

Stewart Gillan - Israel March 2023

St Andrew's Jerusalem
PO Box 8619
Jerusalem 91086, Israel

Dear Friends

Last night I had the joy of presenting the Rev Sally Azar with a Church of Scotland tartan scarf, assuring her of our prayers and best wishes as she begins her ministry as an ordained Lutheran Pastor in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. This in the happy company of a group of visitors from Scotland, led by Marjorie Paton, who were vocal in their support of Sally, the first Palestinian woman Pastor, and in support of Muriel Pearson and I in our ministries here. It means a great deal to us to hear and feel it.



Rev Sally Azar in CoS tartan scarf, with Marjorie Paton & Stewart Gillan

Though the scarf is not a stole, it did take on a liturgical quality as Sally wore it and, thanking everyone for their support, spoke of her journey towards ordination and her experience thus far as Pastor of the

English-speaking congregation at the Church of the Redeemer in the Old City of Jerusalem, and as Co-Pastor of the Lutheran congregation in Beit Sahour, Bethlehem. She gave thanks for the Church of Scotland's friendship over the years, naming in particular its support of the World Day of Prayer, noting that Palestinian women had formed the writing committee for next year's observance, on 1 March 2024. This had many heads nodding in agreement and appreciation around the circle.

When I asked where the idea of a Church of Scotland tartan had come from, Marjorie said it had come from colleagues in the World Mission Council including Carol Finlay, whose team have promoted the tartan items widely. Hearing her name, I was not surprised, given Carol's strong commitment over many years to friendship and partnership with sisters and brothers in Christ throughout the global church, from Malawi to the early days of the HIV and AIDS Programme, to Israel and Palestine and beyond.

The evening thus brought together a number of strands in our relationship-building, strengthening our spiritual communion and mission partnership in Jesus' name. Strengthening too our ties with each other within the Church of Scotland as pilgrims and visitors arrive and make their journeys throughout the Land of the Holy One. It has been and must remain one of the marks of the Church of Scotland that it has its life and work as part of a global Church, drawing on and contributing to its strength, learning from its weakness, entering more fully into the compassion, wisdom and courage of Christ.

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That said, I woke up this morning to a pre-dawn call to prayer issuing from the local minaret, the words echoing round the hills of Beit Jala. It is no longer an unusual experience. The Christian population is higher in Beit Jala than in most places, given as 80% in a 2017 report of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics - Orthodox, Latin and Lutheran in the main. Though the number has been dropping in recent years, Christians still form the majority, and have enjoyed a largely peaceful coexistence with Muslim neighbours within the community. The Churches have no early-morning tannoy, however, and I have begun to feel the Muslim wake-up call as a reminder that I live in a sacred space, and not just a site of struggle.



St Mark's Syrian Orthodox Church, Old City, Jerusalem, during the Week of Prayers for Christian Unity 2023

I spent yesterday afternoon, as distinct from the evening, at Sabeel, the ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement in Israel and Palestine founded by Naim Ateek. Three hours of discussion with Omar Haramy, Sabeel's Director, in its centre in Shuafat, Jerusalem, left me challenged and encouraged. In the course of a strong critique of the Church, he made the point that we are not and must not be Good Friday Christians if that means we never arrive at the Sunday, the resurrection, the great 'Rise up!' of Easter. It is a word he addresses to the Churches in Jerusalem and to the Church of Scotland. As for hope,

we are hope, called to live our lives as expressions of God's hope, we should not think we have to look around for it. A necessary word, spoken in extremis, from our brother as we approach Holy Week, on the road to the cross and the resurrection.

Best wishes
Stewart



Kirk Session, St Andrew's Jerusalem & Tiberias, with Ecumenical Associates. LtoR front: Angleena Keizer, Rev Muriel Pearson, Joanna Oakley-Levstein (Reader), Heather Dobson (Clerk), and Anita Venter; Back: Rev Dr Stewart Gillan, Wendy Cohen, Doug Dick

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