisions among Palestinian Christians, who are divided among 15 different Christian church denominations (Baumgarten 2004: 83) militates against the efficacy of Christian organized interests in Israel. In Nazareth, home to approximately one fifth of the Christian population of Israel, authorities have sought to limit the growth of the Arab city's population while supporting the establishment of the Jewish community of Upper Nazareth (Nazrat Illit) above the Arab city (Cook 2013).

Christian influence on the politics of the Palestinian Authority is also highly limited. Article 4 of the Palestinian constitution of 2003 declares Islam to be the of-

---

<sup>2</sup> The argument about Palestinian Christian flight from the Holy Land usually hinges on whether it is a product of the Israeli occupation and economic stagnation in Palestinian communities or threats stemming from the growth of the Islamist movement, particularly in the occupied territories. In the view of this author, both explanations help to explain the "pushes" that motivate Palestinian Christian emigration.

ficial religion of Palestine, though “respect and sanctity of other religions shall be maintained.” The constitution opens the door to the establishment of political Islam in Palestinian politics. Indeed, Islamism has been a concern of Christians on both sides of the Green Line. The rise of *Hamas* and other Islamist movements in the Palestinian territories poses a direct threat to basic religious freedoms, given that most of these movements seek to implement some level of public acknowledgement of Islamic strictures. The Islamist movement is not limited to the occupied territories: for several years, Islamist activism surrounding the construction of a mosque in an area adjacent to the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth polarized the Arab community and created new rifts between the religious communities (Israeli 2002). Even so, it is important not to overdraw the distinctions between Christians and Muslims among the Palestinians: tensions between Christian and Muslim inhabitants of Bethlehem in particular are sometimes “derived from the fact that the Christians are the long-term residents, while the Muslims are not only newcomers but also predominantly refugees” – a fact that puts class and other distinctions into the mix (Bishara 2013). Though it is common for western media sources to emphasize the polarization of Israeli and Palestinian societies by religion, many other factors come into play.

### **3. Palestinian Christians and civil society activism**

#### **3.1** The tradition of Christian civil activism

In spite of the dramatic decline in the Christian population and the manifold challenges to their political influence and participation, there has been a notable renaissance of Christian civil society activity since the late 1980s. Palestinian Christian educational and social service institutions have long been a pillar of the larger Palestinian civil society. For example, in Nazareth, most of the educational institutions are Christian, though they serve both Christian and Muslim communities (Emmett 1995: 239-241). The prestigious Bethlehem University is a Roman Catholic institution. All three of the hospitals in Nazareth are run by Christians. Each of the major churches runs social services for all the communities as well.

Christian involvement in such civil initiatives matches their high level of educational attainment and urbanization. However, it is equally notable that their participation in social and political activism has developed markedly in the era since the first intifada and the ensuing peace process of the 1990s. The Oslo peace process created a nascent state in the form of the Palestinian Authority and ushered in a period in which Palestinian nationalist groups found new tolerance. The proto-state welcomed the expansion of new civil movements that did not serve as challengers to the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) government of the Palestinian territories. Civil movements led by Christians benefited on both scores. Dur-

ing the first intifada, Christian leaders had been instrumental in tax boycotts and non-violent resistance to the occupation. During the period starting with the first intifada, most of the Palestinian churches welcomed indigenous leaders into their highest ranks, and new lay leaders came to the fore as advocates of the Palestinian national cause. Individuals such as Greek Catholic Archbishop Elias Chacour, Anglican Canon Naim Ateek, and Protestant peace activist Mubarak Awad, among others, rose to champion new movements within Palestinian society. The Vatican's appointment of Nazareth native Michel Sabbah to the post of Latin Patriarch in 1987 demonstrated how the Roman Catholic Church sought to reflect this trend. From the late 1980s, lay leaders led efforts to contextualize Palestinian Christian responses to public issues through advocacy and peace activism. A large number of peace movements in Israel and the occupied territories arose during this time. Though led by Palestinian Christian activists, most of these organizations are "avidly secular, even antireligious", though they also tend to emphasize "creating space for pluralism and engaging constructively with divergent viewpoints" (Hallward 2011: 181).

### 3.2 The diversity of Christian civil activism

Numerous such advocacy initiatives have sprouted up in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. In some cases, they are attached to the established churches: for example, the Lutheran Diyar Center in Bethlehem offers international programs, cultural programs, and educational opportunities with a view to serving the Palestinian community and engaging in outreach to others. Ateek's *Sabeel* Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center began as an effort by the Anglican clergyman to provide a contextual Christian theological movement for Palestinians as a result of an international conference in 1989. It stakes out a more ardently political tone than most Christian civil initiatives, regularly challenging the justice of the occupation and Christian supporters of the status quo. Other organizations have arisen out of the desire to give the Palestinian Christian community a voice in the national movement. Holy Land Trust was spearheaded by Sami Awad, the nephew of Mubarak Awad, the pioneer of Palestinian non-violent resistance, as a means to renew the idea of non-violence for the next generation. The Tent of Nations farm, a working organic farm established by the Nassar family who has been fighting for years for the right to keep its property just outside Bethlehem, provided an opportunity for Palestinians to communicate the common problem of property confiscation until Israeli forces destroyed the orchard in May 2014.

Still other organizations have developed a sociological and theological approach to bridging the sides in the Arab-Israeli Conflict. One of the most important seats of higher learning in Bethlehem is Bethlehem University, founded by Roman Catholics in 1973. A few blocks away, one may find Bethlehem Bible College, a non-

denominational evangelical institution established a few years later with a view to training Palestinian Christians in ministry. Since that time, it has also included vocational training and other educational initiatives in its curriculum. Since 2010, it has hosted a biennial conference that features Christian speakers from around the world to reflect upon the theme of “Christ at the Checkpoint.” The Musalaha Ministry of Reconciliation founded by Salim Munayer, one of the faculty members at the Bible College, leads Christians from both Arab and Jewish backgrounds in creating relational bridges in addition to building educational partnerships with Christians from around the world. These are just a sampling of the initiatives that have arisen during the period after the first intifada.

The vibrancy of Christian civil initiatives stands out in particular given that the larger community of Christians has been in decline. As noted, most of these initiatives, and a plethora of others, have their origins in the period between the first and second intifadas. They have survived despite the drastic acceleration of Christian emigration in the period since the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000. The second intifada proved particularly difficult for Christians in the city of Bethlehem and its neighbouring towns, as the Church of the Nativity in the centre of town became a focal point of the standoff between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants during “Operation Defensive Shield” in April 2003 (Hammer 2003). The following years were a period in which “the geopolitical context for nonviolent activism toward a ‘just and lasting peace’ between Israelis and Palestinians [was] increasingly restrictive,” according to Maia Carter Hallward (Hallward 2011:158). Nevertheless, Christian organizations persisted and helped to rebuild a fractured Palestinian civil society in the wake of the intifada. Ironically, the expansion of secular and Muslim Palestinian civil society during the post-Oslo period had in some ways eclipsed Christian initiatives. The decline of civilian life in the Palestinian Authority during the second intifada created a vacuum in which Christian organizations were able to reassert themselves.

## **4. Motivations and actions: What keeps me here?**

### **4.1 Economic motivations**

Almost two dozen participants in social service, advocacy, and religious organizations were consulted for interviews in preparation for this research. Many were involved in civil society work primarily as a means of finding employment. Others sensed a specific need to be a part of an organization that related to their own faith or political ideology. While almost none believed that the primary goal of their organization was to preserve the Christian presence in the area, most of them were concerned by the decline of the Christian population and saddened by it. Upon reflection, they agreed that civil society work helped to provide support of one sort or another to the preservation of the Christian community.



One of the primary goals of Palestinian Christian civil society initiatives is to combat rampant unemployment and the economic challenges faced by those in the community. Though the problem is more acute for those living in the occupied territories, the economic challenge is still significant for Palestinian Christians living in Nazareth. Many argue that the lack of secure and suitable jobs is the primary impetus for the emigration of the Christian community. In Israel, all Palestinians suffer from a lack of connections provided to the Jewish majority, who participate in the military and enjoy access to the dominant community. In the West Bank, Palestinians in general, including Christians, suffer from extremely high levels of unemployment. In other cases, regulatory limitations on construction and housing for non-Jewish communities have made it difficult to find suitable homes, so churches and civil organizations provide for them. One longtime resident of Jerusalem pointed out that “Christians in Jerusalem... are... dependent on the churches because the churches... wanted to preserve these communities, so they build houses for them... otherwise they might as well leave the country. So this is one of the things the churches are doing to get people to stay” (Jack 2013, interview, 3 October).

The director of *Serve Nazareth*, an organization aimed at strengthening Christian initiatives through partnerships, observes that such partnerships contribute to the economy and thus ease the burden for many Arab citizens of Israel, including Christians: “If people can financially make it, they don’t generally leave, so if we’re providing ways that you can have a good job and a decent salary and survive, then I guess in that way... we are indirectly encouraging people to stay” (Christine 2013, interview 16 May). One specific initiative that the organization has undertaken is a tourist attraction based around a depiction of life at the time of Jesus Christ. Holy Land Trust has also begun an annual initiative to hold a music festival in Bethlehem. Entitled “Beit Lahem Live”, it aims to restore business to 80 shops that closed in the wake of closures imposed during the second intifada (Elias 2013, interview 31 May). In each case, the intent is to bring a larger number of foreign tourists to the city to contribute to the local economy. Other similar initiatives have been spearheaded by Holy Land Trust in Bethlehem. Indeed, many of the individuals interviewed for this study spoke about the way that Christian civil initiatives helped to provide for the basic needs of their families.

#### 4.2 Spiritual and lifestyle supports

The economic service provided by civil initiatives is only one factor in a complicated decision-making process for those Christians who choose to stay. Simple challenges often present themselves for a minority community like Christians. For example, the weekend in most Middle Eastern societies spans Friday and Saturday. One respondent who works at a Christian hospital mentioned that working for a Christian

institution helps her to take Sundays off and go to church on the traditional Christian day of worship. Such civil initiatives also provide spiritual support beyond the regular services offered by the local church. She added that “I think [the hospital helps to keep us here] because if we don’t have a supportive institution... I don’t know what I would have done. I probably would have lived my life if I didn’t come to the hospital, but it wouldn’t be near Jesus, I am sure” (Najla 2013, interview 25 May). To understand the significance of civil society initiatives outside the traditional boundaries of the church is to understand the growing trend of spirituality in its non-traditional and non-institutionalized forms. Whereas respondents were able to identify a particular church to which they belonged, the parachurch organization in which they volunteered or worked in many cases proved more important to their sense of spiritual growth.

#### **4.3 Networking opportunities, local and regional**

Civil society initiatives provide an opportunity for the Palestinian Christian community to connect with other communities, both domestic and foreign. Religious communities in the Holy Land informally segregate and have relatively little to do with one another outside simple day-to-day interactions. One respondent mentioned that working in the context of a social service agency gives Christians an opportunity to interact with adherents of other religions: “A lot of the towns and cities are only for Muslims or Christians... At this hospital, we have the opportunity that people from several groups [come] to meet, to work with each other, to contact each other. When you know the other, you can have a relationship with him” (Naseem 2013, interview 27 May). The construction of such relationships – especially across the gap that exists between Palestinian Christians and the growing community of Messianic Jews – is an aspiration for many Christians. Musalaha, an organization that is styled as a ministry of reconciliation for the church in Israel-Palestine, deliberately seeks to embolden Christians and Messianic Jews to find common cause in building relationships across the ethno-religious divide. Its director credits the work of his organization for building bridges across communal boundaries among the Palestinians: “Our success with the Muslim and Christian leaders of Bethlehem is that they keep [up] the relationship and they are working together and resolving problems. There are so many problems where leaders from both sides... want to participate” (Salim 2008, interview 18 June). The participation of several lay and church leaders in the Messianic community in the work of the organization also speaks to its ability to bridge the larger social divide between Palestinians and Jews. The process by which these organizations help to network people: Palestinians with Palestinians, Palestinians with Jews, and both communities with those from abroad, is viewed by many as a morale booster as well. One of the staff of Musalaha put it

this way: “I think it helps to have a forum where you can have relationships with people from [the] other side [who] agree with you and [who] listen to you, and [who] try to empower you just by having relationships, expressing frustrations. I think it helps you cope with the situation” (Shadia 2013, interview 10 June). Another referred to a recent conversation she had had with a fellow Palestinian, in which they reaffirmed their common commitment to remain in the land. “When people talk to each other about these things I think they should encourage each other to stay and there are reasons that we can stay,” she noted (Nanor 2013, interview 7 June).

Divisions between the religious communities in the land of Israel are replicated throughout the region. For many decades, Palestinian Christians have been separated from coreligionists in other parts of the Arab Middle East as a result of political barriers and the slow pace of normalization, even in those states that have relations with the state of Israel. Add to this the fact that the face of Christianity differs from one country to another: for example, the most popular church among Palestinians is the Eastern Orthodox Church, whereas most Egyptian Christians are non-Chalcedonian Coptic Orthodox and the dominant church among the Lebanese is the Maronite Church. As a result, many Christians in the larger region remain isolated in their own communities. Christian civil initiatives have begun to break down barriers between these communities. Regional satellite initiatives such as Sat-7 bring messages from Christian leaders in other nations into the living room of many Palestinian Christians. Mass media and the improvement of transit links between states have also increased the likelihood of Arab citizens to interact across state boundaries. One respondent described the way in which attending a regional conference of Arab Christians put on by a parachurch organization gave her a greater sense of hope for the future: “. . . there were people from eight countries in the Middle East. . . Christians who participate[d] in this conference [said] that even with [the] hardships they are encouraged because they see how the churches are coming together there and they feel stronger. It does not mean that everything is bright, pink and beautiful. We still have our hard times. . . but they are encouraged” (Najla 2013, interview 25 May).

#### 4.4 Ecumenical and non-denominational initiatives

Civil initiatives have been instrumental in the growing acceptance of ecumenism among Palestinian Christians, further eroding the barriers presented by diverse national churches. In December 2009, an ongoing consultation among the heads of the established churches, produced the *Kairos Palestine* document, a unified statement against the Israeli occupation attributed to “a *group* of Christian Palestinians” (*Kairos Palestine* 2009). As the first such ecumenical document that included

all of the historic churches along with a number of Protestants, it was evidence of the growing strength of community solidarity among both laity and clergy in the churches. The ecumenical movement and the creation of non-denominational spheres of interaction provide new opportunities for many Christian leaders in this context. Jack Sara, a Christian from Jerusalem, was recently appointed the second president of Bethlehem Bible College. Sara mentioned that the move to parachurch work widened his “circle of influence.” Now, he notes, “I think we can impact the nation . . . We communicate with the government, communicate with local authorities, we speak to all the churches instead of being contained to one single church, to that denomination . . . Engagement with them I think could be at different levels, it could be as simple as partnership in social work among our people or it could be dialogue over building bridges between the two communities” (Jack 2013, interview 3 October).

#### 4.5 Hope and purpose

Finally, civil initiatives provide a sense of hope and purpose to the community that might not arise in their absence. Explaining what helps to keep her working in civil society work despite the difficulties of life in a conflict-prone environment, one respondent noted that it was

Hope, I guess. Although all the challenges and difficulties I personally go through . . . I still find hope because when I go to the events or help plan events, I always see that there is something changing . . . maybe I don't see it every day, but in the long run you would see change[s] which are really positive, so it gives me hope and me myself, I am changing in seeing other people around me change (Nanor 2013, interview 7 June).

Other individuals mention the way in which their work responds to a sense of calling. Reflecting on what keeps him and his family in the land, Jack Sara stated that “I just have stayed because I have a deep sense of calling for my country, for my people – I want to stay” (Jack 2013, interview 3 October).

### 5. Conclusions

The plight of Middle Eastern Christians has been a prominent religious freedom concern for the past few decades. Many Christians participated in the Arab Spring protests that brought change throughout the region in 2011, but the crisis that ensued in countries such as Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, has added to worries that majoritarian politics will trample on the rights of Arab Christians. For Palestinians, the Arab Spring came at a time of extreme disillusionment with both the peace process

and the process of democratization. The political malaise throughout the region has added to their worries that Christianity is being squeezed out of the region where it was born.

The extreme decline of the Christian population in Israel-Palestine in recent times has been identified as a serious concern for global Christian organizations and for Christians in the Holy Land who remain. Its causes are multiple, but they include the economic challenges presented to the community, the instability of living in a zone of persistent conflict, the difficulty of a minority population living in either a Jewish state or under the Palestinian Muslim authority, and the fear of Islamist extremism. With so many departing, how do others remain in the land and continue to have an impact on the social and political environment as a means of surviving?

In spite of the decline in their relative numbers, Palestinian Christians have met the challenge by renewing their commitment to the expansion of civil society initiatives, both within their own churches and among their compatriots. The expansion of Christian institutional initiatives to go beyond the traditional social, educational, and health services into advocacy, networking, and peace activism within the Christian community, has arisen even at a time when many have predicted its coming extinction. Amid the decline of Palestinian civil society in the wake of the second intifada, Christian-led civil initiatives have managed to survive and, in some cases, thrive. Christian civil initiatives provide numerous supports to the community and form a survival strategy. They provide economic solutions, spiritual supports, networking opportunities, and a sense of hope and purpose to participants. Though such initiatives do not necessarily flow out of a desire to create bulwarks to preserve the community in difficult times, they do serve that role.

For Palestinians, the desire to remain and persist in the land of their heritage has required solidarity and commitment to remain in spite of the challenges of occupation, marginalization, and violence. Their commitment to remaining in the land in hopes of a better future is often referred to by the Arabic word *sumud*, meaning steadfastness or resilience. For Christians, civil organizations contribute to an even deeper level of *sumud*, one that portends the continued survival of a small but important presence in the Holy Land. This study has focused on the role of such civil initiatives in providing a voice for the Palestinian Christian community. However, the patterns that it identifies in Israel and the Palestinian territories reflect broader regional developments that may be identified in other states with Christian minorities, such as Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. Indeed, the regional networking reported by Palestinians involves initiatives that bring together Christians from throughout the Middle East, standing together to try to stop and even reverse the tide of Christian flight from the towns and cities where Jesus himself established the church two thousand years ago.

## References

- Ateek, Naim, Cedar Duaybis, and Maureen Tobin, eds. 2007. *The forgotten faithful*. Jerusalem: Sabeel.
- Belt, Don 2009. The forgotten faithful. *National Geographic* 215, no.6, 78-97.
- Baumgarten, Helga 2004. The politicization of Muslim-Christian relations in the Palestinian National Movement, in John Bunzl, ed., *Islam, Judaism, and the Political Role of Religions in the Middle East*, Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida 75-97.
- Bishara, Amahl 2013. Covering the Christians of the Holy Land, *Middle East Report and Information Project* [online], Summer. Available <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer267/covering-christians-holy-land>.
- Cook, Jonathan 2013. Nazareth Dispatch, *Middle East Report and Information Project* [online], Summer 2013. Available <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer267/nazareth-dispatch>
- Dalrymple, William 1998. *From the Holy Mountain: a journey among the Christians of the Middle East*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Emmett, Chad F. 1995. *Beyond the Basilica: Christians and Muslims in Nazareth*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ferrari, Silvio 2011. Religion and the development of civil society. *International Journal of Religious Freedom* 4, no.2, 29-36.
- Hallward, Maia Carter 2011. *Struggling for a just peace: Israeli and Palestinian activism in the second intifada*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
- Hammer, Joshua 2009. *A season in Bethlehem: unholy war in a sacred place*. New York: Free Press.
- Israeli, Raphael 2002. *Green Crescent over Nazareth: The displacement of Christians by Muslims in the Holy Land*. Portland, OR: Frank Cass.
- Kairos Palestine 2009. *Kairos Palestine: a moment of truth*, Jerusalem: December. Available <http://www.kairopalestine.ps/?q=content/document>.
- O'Mahony, Anthony 2005. Christianity and Jerusalem: religion, politics, and theology in the modern Holy Land. *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 5, no.2, 86-102.
- Peleg, Ilan and Dov Waxman 2011. *Israel's Palestinians: the conflict within*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Reidy, Tim 2010. A vanishing church. *America* 30 December 2010, available <http://americamagazine.org/node/127123>.
- Reidy, Tim 2011. The Holy Land and the church in the Middle East. *America* 31 January. Available <http://americamagazine.org/node/127227>.
- Rowe, Paul 2009. Building Coptic civil society: Christian groups and the state in Mubarak's Egypt. *Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no.1 (January), 111-126.
- Sabeel 2006. *The Sabeel survey on Palestinian Christians in the West Bank and Israel*. Jerusalem: Sabeel.