

(Amal Nassar) My father had a dream before he died in 1976 to devote part of his land as a meeting point between locals and internationals.

(Narrator) That was Amal Nassar talking about how her family's environmental and educational farm Tent of Nations, came to be.

The family has owned the land for over a hundred years.

They started Tent of Nations because they wanted to bring people together as a first step towards peace. And they wanted people to see what was happening in their homeland.

Tent of Nations resides in the West Bank. All of the West Bank has been under Israeli military occupation since 1967.

(Amal Nassar) "We are here on the hilltop, and we are surrounded by five Israeli settlements, and they are taking our natural resources."

(Narrator) In 1991, the Israeli government declared the Nassar family's property as Israeli state land.

This action is illegal according to the Geneva Conventions.

The Nassar family has the paperwork proving their ownership of the land and frequently have taken the government to court to protect their right to stay.

The government has cut off their water and electricity, so the family gathers rainwater and uses solar power. They have managed to stay and have no plans to leave.

(Amal Nassar) This is my home, our roots on this land. Even under all these pressures and difficulties, obstacles, no I would never ever think to leave this land."

(Narrator) The family faces many challenges.

Just recently, in mid-May of this year the family left to pick up farming equipment and while they were away, their neighbor called to say their farm was on fire.

They rushed home and with the help of neighbors and people from the village, after seven hours, they were able to get the fire under control.

But all the trees they had planted in the last five months had been destroyed. This isn't the first time their farm has been damaged. We talked with Amal back in 2017 she reflected on how they had responded when their trees had been bulldozed by the Israeli army in the past.

(Amal Nassar) It's easy to get frustrated. People ask, what do you do now after all this destruction? We say, still the plan is there. We want to replant new trees and as Christians

we believe that we don't want to repay evil with evil but evil with good. So, we act positively and planting new trees.

We say we are not leaving, and we are not reacting. We want to go forward, continue our work acting in a positive way, looking forward for a better situation. Every time we feel ourselves that we fell down, again we say that we pray that God gives us the strength to stand up again. Still, we say, we have to follow the footsteps of Christ. We have to love our enemy. We have refused to be enemies.

(Narrator) We refuse to be enemies. This message is written on a sign on Tent of Nations land. They've written it in several languages including Hebrew so Israeli soldiers are able to read it in their own language. The Nassar family is committed to making peace with their neighbors.

(Amal Nassar) We are depending on really three basic things. On faith, hope and love to continue our struggle on this piece of land.”

MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN AGAIN.

(Scott) That was Amal Nassar, a Christian Palestinian woman from the Tent of Nations, her family's farm where MCC often takes learning tours.

Hosting people on their farm over the years has enabled the Nassar family to build strong relationships with people around the world. This is one way they are working towards a just peace.

Having an international presence on their land has also likely kept them safer from some of the challenges many Palestinians face on occupied territory – challenges like home demolitions.

Today on the show, we're talking about how relationship building is peacebuilding. How getting to know someone from a different context than you, hearing their stories and working alongside them connects you with their humanity and ultimately fosters peace.

I'm Scott Campbell and you're listening to Relief, Development and Podcast, a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN AGAIN)

The world watched the crisis in Palestine and Israel escalate in May, with new outbursts of violence, rockets and bombing.

Tensions mounted over the planned expulsion of up to 40 Palestinian families from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah to make room for more Israeli settlements.

Such settlements are illegal under international law and significantly harm the prospect of reaching a just and lasting end to the conflict in the region.

MCC has been present in Palestine and Israel since 1949 walking alongside Palestinian partners as they search for justice, peace and freedom. And we have been working with many courageous Israeli peace groups since Israel's occupation of the West Bank in 1967.

MCC has lead learning tours in the area for years, helping people understand the context and current realities. The tours are also a form of peacebuilding, helping shift perspectives through building relationships between different cultures.

Today I am speaking with Mike and Linda Shantz. They are long-time MCC supporters from Baden, Ontario who participated in an MCC learning tour to Palestine and Israel in 2019.

Welcome, Mike and Linda. I'm so glad you could join us.

(Linda) Thank you, Scott.

(Mike) Thank you, Scott, very happy to be here with you.

(Scott) Can you tell me why you wanted to go on a learning tour to Palestine and Israel? Why that trip? It's not a easy trip.

(Mike) It's not, and Linda and I both been fortunate to rub shoulders with some people who had have had experience, whether they've lived there or have participated in different programs in that area. I work with a gentleman who calls himself the other man from Nazareth. And in the construction work that I do, I meet quite a sorted group of people. And every now and then you come across someone who you click with on a different level. And that was the case with Ibrahim Bhutu. He was born in a refugee camp after his family had been displaced during the Nakba.

(Scott) Scott here, just jumping in quick to explain that the Nakba is what the Palestinians refer to as the catastrophe. When in 1948, and 1949, more than 700,000 Palestinians fled from their homes, or were forced out by militias. Back to Mike now talking about his Palestinian friend named Ibrahim.

(Mike) After working with him for quite some time, we dig deeper into both of our pasts he was quite interested in Mennonites and in anabaptism, and I was able to, to learn more from him as to what his life was like growing up that firsthand knowledge of his experience of displacement, getting back in, living under occupation. It opened a completely different set of parameters of how I view the Holylands. It's still the birthplace of our of our faith, the

fundamental places where Jesus walked, preached, talked, live grew up himself. That whole part is fascinating in and of itself, but to have it through the lens of someone who has lived through what is happening in those areas in the last 75 years, definitely added extra interest for me.

(Scott) What was your understanding of the region before you went?

(Linda) My brother dated a woman back. It was about 1990. And before I got to know, Emma, I didn't really know about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I just understood that it was Israel, there were terrorists, there was lots of conflict, and I didn't really get it. And then I met Emma. And Emma, she tended to, well her job, Emma's job was to document human rights violations against Palestinians and so she lived in Ramallah for quite some time, and was out when demonstrations were happening and things like that was hit with rubber bullets. And she, when she returned to Canada had quite disturbing stories. And that really affected me. So that was kind of my drawing card to learn more, and I think the only way to learn more is to go there and talk to people and sit down. And when we saw that MCC was offering a learning tour, and I said something to Mike, he said, book it. There is no hesitation on our part.

(Mike) Having grown up in central Ontario, Mennonite background, we are a Bible focused faith group. The Old Testament talks about the promised land and God's people. And that's kind of the slant that you have. And news says that Israel needed a homeland and that was afforded them after the World War Two and the atrocities of that time period. It all makes sense. This is where that people should be. So from a standpoint, I wouldn't say it was a key part of our faith development, the focus on God's people in the Holy Land, but it wasn't something that we really contested until you start looking at how that transition is happening. And you start asking questions about that.

(Linda) We also had the opportunity to learn from our children. Our three young adult children travelled to the Holy Land through a program called Yella, which I think was organized through MCC and MCC, and, and it's particularly for young adults. And so our,

our eldest son went in 2015. And our other son and daughter went in 2018. And they came home with stories that, well, our supper table conversation, evolved around these stories for quite some time. And they were impassioned about what is going on there. And we learned a lot from them.

(Scott) How did the things that you started to understand, connect with your personal faith and theology? Where were there aha moments for you?

(Mike) When you travel, and you land, and you're immediately in Bethlehem, it's hard not to notice that all the stories that you've learned from the Bible as a child growing up and into adulthood, that you're standing in that presence. So that aha moment, for me was, I'm where this actually happened, which living in a young country like Canada, that's a very foreign feeling.

But it soon came to me to be the notion that these places aren't what's special. At least not now. It's what has happened there thousands of years ago. So I don't ever regret having gone over there to see where this has happened and to feel the presence of the history of Jesus. But I was surprised at how little touching that stone meant to me. It brought the stories to life. And I think that's where the importance came. But it was hard to, to really benefit completely from that with a separation wall and all the other things that are happening in that area. So, I could feel the richness of the history that has happened. To drag my fingers through the Sea of Galilee was a very spiritual moment. But that seems to be as far removed from apartheid walls and things of that nature as you can get when you're there.

(Linda) And I think for me, I wanted to experience what where Jesus walked, where Jesus lived. All the stories and narratives that I've heard throughout my entire life. And they call it the Holy Land. And for me, the holy moments, were with the people. They weren't in the places. They were wonderful places. They were magnificent. They were, some were breathtaking. But the holy moments were with the people we met and the conversations we have.

(Mike) The strongest thing that came out of it for me though was, and it was a theme that was mentioned by one of the people that we had encountered. I hold the Bible important and true. But it can only have value when it's taken through the filter of Jesus. If you remove that filter, then we're allowed to take our own interpretations of it. And that's when I think we, as a humanity, start to make mistakes. We have to interpret and view the Bible through the lens that was given us by God. And that's Jesus. And I think, when you hold that true and important is when better clarity is had.

(Scott) Do you have any stories of people who you met who were particularly impactful? Linda, you mentioned that the highlights for you the holy moments were the people tell us about some of those people.

(Linda) There are so many stories we could tell Scott. One I particularly was impacted by was a time that we spent with military court watch. And this is a group of lawyers. And we got to sit down with two of them, and talked about what they do. And Military Court Watch, they were established in 2013. And they have two kind of basic principles that all children detained by the Israeli authorities are entitled to rights and protections guaranteed under international law, and that there can be no legal justification for treating Palestinian and Israeli children differently under Israel's military legal system. So Military Court Watch, these people, it was amazing what they do. And it's horrific what they have to do. Because they advocate and educate in the region and beyond.

So we met Gerard and Salwa, two of the core co-founders. And they collect evidence from the children and documented interviewing children as young as 12, who have been arrested and detained. And everything they document, the stories and the evidence that they collect is in violation of international law, let alone human rights. And this profoundly affected me. I just could not believe that children would be incarcerated.

And we actually drove by a prison that our leader Joanna pointed, and she said, do you see that small place outside the walls there where there's another area? That's where the children play, that are at the prison. And it was just heartbreaking to hear this story. And to have these two, Gerard and Selma, just tell the stories like it's commonplace. It's normal. It's, it's mind boggling on so many levels.

(Scott) There's been a new outbreak of violence in the region over these last several weeks. And at the time of this recording, there's a tentative ceasefire in place. What has it been like for you to see what's been happening in that region after so recently visiting? And how do you view the news coming from that region now differently?

(Mike) We've seen a broadcast on CNN, and the interviewer, I can't remember who the interviewer was, was interviewing the Israeli ambassador to the United States. And I knew I wasn't going to be pleased with what he had to say. But I definitely wanted to hear what he had to say to see how he would slant it. And he referred to the activities happening as terrorist activities, and that Palestine and Hamas are guilty of two times war crimes, war crimes against Israel, and then war crimes against their people for causing Israel to retaliate for the initial war crimes that Hamas was committing.

He referred to the murders that were happening to Israelis. And didn't refer too much to the tenfold number of deaths that had happened to civilians on the Palestinian side. So I heard exactly what I was expecting to hear from this ambassador. And the interviewer tried to pin him down to comment on the cause of this. And he smirked and said, our government did not cause this, we actually tried to keep it from happening by appealing to the Supreme Court to make a ruling on it. But the violence came out anyway. And we have the right to defend ourselves. And that's exactly what we will be doing. That's what I was expecting him to say. And he came through in flying colors on every aspect that I expected to hear from him. I don't recall seeing CNN interview someone as prominent from the Palestinian side. But I will say that they did ask questions to make it difficult for the ambassador, but he had every answer ready that he knew he was going to need.

(Linda) I think for me, once I heard the conflict was happening, I needed to know the source of this conflict. And, again, as Mike has said, the news reporting kind of didn't go there. They didn't go to what happened at the Temple Mount at Al-Aqsa Mosque, and the settlements that are happening and taking over of people's homes in the West Bank. And so not having the accurate reporting really bothered me because, and I found I couldn't watch the news, or I would just have to walk away, because I found it very frustrating.

And then there was the worry that I felt for the people who we met and for the MCC reps that are there. And are they safe? Are they are they cared for? Are they in danger? And how you can possibly look at the images of what happened in Gaza and not have your heart break? I don't know. I don't know how you cannot have your heart break when you see what's going on there. It's heartbreaking.

(Scott) Has this experience, changed your theology at all?

(Mike) I believe in a faith that is God-centered and focused on the teachings and the acts of Jesus on the time that he was on the face of this earth. But I refuse to believe that what is happening there in God's name is perpetuated by the God that I believe in. And if it is, then I would have to strongly question the basis of my faith. But I do not believe that the strides that are being made to create a homeland for the Jewish people is done in a way that God would be happy with, especially if it's filtered through the lens of Jesus.

(Linda) If we have an understanding that God is love, the people that we met, showed love. Love not only for us, complete foreigners coming into their homes and their businesses, and they would host us and be most kind and gracious, but love for the land, love for their community, love for their family love for their enemy. There is so many people who spoke with kindness and love and it's just it for me it's strengthened my faith in knowing that there is love everywhere. And God's love is everywhere. And God is in Bethlehem and God is in Ramallah and Hebron and Jerusalem and Tiberius, and everywhere God is everywhere, and that there are people who show the face of God, to so many people. It's not all violence and hardship.

(Scott) Why do you think it's important to have experiences like a learning tour, where you learn about people and perspectives, who are different from your own?

(Linda) It enriches your life. To learn more about another place, and another people, it's so much more than being a tourist on a bus, it's these conversations over food and sitting across the table and looking into one another's eyes. It's a whole different level of relationship.

(Mike) It keeps you from being sheltered and narrow minded. It broadens your approach, it broadens the set of parameters that you view the whole world by not just that region, even. It enriches how you look at things and how you view even your own existence, even when you are home again. And then you're not left to understand the world through the very narrow focus that is given through prominent news sources and in media sources like that.

(Scott) We also have a question from a listener that came in through Instagram, Amanda Thiessen Barkey would like to know, how do you intentionally create peace in your own circle of influence?

(Linda) That's a really challenging question. Living in a privileged world that we live in. But I think the skill of listening and acknowledging other people's pain, other people's experience, and validating that continues to be a part of my going forward from this trip.

(Mike) Peace can only happen when there's justice for both sides. And I think that's the essence of what I heard over and over again, from Palestinian people. To have the tables turned and to have Israel completely removed from their existence, they would say that they will these people have created a life here as well. So, our goal is not to, to have them removed from the land that we once had. It's to have justice for all who are here now. And for me, that's, that's the best that I can hope for myself is that you have the wherewithal to seek justice for everyone who you encounter, whether it's in business and church, in school,

or whatever it is that you're involved with, not to have a “me first” approach to things but to look at everyone that you encounter into to try to come up with what's best for everyone.

(Scott) What connection do you see between peacebuilding and hearing other people's stories and experiences.

(Mike) You can't have one without the other. And that is why the separation or apartheid wall will never allow for peace to happen. Because the people are separated so they aren't meeting each other. They aren't allowed to know each other. So, to meet with someone to hear their story, to understand who they are as a person, what their goals in life are, what their beliefs are, what they feel strongly about. I don't see how you could have the hatred for them at that point that would allow you to call them an enemy. And if you don't have an enemy, I think you're a big step closer to peace. So, by meeting these people and hearing their stories, I think that's the essence of peacebuilding.

(Linda) Our last day that we were in Jerusalem, we met with a man named Naim Ateek, and he's one of the founders of Sabeel, which is a Christian theological association, that I'm probably not getting this completely accurate but they promote peace and they're about peacebuilding between Israelis and Palestinians and I just want to share his final words to us because I found that really moving and really important for us to carry this home with us. And he said, “there's four things that you need to remember. One: stand up for justice and truth, without picking up the sword. Two: rise above the ways of the world, but never abandon the poor and oppressed. Three: seek the humanity of the oppressed. Four: be loyal to your faith, without adhering to strict or narrow religion. And then he finished with this wonderful quote: May God bless you with foolishness. So, you might believe that you can change things. Naim, he's a wise man, and that had a profound effect on me, going forward in my life.

(Scott) Thank you both so much for speaking with me and for sharing your experiences. I've so appreciated this conversation.

(Linda) Thank you Scott for listening and for giving us this opportunity.

(Mike) That was the biggest requests that we encountered when we were meeting with people on our trip was that we've shared our stories with you please go and share them with others. So, you've afforded us that afforded us the ability to make that happen.

(Scott) Well, that's my pleasure. And it's the great gift we have working in the world that we do with MCC Being able to amplify the voices of our partners and those that we work with to inform those around the world of, of the work that's being done.

Through MCC, by MCC, by our partners, through our partners and with those who are in are in great challenges in their life, whether they be people who are displaced or caught in conflict or lacking the resources they need to survive or for their family to survive. So, it does feel like a great privilege sometimes being able to share these stories.

(Linda) Absolutely, absolutely.

(Scott) Well, I think you've done a great job representing the stories that you heard and if one of the requests upon your return was to share their experiences through your experiences, I think you've done a great job. Thanks for sharing.

(Linda) Thank you, Scott for the opportunity.

(Scott) That was Mike and Linda Shantz who attended an MCC learning tour to Palestine and Israel in 2019.

Next month, I'm speaking with Sara Melgarejo (Mel Ga Ray Ho), a project coordinator for MCC in Colombia and Ecuador. She'll talk about how integrating peacebuilding and development is important in the region that has a long history of armed conflict.

If you had a chance to sit down with Sara to ask her a question, what would you want to know?

Send us your questions by email at podcast@mcc.org and we might feature your question on the show.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was produced by Meghan Mast and the head producer is Emily Loewen.

Thank you again to Mike and Linda Shantz for speaking with me, and special thanks to Amal Nassar at the beginning of the show for sharing her story. Thanks also to listeners Amanda Thiessen Barkey, Graham Macdonald and Hlobisile Nxumalo for submitting questions. Graham, Mike and Linda did not get a chance to visit Wi'am, so could not speak to how the good folks there are doing, although we hear from the reps in Palestine and Israel that the area where their office is in Bethlehem has been one of the hot spots for demonstrations, they have stayed safe so far and pray that will continue. They have noticed an increase in solidarity and demonstrations of support online, and they hope that the current ceasefire could be the start of new stage that leads to a real solution that ends the occupation. For listeners who don't know, Wi'am is a Palestinian conflict transformation center.

That's it for this episode. If you like this podcast, it would be great if you could subscribe and rate it and tell your friends to give us a listen!

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks, and take good care.

(MUSIC PLAYS US OUT)