

WDC Israel Palestine Task Force Report to WDC Annual Assembly August 2023

<http://mennowdc.org/committees-task-forces/>

Members: Bob Atchison, Katie Mitchell-Koch, Esther Koontz, Michael Poage, Kathy Neufeld Dunn -WDC staff representative

Purpose: To facilitate the implementation of *Seeking Peace in Israel Palestine*, the resolution overwhelmingly passed by Mennonite Church USA in July 2017. To promote education and advocacy to bring peace and justice to the on-going crisis in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel. The Task Force has met 5 times since the 2022 Annual WDC Assembly.

Activity Highlights

- The task force shared their annual report and a video at the 2022 WDC Annual Assembly.
- **Connecting with the Mennonite Jewish Working Group** – Recognizing that it is important to engage simultaneously in opposing antisemitism while advocating for peace and Justice in Palestine, Bob Atchison joined the Mennonite Jewish Working Group and participated in their 2023 meetings including their Advent study of Amy Jill Levine’s book *Light of the World*.
- **Gaza Twinning** – WDC continues to have two congregations participating in MennoPIN’s Gaza Twinning Initiative, Manhattan Mennonite Church with Youth Vision Society and Lorraine AV Mennonite Church with Al-Taghreed. These relationships include bi-monthly meetings, relationship and cultural development, and advocacy.
- **MennoCon23 Seminars**
 - ✓ On Tuesday, July 4th, Bob Atchison, Tareq Abuhailima, and Dave Janzen presented the seminar, ***Creating Relationships and Understanding in Gaza*** – featuring MennoPIN’s Gaza Twinning Initiative which encourages congregations to engage in relationships with groups in Gaza which including prayer, listening, support and advocacy to address poverty, violence and human rights abuses. Manhattan Mennonite Church and Youth Vision Society (YVS) was the first twinning partnership. Relationships and projects with Tareq Abuhailima of YVS developed into a graduate assistantship at Bluffton University where he co-directs *Lion and the Lamb*. The seminar offered experiences growing up in Gaza under the Israeli blockade, wars and the Twinning relationships with Manhattan Mennonite Church (KS) and Fellowship of Hope (IN). Fellowship of Hope twins with Gaza YMCA.
 - ✓ On Wednesday, July 5th, Esther Koontz presented the seminar ***Kansas Wouldn’t Let Me Teach Math, Because I Boycott Israel***, and shared her experiences which began in the fall of 2017, when she was asked to sign a loyalty pledge stating that she would not boycott Israel in order to get paid for her side job as a math teacher trainer for the state of Kansas. Esther called the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU,) sued the state of Kansas and won her preliminary injunction before Kansas changed the law, and she lost her legal standing. Esther's story included how her local Mennonite church first gave her the idea to boycott Israel because of Israel's unjust treatment of Palestinians and then how her church stood by her during the difficult decision to sue and stand up to this first amendment rights violation. A five-minute short film about Esther's story, made by the producer of

Boycott, a new film documenting the story of three other individuals who stood up to similar state anti-boycott laws was shared.

- On July 5th, in conjunction with MennoCon23, our Task Force partnered with MennoPIN to host a viewing & discussion of *Just Vision's Boycott Film* at Grace & Holy Trinity Cathedral in KC. Following the film's viewing Esther Koontz will lead a panel discussion with MennoPIN Steering Committee members and engage participants in dialogue surrounding the issue.
- **Grants** – Bob Atchison wrote two grants to help cover travel and other expenses Tareq Abuhailima would incur presenting seminars at MenoCon23, WDC Annual Assembly and other Mennonite Churches and public venues. Mennonite Church USA's Justice Fund Grant awarded \$1,574 to attend MennoCon23 and WDC Resource Commission \$1,200 for annual assembly.
- **Growing Up in Gaza, Bringing Peace and Justice to Palestine/Israel**–Tareq Abuhailima, a graduate student with Bluffton University, shared his experiences growing up in Gaza, working for the Youth Vision Society, and his "Gaza Twinning" relationship with Manhattan Mennonite Church at a variety of Mennonite churches and public venues. The events created a safe space for education and dialogue about the Israel-Palestine conflict and also addressed antisemitism and other issues that surround this intractable conflict.