

# the peacemakers



Pictures: Mark Woods

Stand-off – Israeli soldiers barred the way as Palestinians demonstrated against the closure of a road and an illegal settlement. BMS regional secretary Gordon McBain looks on (left); one woman was allowed through the barbed wire with her flag (right)

They work with children in kindergarten, women, Hamas leaders, Fatah leaders, and in villages where the Wall is being built and they are losing land.

There's a four-day period of introductory training, covering understanding conflict, understanding violence, the principles of non-violence, and practical strategies for non-violent resistance.

**I** SAW the latter in operation at a regular Holy Land Trust demonstration at the village of Gort al-Shama, a short drive from Bethlehem. A settlement had been built near the village on land confiscated from an Arab farmer who had deeded the land from Ottoman times. He collapsed and died of a heart attack when the settlers arrived.

The road will be shut to protect the settlers, and the villagers will need to take a long

detour to get from the village to Bethlehem, the nearest sizeable town.

We arrived - about 20 of us, a camera team, and a few local children - to find the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) expecting us - about 20 of them behind barbed wire, armed with assault rifles.

It was not a highly-charged affair, except for a moment when a settler brought coffee out to the soldiers. A hostile growl went up, and she was hurried away. The children tried to pull the barbed wire away with strips of cloth, but stopped when the soldiers told them to. It was a game, but they were nervous, as well.

Two of those leading the demonstration gave speeches in Arabic and English. 'We don't feel strong with guns, we feel strong with faith,' said one. They tried to question the soldiers, without success.

What did it achieve? Not much, on the face of it; but for Sami, a demonstration which did not end with rocks being thrown and shots being fired is a small piece of a wider strategy.

'We engage in non-violent resistance. The next step is dialogue, and then comes reconciliation.'

But more than this: Sami believes that non-violence is the way to the root causes of the conflict. 'The word that has been missing so far is equality,' he says. 'We lack equality. We have a group [Israel] which thinks that this is their land because of their ethnicity, and that no-one else should be there.'

And Israeli fear, he knows, is a factor as well - there's a sense of being embattled which leads them to regard all Palestinians as terrorists, and justifies in their eyes the encircling Wall.

'I went to Auschwitz, and it was a very powerful experience for me.

'But acts of violence by Palestinians are generalised; they become full-blown attacks against all of "us"; they connect instantly with the Holocaust.'

Non-violent resistance, he believes, is a way of breaking the cycle of fear and resentment, attack and reprisal.

Nevertheless, his view of the future would be bleak, if it weren't leavened with faith and hope. His office in Bethlehem looks directly out over Har Homa, the Israeli settlement built on Palestinian land which is now on the other side of the Wall - his 'inspiration', he calls

it ironically. Bethlehem, he says, is gradually being encircled; the settler movement is growing, and it is very powerful. 'They ignore the government - they believe that they have a bigger mandate.' And he distrusts Israeli motives. 'We think that people want peace. But the Israelis are prepared to live in contained conflict, war, if it takes 50 years.'

It's easy to see why he thinks this. But there are small signs of hope. Palestinian terrorist attacks from the West Bank have subsided - not, I'm told by more than one person, just because of the Wall, but because it's obvious they aren't changing anything. Sami has even spoken to Hamas, in control in Gaza. He asked them, 'How many inches of ground have you reclaimed? Is this just about retaliation and revenge?'

Furthermore, Israel is a democracy, and public opinion counts. The law still counts, too: the invading Hebron settlers were removed by force, even if the others still remain. And a remarkable statement by outgoing prime minister Ehud Olmert recently might yet indicate a shift in approach: he said his country will have to withdraw from 'almost all' the land it captured in the 1967 war and divide Jerusalem in order to secure a peace deal.

Still, there are mountains to climb.

Nevertheless, 'I say when the occupation ends, not if,' says Sami.


'I'm very hopeful that it will end. It's not about winning; if you win, someone else loses.

Neither side can win.'

Sami and Salim, in their different ways but motivated by the same Gospel, are seeking to transcend the rhetoric of victimhood and hatred which has characterised both Jewish and Arab relations for decades. Both have support from BMS.

If they and people like them do not succeed, the cycle of violence which has disfigured the Holy Land, poisoned international relations and may yet lead to a Middle Eastern nuclear war will continue.

'Blessed are the peacemakers,' indeed.

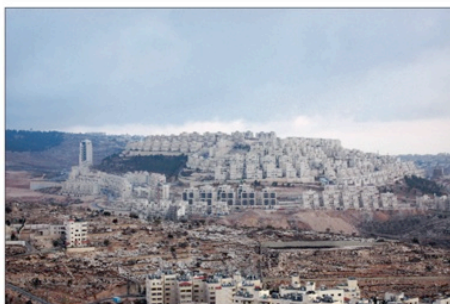


You can hear some Israeli and Palestinian voices on the BMS Christmas resource *A Saviour is Born*, as they contribute readings filmed on location. The resource includes a full set of support materials for Christmas services, and is available free from BMS.

## Can you help?

If you would like to donate to *The Baptist Times* / BMS World Mission Holy Land appeal please send a cheque made out to BMS World Mission and return it with this coupon to:

BMS World Mission  
PO Box 49  
129 Broadway  
Didcot  
Oxfordshire  
United Kingdom  
OX11 8XA



Controversial - The view of the Israeli Har Homa settlement which has been built on Palestinian land