

The Friends of St Andrew's Jerusalem Scholarship Report

11- 25 March 2023

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My first time in the Holy Land was in June 2022 I was blessed to have the opportunity to travel for a week in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory with fellow Trinity and New College ministry candidates. While there, we visited many breath-taking biblical sites. We also had the privilege of visiting **Tent of Nations, Wi'am, Sindyanna and House of Grace**. Each of these four visits were powerful, moving, and insightful.

There is much to learn from our partners in the Holy Land about how we work together across divides. As the Church of Scotland brings more churches together through new Presbytery Mission Plans, we need to understand how to create space for people to come together and celebrate the commonalities we share. Learning how people build resilience and hope in the face of immense challenges is so important in our own Scottish church context. As someone currently training for ministry, I am acutely aware that there is much that seeks to divide us not only as Christians but also within our own denomination. As a church, we have a responsibility for unity and actively including those on the margins of our society. Each of our partner projects have much to say to these issues. As I read and reflected on this topic for my dissertation (as my academic training for ministry I am completing an MTh) I decided to apply for the scholarship to allow me to go back and spend time with two of our partners. To say I was delighted to receive the award is an understatement! Without the scholarship this trip would have been impossible for me.

Sindyanna and Wi'am both agreed to me visiting them for several days to listen, learn and work. Kenny Roger, Rebecca McGonigle, Rev Muriel Pearson, and Rev Dr Stewart Gillan were quick to help me organise flights, give advice and support around accommodation. I am hugely grateful for all their support and kindness.

I flew to Tel Aviv on Saturday the 11th of March 2023. Rev Dr Stewart Gillan was there to meet me at the airport and so my adventure began.

On Sunday morning I very much enjoyed worshipping at **St Andrew's Jerusalem** where I was given the privilege of leading prayers. After the service as we had coffee, I had the chance to speak with many of those who had been at the service. This was the start of what was to become for me, the hallmark of my trip. Connections with people.

Members of the congregation went out of their way to give me travel advice and clear directions to Jerusalem Central Bus station. Thanks to them, and some helpful strangers, I found my way to Tiberias.

The three-hour journey was beautiful. As the bus stopped and my passport and blue slip were examined, I had my first experience of going through a checkpoint without fellow travellers. I stayed at Yakfie, above the manse, for six nights. I ate breakfast at the hotel staff room and had many thought-provoking conversations with the staff there. Husni is a Palestinian Israeli member of staff and is Muslim. We spent time talking about the importance of actions over words to bring people of different faith groups together. Husni is from Kfar Kana and knows many of the workers there. He was astonished that I was going there each day. He told me that not many people would travel there on their own to work with Sindyanna. He said if Christians do things like this, if they



Husni and I in the staff canteen Scots Hotel, Tiberias

help his friends by going out of their way, then he would come to our church and he would want to hear what we say. His words taught me more about ministry than many books have.

Sindyanna is in an industrial estate on the outskirts of Kfar Kana. Each day I travelled there by bus and on foot.



There were some adventures on my bus travels to Kfar Kana. Waiting for the bus to Tiberias (left) and the street where Sindyanna is located (right)

However, on my first day at Sindyanna Rev Muriel Pearson kindly drove me there and we met with Sindyanna's founder, Hadas Lahav. Hadas was generous with her time, and we discussed at length the challenges and highlights of setting up such an initiative, bringing people together and the ongoing task of helping others grasp the vision. Hadas is a gifted leader who has a clear grasp of the importance of vision in leadership and with that the ability to clearly inspire determination within a team. Vision and determination were clearly key elements in the success of Sindyanna.



Nadia and I in the visitor centre

During my time there, I worked closely with Nadia Giol, the visitor centre manager (pictured on the left) and her staff.

As we spent time together washing dishes, preparing food for visiting groups, setting up tables, cleaning, and packaging olive soap, I got to know the staff well and was made to feel like part of the Sindyanna family. I was even

invited to speak to a large group of post graduate

students visiting from Harvard University. Nadia, a Palestinian Israeli Muslim who is married to a Christian, and a volunteer Israeli Jewish volunteer both regularly shared their personal experiences of growing up to large groups of visitors. As they sat together and spoke, the differences in their stories were stark. The women speak with authenticity and realism it was clear that through listening to their stories, perceptions of what daily life is like in northern Israel were challenged. Speaking from the heart without a note they painted a picture of life in a place with

two distinct narratives. Every time I witnessed them speak it was deeply moving, people asked perceptive questions and left with much food for thought. Speaking on these very personal issues to so many groups is highly commendable and something which takes much emotional energy. It was clear that Sindyanna brings Arab and Israeli together through the production of olive oil, but they do so much more. Sindyanna, through the dedication and vision of the staff brings a powerful message of mutuality, common humanity, and forgiveness to so many people. Last year they had over six thousand foreign visitors through their doors and expect more this year. Their message that war is an unnecessary choice and that to live in peace we must love our neighbour is loud and clear.

Sindyanna has much to teach about innovation, this is clear through their use of hydroponics. We often ate lunch with vegetables grown in house in what looks like a series of white drainpipes. Problem solving was also evident through their teaching of basket weaving skills. Teaching these skills allows women who have caring responsibilities, to have the opportunity to work from home and build the self-confidence that comes from producing high quality products.

Sindyanna shows the difference that giving the opportunity of work rather than charity make not only in the life of a woman but also in her family. As we dried dishes together, one of the Arab women I worked with told me that she had never had the opportunity of education. With a smile on her face, she explained that her daughter is about to graduate from university and her younger daughter is about to begin her course there. All of this has been possible because of employment for their mother at Sindyanna. The women work hard and believe in what they are doing. There is a sense of pride in their work which is absolutely justified.

Each day I was there I was made welcome. Women shared their lunch together with me, they even liked to listen to my accent and learn Scottish words. We spoke about family and children



All heading home after a long day's work

and life. We discussed our common problems together. I was sad to leave but so grateful for all they had taught me.

From **Sindyanna** I went back to the Guest House before traveling on to Bethlehem. Ayman from the Guest House along with staff who also live in Bethlehem showed me much kindness and gave me their personal contact details should I have any problems while staying in the West Bank. At the Guest House I met Tom Burnham and Fiona Raison who both showed me incredible kindness, teaching me how to get through the Checkpoint on foot and letting me travel with them.



View from my room
in Bethlehem

I stayed in accommodation in **Bethlehem Bible College** for several nights. Along with many other people I met there, I reconnected with a group of young people from Canada whom I had met the week before at St Andrew's Jerusalem. These many connections were something that was a central theme of my experience. Each morning the Christian Palestinian college students have a time of devotions together to which I was warmly invited and had my first experience of worshipping God in Arabic which I will never forget. There were a mix of male and female students, and I was made welcome and even given flowers on Palestinian Mother's Day. As a theology student from Scotland, it was inspiring to see the dedication and passion of the theology students preparing for ministry in such a difficult situation.

For several days I visited Wi'am and worked alongside Zoughbi Zoughbi and Imad Nassar. Zoughbi and Imad were both generous with their time and we spoke at length about the situation faced by Palestinian people in the West Bank. Imad studied at the University of Edinburgh and was an able translator who could understand a Scottish accent!



Imad Nassar (centre)
Zoughbi Zoughbi (right).

We went together to a day of presentations at Bethlehem Municipality. Throughout the day Imad sat next to me and translated the fast-flowing Arabic so I felt included and understood what was happening. Many

people were there and they discussed plans for roads and pavements, new school buildings, repairing areas of Bethlehem, water, and general infrastructure. The councillors were passionate and professional, and their plans were highly commendable. Wi'am was represented to speak for the many local people they work alongside and to keep updated on what is happening locally. Imad and I joined a large discussion group about building a new school. They are currently working on ambitious plans for this and there was a heated discussion about parking and the problem of collecting children from school. In some ways all this sounded very familiar, and I could have been at a council meeting in Scotland. But as the conversations got deeper, the elephant in the room became larger, so large in fact it was difficult to see any way around it. It is so complicated for people to plan their day to day lives under occupation. As we all shared a beautiful buffet lunch together, I slowly was beginning to understand the importance of hope. Everyone was full of hope, even if that hope was tinged with fear that perhaps none of these things would be possible. Nonetheless, hope was alive. Hope that their situation would improve, hope that disabled children would be able to easily get to school, hope that their young people would have better lives. There was no lack of willingness try despite the circumstances.



The bible study at Wi'am (Zoughbi on the left, I'm third to his right)

One of the many groups Wi'am run is bible studies for local Christians. While I was there, I was invited to speak at a bible study on the raising of Lazarus. Just like the day at Bethlehem Municipality, people getting on with ordinary things in such extraordinary circumstances where striking. About forty of us sat outside the big imposing wall with its

gun towers and read from the gospel of John. As everyone read in Arabic I followed in my own bible. I spoke and Imad interpreted for me as we sat underneath the wall and spoke about Jesus' weeping for his friends. That is something that will stay with me for the rest of my life. After the study some of the women asked me to pray with them privately. I learned that there are somethings we just understand about

one another wither we speak the same language or not. There is a far deeper way that we connect than simply words.

On the day I had to leave Bethlehem to return to the Guest House in preparation for my flight home, Zoughbi accompanied me through Checkpoint 300 on foot. With many other men we boarded the Palestinian bus and headed into Jerusalem. We walked through West Jerusalem and Zoughbi took time to point out homes that had been built by Arabs. Together we read information signs about the Arab style houses in the leafy streets of Jerusalem. As we walked and spoke about these things, I realised how little I understood the deep pain of occupation.

These connections made in two weeks with many people from many backgrounds



Zoughbi reading the history of what are now Israeli homes.

have been such a gift to me. I have learned from others so much about what kindness to the stranger feels like when I am that stranger in a foreign land. Bus drivers, young Israeli soldiers, Palestinian shop keepers, Bible College students, hotel staff, fellow Church of Scotland workers, new friends made along the way, and of course the people who make up Sindyanna and Wi'am have all in different ways given me the experience of a lifetime.

I am sincerely grateful to The Friends of St Andrew's Jerusalem & Tiberias for not only awarding me the scholarship but giving me an experience that will undoubtedly not only shape my dissertation but shape my future ministry.

Trish Archibald – March 2023