



A Wall that Divides

This discussion guide was created to inspire discussion during screenings of the documentary film *Open Bethlehem*. The film offers an intimate look by filmmaker Leila Sansour at the iconic city as she chronicles the building of the separation wall in her hometown of Bethlehem. The film spans ten momentous years in the life of Bethlehem, revealing a city of astonishing beauty and political strife. *Open Bethlehem* is also an organization that advocates globally to keep Bethlehem open and to work to ensure that the city remains an example of an open and multi-faith city in the Middle East.

THE CONTEXT

Generations of Palestinians have been living as refugees since 1948 when the State of Israel was created, which displaced more than 700,000 people. In fact, the number of Palestinian refugees at that time was so high that the United Nations created a new body to tend to the needs of this stateless population: the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Today, the UNRWA provides services to around 5 million Palestinian refugees. Approximately one-third of these people live in 58 camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza and the West Bank, while the rest live in cities near the camps. Social and economic conditions in the camps, as well as in Gaza and the West Bank, are very poor, with high population density, cramped living conditions and inadequate basic infrastructure such as roads and sewers.

This situation has affected the entire region of the Middle East, and ongoing violence and conflict continue to deny people a safe and peaceful existence. Development and Peace has been working in the region since 1967 to take action in solidarity with those suffering.

Today, Development and Peace's program is focused on promoting peace for all people in the region, supporting access to justice for people whose rights have been violated, and relieving the suffering of for all people in Gaza. Development and Peace supported the production of the documentary *Open Bethlehem* to help bring to light the impacts of the construction of the separation wall on a city that is a symbol of religious and cultural diversity.

A QUESTION OF LAND, LODGING, AND LABOUR

At the heart of the conflict between Israel and Palestine is the question of land and who it belongs to. For years, Israel has expanded its borders into Palestinian territories with the development of settlements. This has displaced millions of Palestinians. Those who still live in their homes face the threat of having their land annexed for the construction of a wall being built by Israel to create a barrier between Palestinian neighbourhoods and Israel. This wall, which was built in the context of violence and insecurity,



is supposed to ensure protection. However, it has been deemed illegal by the International Court of Justice because it removes land from Palestinians, separates families from one another, cuts off Palestinians from employment and education, and makes access to goods and services nearly impossible. In effect, this wall denies Palestinians access to land, lodging and labour – the three conditions Pope Francis names as the pillars for integral human development.

“... government leaders must do everything possible to ensure that all can have the minimum spiritual and material means needed to live in dignity and to create and support a family, which is the primary cell of any social development. In practical terms, this absolute minimum has three names: lodging, labor, and land; and one spiritual name: spiritual freedom, which includes religious freedom, the right to education and other civil rights.”

— Pope Francis, Speech at the United Nations, September 25th, 2015



COMMUNITIES DIVIDED BY THE WALL: A CASE STUDY

The Salesians of Don Bosco have been based in the Cremisan Valley in Bethlehem since the 19th century. The order began with a monastery, and in the 1950s, a convent was established. The convent has grown into an integral part of the surrounding community of Beit Jala, offering educational services for minimal fees, regardless of gender, race or religion. Today, the convent runs a primary school, a daycare, tutoring, extracurricular activities, and summer camp. The Sisters teach values of truth, justice and peaceful coexistence, but the events of the outside world are making it harder for them to impart these teachings, which are critically needed in this occupied land.

The Israeli military had issued an order to seize Palestinian lands in the Cremisan Valley to build the separation wall, which will cut off the Sisters, as well as the monastery, from the community that it so diligently serves.

Development and Peace's partner, the Society of St. Yves, has been representing the Salesian Convent and accompanying the religious community in its struggle since 2010. This Catholic centre for human rights takes on the legal cases of the most disenfranchised. It helps them access justice in the midst of daily human rights abuses. They are preventing

housing demolitions, supporting individuals with disabilities in registering for benefits, and ensuring that families can see their loved ones, who may live on the other side of Israeli checkpoints.

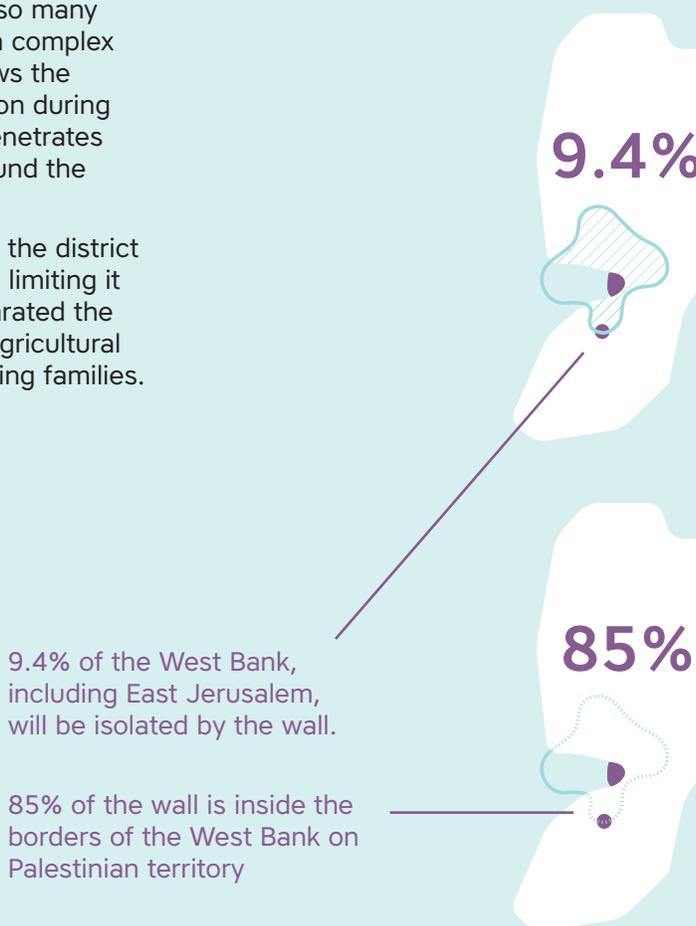
With support from rulings by the International Court of Justice, the legal team at the Society of St. Yves has been petitioning the Israeli courts to stop the construction of the wall in the Cremisan Valley and the surrounding community of Beit Jala. After a series of legal challenges, in January 2016 the Israeli High Court rejected the petitions lodged by the Salesians, and held that Israel can build the wall as planned, while keeping a 225 metre gap in the wall in order to keep both the convent and the monastery connected together and providing "facilitated access" to the communities they serve.

This problematic solution is just one of a series of both setbacks and successes, and the Society of St. Yves, with the support of Development and Peace, is not giving up hope in its pursuit to restore dignity to those faced with gross injustices and bringing hope that justice is possible.

A SECURITY WALL OR A LAND-GRABBING WALL?

The separation wall, which divides so many families and communities, follows a complex route. Some of it, about 15%, follows the “green line” which was decided upon during the ceasefire in 1949, but it also penetrates deeply into the West Bank to surround the Israeli settlements.

In Bethlehem, the wall has reduced the district to less than 13% of its original size, limiting it to its urban core. The wall has separated the community of Bethlehem from its agricultural land and water sources, while dividing families.



150 Palestinian communities own land that falls between the green line and the wall.



62% of the wall is already built; 10% is under construction; and 28% of it is in the planning stage.



Currently, 11,000 Palestinians are isolated between the separation wall and the green line in the West Bank. By the time it will be built as planned, 25,000 more people will be isolated from the West Bank.

Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

A LEGAL OBLIGATION TO TAKE ACTION

In July 2014, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon stated: “the implications of the wall go far beyond its legality. The wall severely restricts Palestinian movement and access throughout the West Bank, cuts off land and access to resources needed for Palestinian development, and continues to undermine agricultural and rural livelihoods throughout the West Bank.” He said this on the 10th anniversary of the Advisory Opinion of the United Nations International Court of Justice, which found that the Israeli construction of the wall within the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including in and around East Jerusalem, violated Israel’s obligation under international law.

This Advisory Opinion called on Israel to cease the construction of the wall, bring down the parts that had already been built, and halt the severe restrictions on the freedom of movement of Palestinians living in the West Bank. In addition, the Advisory Opinion pointed out that all States were not only under an obligation to recognize the illegal situation resulting from the construction of the wall, but that States Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention had the additional obligation to ensure compliance by Israel with international humanitarian law. Canada is in fact a Party to this convention, and so legally has this obligation.

BISHOPS SPEAK OUT

5

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has asked the Canadian government to take action to propose a more humanitarian approach to the Cremisan situation, and to seek alternative approaches through dialogue and negotiation. This echoes a statement made by the Coordination of Bishops’ Conferences in support of the Church in the Holy Land, who sent these messages:

“To the Christian community of Beit Jala, where the Israeli confiscation of land and the expansion of the separation wall in the Cremisan Valley, in violation of international law, further undermine their presence in the Holy Land, you are not forgotten. Throughout 2016 we shall raise your plight nationally and internationally.”

“To those Israelis and Palestinians who seek peace, you are not forgotten. The right of Israel to live in security is clear, but the continuing occupation eats away at the soul of both occupier and occupied. Political leaders across the world must put greater energy into a diplomatic solution to end nearly 50 years of occupation and resolve the ongoing conflict so the two peoples and three faiths can live together in justice and peace.”



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1

What images come to mind when you think of Bethlehem? How do you feel when you think of a wall being built around and through this ancient holy city?

2

Walls have been used to protect and divide for centuries. From the Great Wall of China to the Berlin Wall, people and governments have used walls to divide. Do you remember when the Berlin Wall came down? What did it signify for you?

3

The documentary film *Open Bethlehem* invites us to take a journey to Bethlehem to learn more about the people who live there and their cultures. Have any of you taken this journey? What were your impressions?

4

The separation wall divides families and communities, and threatens their livelihoods. How do you feel when you imagine a wall being built between you, your family, and the place where you make your living?

5

Do you believe this wall is being built for security? What do you think are some of the other reasons that the wall is being built?

6

The building of the wall creates division between the populations in the region, rather than promoting communication and reconciliation. What are some methods for promoting healing and reconciliation among the communities who live in the Holy Land?

7

How can we learn more about the realities facing people affected by the separation wall? What are some ways we can show solidarity with them?

8

Many Palestinians have become refugees and this situation has been continuing for generations, where people born in refugee camps are raising their children there. Development and Peace is currently providing shelters for refugees in Gaza. When you think of the word "home", what do you think of? Why is it important to build long-term housing for Palestinian refugee families?



To enrich your discussion, read an interview with Leila Sansour, Director of *Open Bethlehem*, at devp.org/en/emergencies/palestine#resources

A PRAYER FOR PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

«They will hammer their swords into ploughshares and their spears into sickles. Nation will not lift sword against nation, no longer will they learn how to make war.»

— Isaiah 2:4

God of peace, bearer of hope, we seek Your help for the peoples of the Middle East.

Quiet the clamour of war and guide us towards peace.

Where there is hatred and division sow seeds of calm and openness.

Where there is destruction help us to rebuild.

Where children are crying bring an end to tears.

Shelter your peoples and protect them Guide them and keep them from harm.

Show us how to break down the barriers of history and fear and breathe whispers of hope.

Amen

Written by Linda Jones, CAFOD



The *Open Bethlehem* project invites us to learn more about the situation of the ancient and iconic town of Bethlehem, and to work to make Bethlehem an open city.

openbethlehem.org



Development and Peace has been working in the Middle East since the organization was founded in 1967. In collaboration with its partners in the region, Development and Peace stands firm in its commitment to promote human rights, and the principles of non-violence and mutual respect between the different communities involved. By giving to Development and Peace, you contribute directly to building a more just world.

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