

Palestinian advocacy campaign brought to churches in India

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Bangalore, India, March 4 (ENInews)--Two advocates for the Palestinian cause in the Middle East have expanded an awareness campaign to churches worldwide and recently brought the campaign to India.

Michel Nseir, who is the Geneva-based World Council of Churches (WCC) program executive for public witness with a special focus on the Middle East, and Rifat Kassis, coordinator of a group called Kairos Palestine, led a 28 February-1 March conference for church leaders, activists and theologians in Bangalore.

"This (conference) is the beginning in our campaign to raise awareness and educate churches," Nseir told ENInews. "Churches must engage each other theologically and ethically to embrace a justice-based approach that honours real concerns about growing anti-Semitism while addressing the urgent need to end [Israeli] occupation [of Palestinian territories] and build a just peace in the Middle East," he said.

Israel has controlled such areas as the West Bank of the Jordan River, Gaza Strip of land on the Egyptian border and Golan Heights on the border with Syria due to previous terrorist attacks.

Nseir said that while some Christian evangelical groups support the Zionist view of "promised land," he added that there are mainstream churches that also share that view that makes them indifferent to the "suffering" of the Palestinian people. He told the 40 attendees that "churches should give up their orthodox linear reading and interpretation of the 'promised land' that justifies Israeli occupation."

He said: "The 'people of God' is not an exclusive term. The geographical barriers of the biblical land need to be interpreted properly to educate the congregations. We must confess that the ecumenical family is still a house divided with respect to this issue," Nseir told the conference, which was hosted by United Theological College.

Quoting from a Kairos (which means "significant moment") Palestine document that was approved by a group of Palestinian church leaders in December 2009, Nseir said that "any theology, seemingly based on the Bible or on faith or on history, that legitimizes the occupation, is far from Christian teachings, because it calls for violence and holy war in the name of God Almighty, subordinating God to temporary human interests."

One attendee said biblical interpretation is an issue. "The interpretation of the Old Testament seems to be the obstacle to solidarity with the victims in the Middle East," pointed out Bishop V. Devasahayam who heads the Church of South India's Diocese of Chennai. "We have to use the Gospel values to interpret the Old Testament," said Devasahayam, endorsing the concern expressed by the WCC official.

The Rev. Monica Melancthon, a professor at Gurukul - Lutheran Theological College in Chennai, pointed out that the task was not easy as several people in the churches interpret the Old Testament passages with a pro-Israel bias. "The challenge is to prepare the congregations to read the historical texts on the Holy Land," she added.

Kassis in his address to the conference called for a "prophetic response" from the churches worldwide to ongoing Israeli oppression. "Several churches show sympathy and charity to the Palestinians. What we need is not charity but genuine solidarity with the suffering resulting from the oppressive measures of Israel," said Kassis, a Lutheran who was previously a director of the WCC's Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel.

A working group was set up to spread the conference message and study parallels between the Palestinians and the dalits (members of a low caste formerly called untouchables) in India.