



Alternative Tourism Group-Study Centre and Kairos Palestine

A letter to Churches and to Palestine Solidarity Groups around the world who seek justice in Palestine from the International Reference Group of Alternative Tourism Group-Study Centre and Kairos Palestine

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

We write this communiqué from Madaba, Jordan where twenty one representatives *from the International Reference Group of Alternative Tourism Group-Study Centre and Kairos Palestine* rallied for a journey for justice for Palestine. This was our 5th time of coming together as a group, since our first gathering in October 2005 in Alexandria, Egypt where we launched the idea of ‘Pilgrimages for Transformation’ (PIFT).

In Alexandria, we concluded that people-to-people encounters, and visitations to heritage sites, could not be excluded from the political context of the region as a whole. They would have to be transformative and based on an understanding of the spiritual and the political complexities of the region.

In Madaba in 2008, we deliberated on how we could ‘Combat Dispossession’ and learned how the apartheid-like practices were being duplicated in the tourism arena too. That meeting ended with a call to develop a Code of Ethics for tourism to the Holy Land. Palestinian tourism groups, industry, and the government joined hands to produce a Code of Ethics which is widely used by pilgrims and travelers visiting the Holy Land.

In Switzerland 2010, we called churches to renounce and reject harmful Biblical interpretations and theologies, and, instead, popularize pilgrimages in line with the Kairos Palestine call to “Come and See”.

In Bonn, 2012 we affirmed the need for participatory-learning style pilgrimages that allow visitors to Palestine to return from Palestine as advocates and lobbyists for justice in Palestine. The need for a theology for Pilgrimages for Transformation emerged as urgent and vital.

In Madaba, September 14-16, 2017, the situation for Palestinians has worsened drastically. Palestinian Christians only recently had written to Churches around the world: “We are still suffering from 100 years of injustice and oppression that were inflicted on the Palestinian people beginning with the unjust and unlawful Balfour declaration, intensified through the *Nakba* and the influx of refugees, followed by the Israeli occupation of the West Bank including East Jerusalem

and Gaza and the fragmentation of our people and our land through policies of isolation and confiscation of land, and the building of Jewish-only settlements and the Apartheid Wall.”

Our deliberations in Madaba were cross-sectoral and resulted in practical outcomes. Our outcomes were shaped by a dynamic and interactive process that included:

- “Discerning new signposts in the Pilgrimages for transformation”
- Addressing the complicity of Christian community and Christianity in this situation and the resultant deepening crisis for the integrity and credibility of the Gospel as well as own witnessing thereof.
- Theoretical and practitioner insights on tourism and pilgrimage in the Holy Land that highlighted obstacles and restrictions on visiting Palestine which hurt the tourist economy of Palestine.
- A case study into the experiences towards transformational change of participants during a pilgrimage to Palestine and Israel.
- An overview of Palestine heritage and history suggesting new and different opportunities, and itineraries towards broadening and deepening exposures particularly which, in turn, offered different options for advocacy work.

An Invitation to Solidarity - Join the Pilgrimages for Transformation, “Come & See”

A plethora of urgent actions were proposed for continuing work. The core of these actions call for increased visits and pilgrimages to the Holy Land and for the international Christian community to “lead campaigns for church leaders and pilgrims to visit Bethlehem and other Palestinian cities in cooperation with Palestinian tourist and pilgrimage agencies, in response to recent attempts by Israel. We ask that pilgrims publicly challenge any attempt by Israel or other Christians that discourage pilgrims from visiting Palestinian places.” The hope is that this same call will also reach the large number of progressive social movements, media, and individuals/academics because they too have spheres of influence and potential impact.

Palestinians call on visitors and pilgrims to proceed beyond and outside the Zionist narrative, practices and limitations, to break the ‘culture of silence’ in the face of human suffering, place human dignity as the highest value, and thus, rediscover the fact of our common humanity. We reiterate the call for each of you who travel to our land to visit our homes, our churches, benefit from our rich heritage and culture, and, thus, become disciples and holders of knowledge that will one day lead to equality, democracy, and human rights for all.

In hope and solidarity,

Alternative Tourism Group-Study Centre and Kairos Palestine

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