



Central
District
Conference

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Mennonite Church USA

focus

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KNOWING CHRIST'S LOVE—ANSWERING GOD'S CALL

A call to be prophets ... to raise our voices

Stories of the lives and deaths of two girls, one 12 years old and one 14 years old, will make a difference for the future of Israel and Palestine, their parents believe.

In late October Rami Elhanan, father of one of the girls, and George and Najwah Sa'adeh, parents of the other, traveled through the U.S. to tell the stories of their pain and to call for reconciliation and an end to Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. The Missional Church Committee of Central District Conference helped to sponsor their presentations at Bluffton University, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, and Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship, Berne, Ind.

George and Najwah are Palestinian Christians and Rami is an Israeli Jew, and they have joined more than 600 other bereaved families in Parents Circle Family Forum, choosing the path of reconciliation and forgiveness.

The families' stories

Rami

Rami's father survived one year in the Auschwitz extermination camp in Germany and met Rami's



Najwah (second from left), Rami (center) and George (right) posed with hosts after the presentation at AMBS. Janeen Bertsche Johnson (left), member of the CDC Missional Church Committee, helped to host the three speakers. Also with them is Christopher Beachy, who is the fundraising and communications coordinator at American Friends of the Parents Circle.

mother when she nursed him back to health. Rami served in the Israeli army, became a graphic designer, married a university professor and became father to three sons and a daughter.

"On first of September 1997, this life of ours was blown up into millions of pieces by two Palestinian suicide bombers. They killed five people that day, including three girls. One of those was my 14-year-old daughter."

The first reaction was anger, he said. But "after a long and complicated process, you ... ask: What could cause someone to be that angry, that desperate, that hopeless that he is willing to blow himself up? Do you have some responsibility for it? And the most important question of all: What can you do to prevent this terrible pain from happening to others?"

When Rami gathered with other bereaved families he met not only Israeli families that he respected, but also Palestinian families. "From that moment on, I devote my life to go everywhere possible to convey this message: We can break once and for all this cycle of violence. We can start by talking to each other, because it will not stop unless we talk. Once you are able to listen to the pain of the other, you can expect them to listen to your pain. Then and only then you start this long journey called reconciliation with maybe some kind of peace in the end."

George and Najwah

George and Najwah are Christians living in Bethlehem. In March 2001, several months after the start of the Second Intifada, they were driving with their two daughters, 15 and 12 years old. Their car was ambushed and Israeli soldiers fired more than 300 shots at the car. George, Najwah and Marian, the older daughter, were injured; Christine was killed.

A call (continued)

George said, "I believe, as a Christian, forgiveness is essential for us, because there is no hatred in our heart. We use our forgiveness to help each other and to live in peace. We are not against each other, not even against the soldiers who killed our daughter. The strength we have to speak about peace and forgiveness is from God. I can't tell you how—it is in our heart, because I believe God loves us all."



Najwah speaks at AMBS; George and Rami are seated behind her.

Janeen Bertsche Johnson

Reconciliation and forgiveness

Rami

"Jews do not forgive; Jews do not forget. It's not in our tradition. We love our victimhood. But for me, there is something else between forgiveness on the one hand and hatred in the other hand. There is something in the middle that is reconciliation. I will not use my victimhood to victimize other people."

George

"We follow our Lord Jesus Christ and his example. He was the first one to forgive. The Holy Spirit will guide us in this impossible mission. There is hope that we will achieve something and bring peace to a new generation. Yes, we have suffered, but we don't want other families to suffer. The only weapon we have in our hands is forgiveness."

Rami

"I lost many friends because of my activity [calling for reconciliation], but I have gained a new family, new friends, new language, new narrative, new history."

George

"It is not easy for us. We are speaking for peace and reconciliation, when there is more killing. When we speak about peace and justice, we say this is our right. I cannot speak about peace and justice, and then be shooting."

Rami

"Sometimes walking into a high school class [to speak to students about reconciliation] is

like walking into the open mouth of a volcano. Children are angry; children are full of fear. There is a sea of blood between the nations, and an ocean of emotions. The very sight of a Palestinian and an Israeli walking into the class is a kind of an earthquake. For most of these students it is the first time they have laid eyes on a Palestinian and an Israeli who are not fighting each other, who are calling each other brother. This is a crack in the wall through which a little light comes in."

George

"We let them know that we suffer. When they join the army, if there is one person who recognizes our humanity, then we have achieved something."

Primary message

George

"We want to live in peace and justice. We are all human. I believe this is the Holy Land and it should be for all of us to visit and worship. I as a Palestinian seek to live freely without obstacles, without checkpoints, with a good neighborhood, respected by my neighbors. That's all."

Rami

"Occupation is the essence of evil. It must be fought by any way possible—it is the reason we lost our children. We demand of you to be prophets, to be against the injustice. Don't be pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli, but be against the occupation. With the utmost respect to my culture, my history and my people, being against occupation is not anti-Semitism."

George

"It is very important to raise our voice for peace and justice. Let us raise our voice in all our churches, like when Jesus came and he raised his voice for peace and justice."

Members of Mennonite Church USA are asked to become informed about issues of Israeli occupation of Palestinian land in preparation for discussion and voting on a resolution opposing the occupation at the MC USA convention next summer. The revised resolution is available for review on the MC USA website: mennoniteusa.org/news/israel-palestine-resolution-revision-available-review/

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