

Be Bold: Nonviolence Works

Volume 73 Summer 2017 Annual Report Issue presbypeacefellowship.org @presbypeace

Peace Fellowship “Working Groups” are Working!!!!

PPF's new Working Groups are hard at work on the issues prioritized by the Activist Council last year. Join us at the next Activist Council gathering, which will be Sept. 28 -30 in Stony Point, NY. Here's a report from the Working Groups:

Climate Justice Working Group –

Our Working Group would like you to approach your synod, presbytery and congregation to ask them to divest from fossil fuels. This seems to us a next step as we prepare for the 2018 General Assembly and the third effort to call our church to a prophetic witness against the danger of climate change to human community, peace and all of creation. As Bruce Reyes Chow, Moderator of the 218th General Assembly tweeted: “While there have been many #GA222 decisions that have gone the way I had hoped, our failure to divest in fossil fuels is a monumental miss.”

Since then, several synods, presbyteries, and congregations have voted to divest. We'd like to increase that number so we don't have another “miss” in 2018! Find resources to help you get started at fossilfreepcusa.org

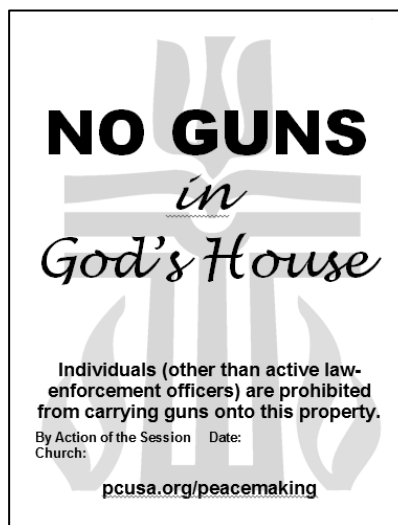
See p. 5 for an overture for the 223rd General Assembly. We need concurrence by an historic number of presbyteries. Find the overture on-line at <https://www.fossilfreepcusa.org/climate-change-divestment/overture-2018/>

Your witness to our God-given call to love creation will help us galvanize the PCUSA to save the planet for future generations. Tell us your stories! Contact kathy@presbypeacefellowship.org

Gun Violence Prevention – THE SIGN PROJECT – 100 Churches

On June 12, the anniversary of the Florida Pulse massacre, the GVP Working Group announced a goal to find 100 Presbyterian congregations, schools or camps to study the issue of gun violence and post “No Guns in God's House” signs by Dec. 14, the 5th anniversary of the Sandy Hook school shootings.

These 100 buildings will be the first of many others as PPF helps to implement the action of the PCUSA



orders for 144 copies of the new Gun Violence Prevention Congregational Toolkit to Presbyterians in 29 states. See more on p. 4 and find sample signage and the new toolkit at presbypeacefellowship.org/gun-violence/resources

General Assembly. In 2014 GA called on Presbyterian congregations to post signs as a public witness against the gun-lobby myth that more guns in more places will make us safer. Studies show that, where there are more guns, there is more gun violence, not less. Would your church study and pray over this project? Contact Chair Margery Rossi at margery0830@gmail.com

Since its release on June 2, the GVP group has filled

Challenging Racism Working Group

Here's a simple, but direct, question: Where has racism touched *your* life? If you're white it's touched you, whether you are aware of it or not, by the privilege you enjoy, getting to the head of the line in so many places and ways. People of color still have to sit in the back of the metaphorical bus. They live looking over their shoulder, hoping nobody's going to try to use or abuse them. They wonder if their teenager will even get home safely.

Racism in America is the problem near to our hearts. We have been meeting monthly by conference call and reading to help us focus how we might address the issue of racism, not just generally, but within the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship and the Presbyterian Church. Here is our reading list, which we recommend: *Facing Racism: A Vision of the Intercultural Community* by the 222nd General Assembly, with Anti-Racism (Cont. p. 2)

(Groups, Cont.) Study Guides made available by the Racial Ethnic & Women's Ministries of the PCUSA Mission Agency; *Faithful Resistance: Gospel Visions for the Church in a Time of Empire*, Rick Ufford-Chase; *The New Jim Crow*, by Michelle Alexander; *Race in a Post-Obama America: The Church Responds*, edited by David Maxwell

The current members of the Challenging Racism Working Group are Jim Atwood, Susan DeGeorge, Dan Fullerton, Ed Green, Ben Heimach-Snipes, Andrea Hickerson, Peggy Howland, Mary Hunt, Rebecca Segers, Barbara Smith, and Melinda Thompson. We invite you to join us as we develop our goals and objectives in the mission of facing down racism. Contact group moderator Dan Fullerton 469-744-1405 dan.fmpc@mail.com.

Middle East Working Group –

Chair: Jessie Light, jessie.a.light@gmail.com
PPF's delegation will be in Israel/Palestine July 22 – Aug. 4. PPF joins with American Muslims for Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace in this interfaith visit to learn about the current reality in Israel/Palestine and options for ending the Occupation. On Aug. 29, join in for a national phone call to hear their report. Sign up at presbypeacefellowship.org. Working group member Don Mead reports on his visit to Syria and Lebanon with a new Syria perspective. See pages 10-11.

Colombia Working Group

This group, which recruits and trains those who go as accompaniers, has built a new Accompaniment Alumni Association to support this work and to do advocacy. The Presbyterian Church of Colombia needs our eyes, ears and presence as they do the difficult task of finalizing and bringing to life a peace process to heal their nation. The next training will be Oct. 6-9. To learn more or to join the alumni group, contact Lora Burge at lora@presbpeacefellowship.org

Peace Seeking Churches & Communities Working Group –

PPF is building a network of peace churches and peace-supportive presbyteries around the US. See some of them in our Annual Report on page 8! PPF continues to support several peace communities who offer new models for nonviolent direct action. To learn more, contact Art Hunt, art@presbypeacefellowship.org

Join the PPF Activist Council!

The ABCs of the Activist Council are:

Affirm the nonviolence of Jesus,
Be active in PPF, **C**ontribute each year
as generously as you are able.

Sign up at presbypeacefellowship.org/ac
Fall AC Gathering Sept. 28-30, Stony Point, NY
More Info at presbypeacefellowship.org/ACfall17

A Peacemaker's Calendar

Jul. 22-Aug. 4 Interfaith Network for Justice in Palestine Delegation to Israel and Palestine – Sponsored by the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, American Muslims for Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace. Follow their blog at presbypeacefellowship.org/interfaithIP

Sept. 3-Oct. 1 PC(USA)Peace& Global Witness Offering

Sept. 21-23 The Syria/Lebanon Partnership Network meets at Laws Lodge, Louisville, KY syriailebanonpn.org

Sept. 22-Oct. 16 International Peacemakers Tour, with PPFer Doug Baker, PCUSA peacemaker in Ireland.

Sept. 28-30 PPF Activist Council Gathering, Stony Point, NY. Meet with PPF activists from across the USA for networking, training and planning for 2018 GA. Register at presbypeacefellowship.org/ACfall17

Oct. 1, 3pm Ordination of Emily Brewer to the Ministry of Word & Sacrament, which is the ministry of peace. Rutgers Presbyterian Church 236 W. 73rd New York City

Oct. 6-9 PPF Colombia Accompaniment Training, Chicago, IL. Contact Lora@presbypeacefellowship.org

Oct. 21 Barstow Driver Award Banquet, Honoring Melinda Thompson in Washington DC at the New York Ave. Presbyterian Church. See p. 3. Register at presbypeacefellowship.org/BD2017

Oct. 26-28 The PCUSA Israel-Palestine Mission Network meets in Chicago. deyoejeffrey@gmail.com

Nov. 10-12 - School of the Americas Annual Vigil, now at the US-Mexico border south of Tucson. As we protest the militarization of the border, we also call for an end to state-sponsored terrorism and violence against our communities inside the United States. Mobilizing at the border in Nogales is one more way to fight for the closure of the School of the Americas/WHINSEC and put an end to U.S. intervention in Latin America. See soaw.org for schedule. To join other PPFers who will be participating, contact Marilyn White at marwhite@igc.org

Nov. 16-18 - Presbyterian Peacemaking Program Study in Madagascar on Creation Care and Reconciliation. presbymission.org/ministries/peacemaking/travel_study/

Dec. 14 – Observe the 5th anniversary of the Sandy Hook school shootings. The Gun Violence Prevention Toolkit has ideas: vigils, offering of letters, films to show.

June 16-23, 2018 223rd Presbyterian General Assembly, St. Louis. Deadlines for Overtures with Constitutional Changes: Feb. 16, 2018; Overtures with Financial/Future Budget Implications: April 17, 2018; all other overtures: May 2, 2018. All overtures require at least one other presbytery concurrence. See pcusa.org and search for "How to Submit an Overture." Be sure to coordinate with PPF on your plans. Come to GA to volunteer for PPF!

Melinda Thompson

**2017 Recipient of the
Anne Barstow & Tom Driver Award for Excellence
in Nonviolent Direct Action in Retirement**

Plan to Join Us!

Sat. Oct. 21

New York Ave. Presbyterian Church Washington DC

Register at presbypeacefellowship.org/BD2017

Melinda Thompson has been many things – teacher, lawyer, chaplain, activist to end the Occupation. She has lived in New York, Ohio, New Jersey, Germany, Okinawa, Maryland and Delaware. She has travelled all over the world. The one constant? Melinda Thompson is a lifelong Presbyterian, whose calling to peace and justice continues to evolve.

Born in NYC during WWII to a journalist mother and political scientist father, Melinda grew up in Ohio and New Jersey. By age 8 she was the first girl with a paper route. There was an early awareness of the world. After graduating from Ohio Wesleyan University, Melinda went to Munich on a Fulbright Scholarship. “I was away Sept. 67-Sept. 68, during all the violence, Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy’s deaths, the riots. I wasn’t there. On 1967 New Year’s Eve I went through Checkpoint Charlie by myself to go to East Germany, the first time I experienced a military checkpoint. Growing up, my life in Ohio was lily white, not much diversity. When I finally went to seminary, I realized that *WE* were the empire. It was an epiphany to me. We weren’t the ones Jesus was talking to. We were the other ones. I was captive to empire.”

The story speeds up: marriage, teaching at DoD schools in Okinawa, teaching in Maryland for nine years, a divorce, using her teacher retirement fund going to law school, a career as a corporate lawyer, marriage to Mike and gaining two children, ages 3 and 5, learning about the National Security Agency through Mike’s work. The week after 9/11, Mike was diagnosed with cancer. During the whole time in hospitals, they never saw a chaplain. After Mike died, Melinda enrolled at Wesley Seminary to become a chaplain. She entered the ordination process and was certified to receive a call.

She did. “God called me to Israel/Palestine,” first on a church trip in 2006 and then on the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship delegation in 2008. This changed Melinda’s life. “Going through Bethlehem checkpoint late at night, it all came back to me---the fear I had at the checkpoint in Berlin. I remembered a line from Exodus about the Hebrews getting too numerous (Ex 1:9-10). I felt that the fear and oppression of the other had been going on for thousands of years. Can’t we get beyond that?” Don and Carol Mead were on her trip and they got her involved in PPF and the Israel-Palestine Mission Network.



**Melinda and Friend on one of
five trips to Israel-Palestine**

Coming home, plans for chaplaincy changed to working at Partners for Peace in Washington DC, where she later became the executive director. She led groups from Wesley Seminary to Israel/Palestine in 2010 and 2012—26 people went, co-led with a Hebrew professor at Wesley. “It was very painful to see what was happening then.” She became involved with Sabeel and more involved with PPF, attending her first GA in 2010. As a PPF leader, Melinda helps to keep PPF’s Endowment Fund occupation-free. She chaired the Development Committee and urges the use of IRA distributions as support for PPF. She served on the Executive Committee when it called Emily Brewer as executive director. Today she works to encourage young people to learn about and to help end the Occupation and she is a member of the Challenging Racism Working Group. “Did God send me to Israel/Palestine so that I would finally understand the racism going on here?”

In all of this journey, Melinda has been nurtured by a diverse community of friends in the DC area and by Oaklands Presbyterian Church in Laurel, MD, where she was a member for nearly 40 years. Like her father, she was ordained an elder and served as clerk of session. She was a commissioner to National Capital Presbytery and General Assembly. Moving to Delaware to live near her sister Kim, she found a spirit of welcome at Seaford Presbyterian Church. Melinda now serves on Newcastle Presbytery COM.

On retirement? “I retired as a teacher, then as a lawyer, then went to seminary. I now realize that retirement may mean doing more work, but it’s the kind of work you really want to do. I believe that the spirit is always at work. It is important to recognize when a door opens for you. I read to kids at Head Start. One book they love is called *Pete the Cat*. Pete gets into all kinds of situations. ‘But does he cry?’ No, he just keeps singing his song: ‘Because it’s all good.’”



**Melinda at GA with Sydney Levy
of Jewish Voice for Peace**

NONVIOLENCE NEWS...

Korean War Resource - Unzu Lee at the Stony Point Center is creating a new resource on Korean peace and is looking for reflections written by persons directly impacted by the experience of the Korea conflict. If you were involved in any way in the Korean War (particularly if you were a conscientious objector or veteran) and are willing to share your experience, contact unzulee@stonypointcenter.org

"A conflict in North Korea...would be probably the worst kind of fighting in most people's lifetimes.... The bottom line is it would be a catastrophic war if this turns into a combat if we're not able to resolve this situation through diplomatic means." Defense Secretary **James Mattis**

The Sign Project – 100 Churches “No Guns in God’s House”

Signs will vary among states and churches, but they all take a stand against gun violence. In 2016, 33,000 Americans died from gun violence and another 100,000 were injured. Learning about gun violence and taking back God’s House are steps that churches can take to encourage local discussion about the epidemic of gun violence and what we must change in our society. Send us a photo of your church, camp or campus sign! Thank you, margery0830@gmail.com



Chicago



Dallas

Have an IRA? Are You Over 70½?

Did you know that Required Minimum Distributions can be taken for charitable gifts at any time during the year? *Why wait till Christmas?* ...Plus, you can set up recurring gifts directly from an IRA to support PPF all year long. See presbypeacefellowship.org/IRA

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War and Global Warming

“Researchers like Marshall Burke and Solomon Hsiang have managed to quantify some of the non-obvious relationships between temperature and violence: For every half-degree of warming, they say, societies will see between a 10 and 20 percent increase in the likelihood of armed conflict. In climate science, nothing is simple, but the arithmetic is harrowing: A planet five degrees warmer would have at least half again as many wars as we do today. Overall, societal conflict could more than double this century.”

--David Wallace-Wells, “The Uninhabitable Earth,”
New York Magazine, July 10, 2017

Peace and Global Witness

PPFer Bruce Gillette represented the PCUSA at the meeting of World Communion of Reformed Churches in early July in Germany. He reports that the WCRC made support for the Paris Climate Accords and other Climate Change work a top objective for the world’s churches. As new leader of the WCRC they elected Lebanese clergywoman Najla Kassab (see p. 11) and issued a proclamation in support of Palestinian Christians.



Chicago



Seattle

Find Sample No Guns in God’s House Sign
at presbypeacefellowship.org/gunsigns

Suggested Presbytery Overture on Fossil Fuel Divestment for GA 2018

PPF will support this overture as an act of peacemaking for future generations. See fossilfreepcusa.org

The Presbytery of _____ overtures the 223rd General Assembly to

1. Commend the Board of Pensions and Presbyterian Foundation for creating fossil free options for participants, and the Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee for increased engagement with companies in the Fossil Fuel industry-- actions that embody the beginning of a faithful response to the devastating and urgent reality of climate change.
2. Recognize that by continuing to hold investments in the fossil-fuel companies that most egregiously contribute to the climate crisis, the PC(USA) is complicit in harming God's creation and "the least of these" who are disproportionately affected by climate change.
3. Direct the Board of Pensions and the Presbyterian Foundation to divest from the fossil fuel industry.
4. Direct the Board of Pensions and the Presbyterian Foundation to actively seek out and invest in securities of companies whose predominant focus is in renewable and/or energy efficiency.
5. Direct the Board of Pensions and the Presbyterian Foundation to report to the 224th General Assembly (2020) about their progress in effecting recommendations 3 and 4.

Sample Rationale (You can create your own presbytery rationale or use this one. Please concur with action above.)

People on the front lines of climate change, particularly people of color, are disproportionately impacted by climate change. Countless individuals and organizations among "the least of these" have prophetically called upon the world to divest from fossil fuels. Earlier this year, for example, Ladonna Brave Bull Allard, one of the Native Water Protectors at Standing Rock said, 'We will be everywhere to let people know that there's a better way to live, there's a better way to live with the Earth, with green energy, and that it's time for us now to start divesting from fossil fuel, because we must save the water. We must save the water.' We are thus called to take prophetic action in light of these voices and the imminent dangers on which they shed light.

The PC(USA) has debated divestment from the fossil fuel industry during the last two General Assemblies (221st in 2014 and 222nd in 2016).

In 2014, the Presbytery of Boston sent the overture "On Divestment from Fossil Fuel Companies" with 11 presbyteries concurring.

In 2016, the Presbytery of San Francisco sent the overture "On PC(USA) Fossil Fuel Divestment" with 31 presbyteries concurring.

Prior to the 222nd Assembly, nine former moderators signed a letter urging the commissioners to support the overture to divest. Their reasoning included, "because of the grave and urgent threat of climate change and the fossil fuel sector's well-documented and unyielding refusal to change, it is no longer morally or ethically right for the PC(USA) to profit from companies that are creating ecological destruction and human suffering on such a monumental scale."

Our denomination has already recognized the moral mandate for humanity to shift to a sustainable energy plan in a way that is both just and compassionate, not least of which includes the support of carbon neutrality in 2006. These statements have all been founded on the biblical call to love and care for creation.

We have actively worked as a denomination to reduce our use of fossil fuels and shrink our carbon footprint in our congregations and individual lives. These biblical and denominational mandates compel us to look at our collective investments.

As a denomination, we have long held that we cannot profit from the companies whose policies are harmful to any living thing. For nearly a century, the church has not invested in companies producing alcohol, tobacco, gambling, the military, or those that contribute to violations of human rights. The General Assembly thus declared in 1968, "the [Church's] power to spend and to invest includes the power to refrain from spending or investing. The church has not only the right but the responsibility to be selective in the use of its funds."

The General Assembly reinforced this form of stewardship in 1992, affirming that it does not and will not invest in any "sin stocks." In addition to these broad industries, General Assemblies have also divested from the Duke Energy coal mining company because of its treatment of its workers, Chevron after it sold fuel to the South African apartheid government, Talisman Energy for building a pipeline in Sudan that threatened human rights, and Hewlett Packard, Caterpillar, and Motorola for profiting from human rights abuses in the occupied Palestinian territory.

Some of these divestment actions came after a long process of corporate engagement by the church's Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) committee. Other divestment decisions were made outside the realm of MRTI.

Climate change represents deep harm to the whole biosphere, including especially marginalized people, so it is imperative that we would divest from the industry most responsible for that harm, as outlined in the Carbon Underground 200 list.

And already as a denomination we are taking some steps. The Foundation has introduced financial products that provide comparable return on investment without supporting fossil fuel companies, and the Board of Pensions has a fossil-free option for their 403-B plan. Synods, presbyteries, congregations and individuals have moved their investments to such funds, and we commend them for doing so. But while these actions among individuals and various Presbyterian entities are faithful responses to the growing crisis of climate change, they fall far short of the institutional actions necessary to make a significant difference. It is time for fossil free investments to be the norm instead of the option.

Presbyterian Peace Fellowship Annual Report

2016 Donors – *THANK YOU!*

2016

In January of 2017, the PPF Executive Committee selected a theme for the year, “Faithful Resistance: Planting Justice, Reaping Peace.” As I look at our list of supporters from 2016, I can see so many seeds of justice that were planted that are already bearing fruit because of your support. Your 2016 financial gifts supported a delegation eight people to Iraqi Kurdistan to learn about the impact of the fossil fuel industry on people there. Almost all of those delegates are now members of the Activist Council and continue to share their vision and gifts for the long-term work of PPF. Those delegates were also some of the strongest advocates for fossil fuel divestment at the General Assembly in Portland, and although we lost that vote, we have more people dedicated and organizing to get it passed next year (I hope you’ll join this effort!). We accomplished all of our other goals at the 2016 General Assembly.

Your gifts also allowed us to hire a half-time staff person, Lora Burge, to coordinate the Colombia Accompaniment Program. Most of the news in the US tells us that peace has arrived, yet our partners in Colombia know that the work of building a peace-centered society is only beginning.

These are just two examples of some of the seeds of justice that you planted last year with your gifts. These investments in peace will continue to grow and flourish. And there are so many more. PPF’s Gun Violence Prevention Work is taking off with renewed energy, and there is effective organizing work going on in our Creation Justice, Middle East, Peace Seeking Churches, and Anti-Racism working groups.



PPF Celebrates 2 Years of Emily Brewer’s Leadership. Thank you, Emily!



In 2016 PPF joined SOA Watch at the Mexico-US Border. Next Action: Nov. 10-12, 2017

When I look at our ministry together, alongside this list I also see that 242 more people donated to PPF in 2016 than in 2015 --how wonderful to have that many more peacemakers in this community! I welcome and thank each one of you. As you know, the work of nonviolence is not important because of any single person in elected office. PPF has been at work for almost 75 years, and with your support and God’s grace we will continue to work for peace at all times in all ways we can, until that day when the seeds of justice that we sow bear the full fruit of peace. Thank you for your support of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship.

Emily Brewer, Executive Director

Thank you to each 2016 donor. PPF’s work depends entirely on your support.

Please forgive and advise PPF on any mistakes or omissions. All 2017 donors will be included in next year’s Annual Report

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Amazon Smile

Anonymous Donors

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To learn about PPF’s Peace Seeking Church Network, contact Art Hunt art@presbypeacefellowship.org

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Editor's Note: We present a shortened version of PPfer Don Mead's report on a rare visit to Syria today. Please read the full version on the PPF Blog at http://presbypeacefellowship.org/blog/syria-evolving-perceptions-tenacious-conflict#.WVz_GIGQxLM Guided by our church partners on the ground, Don respects the Syrian church view that USA attacks on the Assad government are not helpful to peacemaking there, nor is any of the outside military involvement by the USA, Russia, ISIS and others. As we go to press, the USA and Russia have promised a cease-fire in Syria.

Syria: Evolving Perceptions of a Tenacious Conflict

By Don Mead on July 5, 2017

In May 2017, eleven of us traveled from the United States on a trip organized by the Syria/Lebanon Partnership Network of the PC(USA) "to share worship, fellowship and a mutual time of learning with PC(USA) partners in Syria and Lebanon." The context of any visit to Syria is a great humanitarian crisis, one that requires a peace-focused response.

We visited four congregations in Syria and six schools run by our partner churches in Syria and Lebanon, where the words "Evangelical" and "Presbyterian" are synonymous. Since 1959, our partner churches are organized as the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon (NESSL). We met with officials of the Synod in Beirut and visited the Near East School of Theology (NEST) and the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), as well as with priests from several other Christian denominations. In each location, we saw that, in the midst of the great turmoil around them, the church is active, alive and well. The evangelical pastors we met are well trained (at NEST!), offering strong leadership in engaged congregations filled with active elders and amazing numbers of young people, including ordained women in leadership roles. The churches provide help to those fleeing turmoil, regardless of religion (most of the beneficiaries are Muslims). Attendance at church conferences has increased substantially, as people seek mutual encouragement and to learn from each other. The demand for schooling is immense; the schools run by the churches have a reputation for strong values-based education which is appreciated by all, including Muslims (most students in the schools are Muslim).



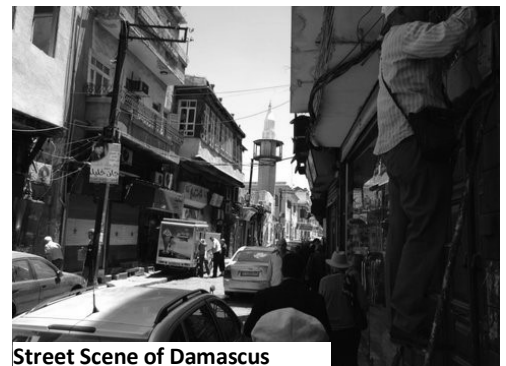
Priests who joined us for breakfast in Qamishli

We heard of a commitment not to leave. Two of the Syrian churches had been badly bombed but are now restored and operating. Congregants thanked pastors for not leaving. Among people who fled, some have heard from those who stayed in Syria that it is safe to return. We heard a report that many others have already returned, but it is not clear how many plan to stay. We found wide evidence of cooperation between all branches of the Christian church. Synod leaders said to us: "In this time of conflict, the challenge is to write our own story, to develop our own theology of how we should live

in this time of crisis....We must keep our values during this time of war; we must get out of the war with good values. Holding firm to the goal of reconciliation is the challenge, and the church must play a role in that."

So if the church is active and strong, how do we understand the conflict that surrounds them and their roles in dealing with it? Analyzing the conflict requires an understanding of the government of Syria and the religious and ethnic demographics of the country. For centuries, Syria has been a predominantly Muslim country, with a Sunni majority (about 60%). Other Muslim minority sects – Shiite (including Alawites) and Druze – make up about 30%, while Christians, Yazidis and others fill less than 10%. Since the late 1960's, power in Syria has been in the hands of the Baath Party, which is secular in its orientation, with a focus on socialism and Arab nationalism. Its leadership has come from the Alawites, a tribal group with religious roots in Shiite Islam. But the secular nature of that government has led them to affirm the rights of each person to practice his or her own faith as she or he wishes. Relative to many of their neighboring countries, their pattern of ruling has imposed fewer restrictions on dress codes and other patterns of behavior. One thing, however, was never on the table for discussion in Syria: the structure of governance, reflecting the absolute power of those in charge.

Sunni Islamists (first the Muslim Brotherhood, then Al Qaeda-affiliated groups) worked over many years to overthrow those leaders, whose secularism they called un-Islamic and heretical. In the 2011 "Arab Spring," there were demonstrations in Syria for more political freedom. At first the protests were peaceful, focused on an expansion of freedoms, although many were also calling for regime change. Syrian protesters were soon joined by others from outside the country: Islamist extremists, recruited and trained by Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups who sought to overthrow the government, as well as Sunni groups from Iraq, experienced fighters disenfranchised in their own country. This internationalization of the conflict through the influx of fighters, money and weapons allowed insurgents to capture major areas across Syria. The



Street Scene of Damascus

government used all the brutal force at its disposal to put down those who challenged it. In response, friends of the Syrian government from across the Shiite world – especially Iran and Hezbollah – rushed to supply fighters, money and weapons. When it became clear that more help might be needed, the Russians joined the battle with their own fighters, weapons and money. This raised the anxiety of the Americans, who added their resources (our resources!) to the mix, to prevent the Russians from gaining too strong a foothold. Add to this the Kurds, effective fighters for the Syrian government, but also eager to form their own nation with parts of Syria, Iraq and Turkey. Thus, the conflict in Syria has moved from being a civil war – a struggle between different groups of Syrians – to being a proxy war, engaging regional superpowers – Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, on one side, against Iran and its followers, on the other – as well as the world superpowers – Russia and the United States – with each of these outside groups pouring in fighters, weapons and money to support its own clients in Syria. The tragedy is that the battle between these outside forces has raged back and forth across Syrian landscape, with untold suffering for the Syrian people.



Above, Rev. Joseph Kassab, General Secretary, NESSL, with Rev. Ann Brunger (one of our travelers) and Rev. Najla Kassab, Director of Christian Education Department of NESSL, who has just been elected President of the World Commission of Reformed Churches! Hurray!

What our Syrian church partners requested of us was clear and straight-forward:

- * Prayer: please pray for and with us. Encourage more to come and visit.
- * Provide more help for suffering Syrians, especially those displaced in the region and those providing help to them.
- * Work in your country to eliminate the outside flow of weapons supporting any faction in the conflict, to de-escalate this proxy war. Use diplomacy to help stop the fighting.
- * Work in your country to seek to remove US government sanctions, designed to pressure Syrian political leaders to change policies but in fact causing great suffering among the Syrian people.
- * Seek alternative sources of information. Our partners there see western media as often misleading and inaccurate.
- * Help change the discourse in the US away from an insistence that the current government of Syria must go. Our church partners see any currently viable alternative to that government as a major threat to their own safety and to that of other minority groups. Harsh criticism of the Syrian government by our church can put our Christian partners there at risk.



Syrian refugee children in a NESSL school in the Bakaa Valley of Lebanon

I recall a NPR interview with Amos Oz, an Israeli citizen who has thought deeply about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which he saw as an ongoing tragedy. In literary tragedies, he said, endings come in two different ways: the tradition of Shakespeare and the tradition of Chekhov. In the Shakespearean tradition, at the end of the play, “the stage is hewed with dead bodies and justice of sorts prevails.” In the Chekhovian tradition, at the conclusion, “everyone is disappointed, disillusioned, embittered, heartbroken, but alive.” He calls that outcome a “clenched teeth compromise.”

at all costs, stop the fighting. But as Christians, I believe we also hold up a third outcome. God’s plan for creation is not a “compromise of gritted teeth.” Rather, it is reconciliation, where people with profound differences are reconciled with each other and with God, a goal which leaders at NESSL also affirmed. Nobody believes that the path to reconciliation is easy. People killing each other, who must confront others who have killed friends or family, will not be quickly reconciled. To me, the goal of reconciliation is not ours to create. It involves a changing of hearts and minds, the work of the Holy Spirit.

Our role is to plant seeds by inviting people to re-think their accepted truths, while seeking to create conditions that lead towards that end. This surely means a movement away from militarized conflict. The path to reconciliation may go through a “compromise of clenched teeth.” For too many leaders around the world, including in our own country, a Shakespearean Armageddon seems their preferred outcome.

May God help us walk the path that leads to shalom.

Many in Syria think that the best goal for now is one of “clenched teeth compromise.” Their plea, and surely we must support that plea, is firm:



Right, At a U2 Joshua Tree Concert in Arlington, TX on May 26, a giant photo of a Syrian refugee child is carried by the audience around the whole AT&T Stadium.



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ANNUAL REPORT ISSUE! Activist Council Sept. 28-30

Kairos Moment for Colombia – Can Peace Succeed?

Reality in Colombia is changing daily, either to move the cause of peace forward or set up an obstacle for peace. We at PPF keep working to flex the Colombia Accompaniment Program to respond to the current needs. ***We urgently need companions to go in teams now in a fragile moment of peacemaking that we must not let pass by.***

Recently the UN certified the main rebel group, FARC, as disarmed. Our colleague, Rev. Diego Higuita, shares these powerful words after witnessing a FARC arms handover in his home region:

"The armaments, duly registered (physical and digital archives) and classified, were placed in two containers sealed with padlocks whose keys were left in the hands of a UN official. Under the motto, 'They will never be fired again.' With religious and cultural celebrations of coffee, song and joy, the text of Isaiah 65:25 came to mind and was made reality in that moment. Government, guerrilla, churches, the community of small farmers, army, and police – all experiencing an act more than symbolic, full of hope, together singing a hymn to peace that every corner of this country must replicate. Without fears and with the eyes full of hope in a single table we shared the bread representative of all the sectors. And in conclusion everyone with a voice was asked that the government now fulfills the part that corresponds to it and that never again points its arms towards the Colombian people."

This is indeed part of why we have accompanied the IPC in their work for peace with justice all these years. Alleluia!

Still to resolve are peace agreements with the smaller rebel groups, as well as paramilitary groups who remain a factor in post-conflict violence. With a war that lasted five decades, it will take years of leadership by the churches and others to build peace and to make a country that is safe. Our partners in the IPC (Presbyterian Church of Colombia) are risking all at this fragile moment to make the historic peace agreement successful. They ask for our eyes and ears and presence to accompany them in this new stage of their work. It is truly a *kairos* moment.



In the photo, *right*, PPF companions Janet Lowery and Tricia Lloyd-Sidle help lead communion in Barranquilla. If you wish to explore accompaniment, PPF's next training session will be Oct. 6-9 in Chicago. Contact me or find the Accompaniment Program on Facebook or the PPF website for info on how you can be involved or offer support. May peace continue to bloom and grow in Colombia.

Rev. Lora Burge, PPF Colombia Accompaniment Coordinator lora@presbypeacefellowship.org 360-720-3495