

Press Release:

Theologians, Tourism Activists, and Industry Leaders Call for Holy Land Pilgrims to Seek Balance and Work for Peace

GENEVA, 21 May 2010: Representing 14 countries, a group of 27 theologians, tourism activists and advocacy organizations, and Palestinian Christian activists and tour organizers called on Christian pilgrims to live their faith as they visit the Holy Land, going beyond homage of ancient sites to show concern for the Palestinian people living there whose lives are severely constricted by the Israeli occupation of their lands.

“Justice tourism concentrates on political realities. Only by living what Palestinians experience all the time can a visitor recognize the injustices that are their daily bread. With this understanding comes a desire to help end the accumulated injustices in Palestine,” said Rami Kassis, Executive Director of the Alternative Tourism Group.

The meeting further asked pilgrims to demonstrate solidarity with Palestinian Christians whose 2,000 year continuous presence in the land has been steadily diminishing as the hardships they face due to occupation lead them to emigrate.

Mainstream pilgrims directed to Israeli organized tours can contribute to the problem by ignoring the Palestinian people and their situation and only hearing and then reinforcing the Israeli narrative, the group concluded. “They think they are bringing hope, but they are actually taking away hope from the whole region,” said Rifat Kassis, representing Kairos Palestine, a Christian Palestinian initiative modelled on the South African Kairos that gives theological grounding to recommendations for actions needed to achieve a just peace.

Tourism to Palestine was identified as an opportunity for a “pilgrimage of transformation” representing a deeper Christian experience that invites pilgrims to a genuine encounter with the Body of Christ by connecting with Palestinian sisters and brothers in faith. The trip strongly recommended that pilgrims abide with the Code of Conduct for Tourism in the Holy Land, a document drawn up by a Palestinian network that gives guidance about trip preparation, behaviour, and follow-up actions.

Participants expressed grave concern about the monopoly that Israel exercised over Holy Land tourism and the crippling restrictions it imposed on Palestinian tour operators, hotels, and guides that limited development of this key sector of the Palestinian economy.

The Israeli occupation impacts Palestinian life drastically; 400 Israeli military checkpoints dotting the West Bank, hindering Palestinian travel for work, school, family visits, and health care. The “Apartheid Wall” that slices through vast swathes of their land further cuts off Palestinians from each other and from East Jerusalem, the traditional centre of Palestinian religious, cultural, and commercial life. Israeli authorities also block West Bank Palestinian Christians, whose families would normally celebrate Easter and other Christian feasts by worshipping in Jerusalem, from entering the city.

However, reports on the Palestinian tourist sector showed that despite restrictions it was both vibrant and growing, offering authentic and unique experiences and an array of tours and opportunities to meet specific interests. On the Nativity Trail, for example, tourists travel

from Nazareth to Bethlehem, interacting with local Palestinians, including Christians, Bedouins, and other communities along the way.

The meeting was organized by the [Alternative Tourism Group](#) (ATG) in cooperation with the World Council of Churches' [Palestine-Israel Ecumenical Forum](#) (WCC-PIEF), the [Ecumenical Coalition on Tourism](#) (ECOT) and [Kairos Palestine](#).