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# THE RAMALLAH FRIENDS MEETING: EXAMINING 100 YEARS OF PEACE AND JUSTICE WORK<sup>1</sup>

MAIA CARTER HALLWARD

## HISTORY OF THE RAMALLAH FRIENDS MEETING

The Quaker presence in Ramallah, Palestine began after an 1868 visit to the area by Eli and Sybil Jones of New England Yearly Meeting and Alfred Lloyd Fox and Ellen Clare Miller of Britain Yearly Meeting. When stopping over in Ramallah, a small Christian town, they met fifteen year old Miriam Karam, who asked them to start a school for girls and volunteered to be the first teacher. The Quakers went home, raised funds, and returned in 1869 to set up classes for girls. In 1889 classes became institutionalized as a boarding school, called the Girls Domestic Training Center. The school was highly successful, and the community requested that Friends establish a school for boys, which they did in 1901 (Edwards-Konic, 2008; Leonard, 1989).

The American Friends Mission Board, which was responsible for running the schools, was concerned that Friends lacked a meeting house in Ramallah. A house was rented for ten years as the place of worship for those connected with the schools. A monthly meeting was established in 1890 for five years, and was later revived in 1901 by Elihu and Almy Grant (Brinson, Kanaana, Rought-Brooks, Campuzano, & Bergen, 2010; C. H. Jones, 1944). In 1906 members of the Ramallah community purchased land to construct a meetinghouse half way between the Girls Training Home and the land that had been purchased for the Friends Boys School. While today this site is in the center of downtown Ramallah, in 1910, when the meetinghouse was completed, it stood alone, with no buildings nearby. Foreign Quakers from Haverford College helped raise the money to construct the actual meetinghouse, but local Friends furnished the benches and other internal furnishings. A local Ramallah Friend said, "I'll start with myself. I'll offer two benches. And then

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his friends were embarrassed that he offered and they didn't. And so in one sitting, they managed to get twenty benches for the meeting.” (Author Interview, 2010). Unlike the schools, the meeting remained under the ownership of local Friends, not the American Friends Mission Board, and the property was registered as *Kiniset Arabia le Friends*, the Arab Friends Church.

The meeting prospered in its early years, with attendance as many as 154 when school was in session and up to 400 children attending Sunday School in some years in the 1920s (Brinson, et al., 2010). The Sunday School was one of the Meeting's most successful outreach programs, with some non-Christians and many Christians from other denominations attending. At both the re-dedication of the Ramallah Friends Meeting in March 2005 and the Centennial Celebration in March 2010, local dignitaries including the Governor and the Mayor (neither of whom is Quaker) shared their memories of attending Sunday School at the Quaker meeting. Although a number of Friends assisted with the Sunday School over the years, it was the particular ministry of Ellen Audeh Mansour, who had a special gift of storytelling. As one local Friend shared,

We still talk about our days at Sunday School today. Just like [my class at] school bonded, that was also a special group that went to Sunday School. We were bonded in that special way. Our clerk of the board of trustees at the [Friends Boys] School, Samir Shehadeh, he was a regular attender of the Sunday School, for example, so I think his relationship with the meeting in that respect made him more aware of Quakerism and maybe that has something to do with the fact that he's ...the clerk (Author Interview 2010g).

Another local Friend noted that as late as the 1970s, “Sunday school was the thing in town so everybody just joined in” regardless of whether they were Quakers, Greek Orthodox, or Catholic. In fact, the majority of the twenty to twenty-five children who attended each week were non-Quaker (Author Interview 2010i).

The 1940s were a period of heightened nationalism, and many in the local community saw the Ramallah Friends Schools as an institution aimed at helping Palestinians build their expected state (the 1937 Peel Commission had recommended dividing the British Mandate into an Arab and a Jewish state). The meeting prospered, with approximately 170 members. Khalil Totah, the principal of the

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Friends Boys School and a major leader in the Ramallah community, connected to Quakers around the world as a result of his speaking tours, and to Jewish leaders and Jordanian officials as well, was a major figure in the meeting. However, a series of differences of opinion over the leadership and direction of the Ramallah Friends Mission between Totah and the Friends Mission Board led to Ramallah Quakers meeting separately from American Quakers. This conflict stemmed in part from

different social, political and cultural traditions, practices and expectations of Palestinians engulfed in decades of violent struggles for their independence, and the American Quakers who were, in part, insensitive to the implications of the Palestinian war against Zionism and British colonialism, and, in part, to missionary hubris in bringing ‘democracy’ to Palestine and in ‘creating’ American Quaker Christians in the Middle East (Ricks, 2009, p.34).

Struggles over how to best manage and run the schools involved question not only of nationality and personality, but also questions of patriarchy, leadership style, and control over Mission property (Ricks, 2009, pp.36-37). After several years of disagreements and debates within the Ramallah community as well as between local and foreign Quakers, in March 1944 Dr. Totah sent an ultimatum to the Friends Mission Board that unless all Friends work and property were turned over to the Ramallah Friends Meeting (where he played a leading role) he would resign. Willard Jones, whose wife Christina was Education Secretary for Friends United Meeting in Richmond, IN, was sent immediately to Ramallah to accept Totah’s resignation. Practically overnight the meeting lost over 120 members, as everyone except for those employed by the schools and a few other families resigned along with Totah (Leonard, 1989, 2010).<sup>2</sup> This break is best understood in the context of the ongoing political conflict between Arabs, Jews, and British and Palestinian desires for independence and self-determination in all aspects of life. While theological issues may have played a role, particularly American Quakers’ focus on democracy over Totah’s more dictatorial style, other factors included the broader colonial struggles in which Quaker testimonies of democracy and equality were applied differently in different contexts (Author Interview 2010).<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the at-times strained relations between local and foreign Quakers over leadership and autonomy issues, the meeting has been greatly impacted by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 1967, with the

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Israeli occupation of the West Bank, the meetinghouse was hit during the fighting, leaving two big holes in the roof, and it lost many weekly attenders when the Ramallah Friends Schools had to stop boarding students. Until this time, about forty girls and the boarding boys attended meeting each Sunday, sitting on either side of the meeting house with twenty to fifty meeting members and attenders sitting in the middle (Brinson, et al., 2010; Leonard, 2010). As the occupation became more entrenched, Christians, including Ramallah Quakers, increasingly emigrated to the United States and elsewhere. By the 1970s there were usually about thirty to thirty-five people attending meeting on an average Sunday; in the 1980s this decreased to about twenty to twenty-five on average. During the first Intifada (1987-1993) Friends stopped using the meetinghouse because it was not safe to meet since the main street of town was the site of frequent clashes between Israeli soldiers and local youth. Instead, the meeting began to meet in a small room at the Friends Girls School. In 1995 the meetinghouse was leaking so badly that it was no longer useable; experts from al Najah University declared the building unsafe (Author. Interview, 2010).

Given the cost of repairing the roof and the size of the meeting, local Quakers debated the future of the meetinghouse. However, after the first intifada Palestinians had an increased concern for preserving their cultural heritage and using it as a form of national resistance. The meetinghouse was declared to be a historical site by the Ramallah Municipality, ending the possibility of moving it (Nassar 2006; Author Interview 2010c, 2010i). In 2002, when presiding clerk Jean Zaru spoke at Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (FGC-affiliated), Philadelphia Quakers were so moved by the situation in Ramallah that even though Jean did not ask for funds for the roof they raised \$50,000 almost on the spot for the renovation. As the renovations occurred, first for the meeting house and then for the annex, local Quakers, in consultation with Friends from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and Baltimore Yearly Meeting, which also contributed funds to the project, began to discuss how to best make use of this newly renovated space. In 2005, when the meetinghouse was re-dedicated, a group of Quakers gathered together in a consultation out of which emerged the vision of the Friends International Center in Ramallah (FICR), now Friends of the Ramallah Friends Meeting.

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## MINISTRY OF HOSPITALITY: NURTURING PEACE AND JUSTICE WORK

As evidenced by the interviews, a major service of the Ramallah Friends Meeting is providing hospitality in the practical and theological sense. This ministry stems in part from the small size of the meeting and its strong connection to foreign Quakers, although Palestinians also pride themselves on their culture of hospitality. This hospitality is a vital contribution to peace and justice work in the region as the meeting has nurtured and enriched Quakers and fellow travellers visiting or working in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, often in connection with stressful humanitarian and peacebuilding efforts. At the same time, the visitors strengthen the meeting through their presence and solidarity. Due to the meeting's connections with FGC and FUM, as well as its membership in the European and Middle Eastern Section of FWCC, this hospitality also connects Friends across differences and reflects (unintentionally) the Convergent Friends' emphasis on building relationships through hospitality, participation, public witness, and shared worship rather than narrow doctrinal agreement (Daniels, 2010, pp. 244-45). Unsurprisingly, given that the meeting was created to support the foreign Quakers working at the Ramallah Friends Schools, every respondent recalled that foreign visitors have always been a part of Sunday worship. As one foreign Quaker long connected to the meeting commented,

What has kept a vibrant community has been the long-term and short-term visitors. Mostly foreign, occasionally a Palestinian. The nature of the meeting [in 2010] is very similar to what it was twenty or thirty years ago. Jean [Zaru, clerk of the meeting] in her person makes a difference, she is a Quaker internationally known and she is large part of the meeting and she remains a large part of the meeting, but for many years there haven't been very many Palestinians besides Jean to keep the meeting going (Author Interview 2010e).

The meeting's connection with Friends United Meeting (FUM), while not of a direct or material nature, is one reason for the regular presence of foreign Quakers. FUM has supported the meeting through its sponsorship of foreign Quaker teachers at the Friends schools, because "anybody that came to the schools has a commitment to participate in the life of the meeting because it's basic for their activity. I mean, if they do not function out of a faith base and a commitment to these values...they will be burnt out." As one foreign Quaker affirmed,

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“the meeting served as a good refuge and support for the Quaker volunteers,” and another, who taught at the schools in the 1970s, shared, “the meeting and meeting community was really an anchor for me during the years as a teacher and a respite from the craziness of teaching at the schools;” The meeting has supported foreign Quaker teachers over the decades, serving as their “support system” and “community for the people who came.” (Author Interview 2010c, 2010e, 2010f, 2010g) One foreign Quaker who joined the meeting in the 1970s while working in Jerusalem said that the meeting provided “hospitality with all of the theological implications of hospitality,” noting that while this might be easy to take for granted, “as soon as you think about it, you think about how important those relationships were, how much you felt empowered by them, embraced by them.” (Author Interview 2010h) He explained how knowing “that there were Palestinians open to a just and equitable relationship with Israelis” made his peace and justice work easier. (Author Interview 2010h)

The support function of the meeting extends beyond Quaker teachers at the Ramallah Friends School to include other foreigners, such as the Mennonites or volunteers with Christian Peacemaker Teams in Hebron, who engage in peace and social justice work and come to the meeting for “respite” and for “a moment of quiet reflection and trying to hush their spirits” from their difficult work. (Author Interview 2010e) The meetinghouse has provided this same “respite” function for local Ramallah Quakers as well. Although the bustling commercial center of Ramallah has grown up around the meetinghouse, Friends shared that the meetinghouse continues to serve as a refuge from the chaos of everyday life.<sup>4</sup> As a local Quaker said, “We go to the meetinghouse with all the noise around you, and I don’t know how, but you stop listening to the outside world. A lot of people were pushing to move the meeting somewhere else. I think it’s great that it is still where it is in the middle of town.” (Author Interview 2010i)

The meeting also served as a place of restoration for Quakers travelling in the region for a variety of reasons, including peace and justice efforts. Such visits also strengthened the worship experience and connected worshippers to other ideas, experiences, and communities. One foreign Quaker recalled a moving message

from Landrum Bolling, probably in 1971. He had been engaged in secret shuttle diplomacy between Egypt, Israel and Syria, and

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probably the PLO in exile. He spoke of how the situation was more hopeless than he had seen over his many years of engaging in this activity but that it was important to maintain hope anyway, that you can't give up hope. In fact, that tension led to the 1973 October War, but later those same parties found a way to make peace in the late 1970s and again later talk to each other in the Oslo Accords. (Author Interview 2010c)

While not all Quaker visitors have engaged in that level of diplomatic peacemaking, over the years the meeting has helped network individuals and groups involved in peace and justice work. As a result of meeting at the Ramallah Friends Meeting, people “were able to coordinate activities and exchange information, form friendships.” (Author Interview 2010e) Quakers have supported the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) and Quakers working for a host of different NGOs in Ramallah and Jerusalem. In this way, the Ramallah meeting has, in the manner of convergent Friends, supported the public presence of Friends' testimonies in society.

## OUTREACH PROJECTS: SPEAKING TO THAT OF GOD IN EVERYONE

Collins asserts that “Quaker identity is sustained primarily through the generation and regeneration of stories, primarily in and around the Meeting House” and that Quakerism tends to be a behavioral creed rather than a theological one (Collins, 2009, p.215, 217). Indeed, Ramallah Friends have demonstrated their commitment to peace and justice work, as well as their Quaker identity, through behavior in the community and through the presence of the meetinghouse itself. In a very fundamental way, the Ramallah meeting opened its doors to refugees during the Nakba of 1948, with nine families (a total of fifty-eight people) making their home in the small meetinghouse until the end of 1949. The Quakers ran a refugee school from 1948-1952, and eventually opened a series of play centers for the refugee children, both in the Annex of the meetinghouse and also in the Am'ari refugee camp on the outskirts of Ramallah/El Bireh (Brinson, et al., 2010; Zaru, 2008).

In addition to providing physical space and schooling to refugee families, the meeting women organized a sewing cooperative to make clothes for refugee women and children. Ellen Mansour, Azizi

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Mikhail, Violet Zaru and Bahia Salah were particularly concerned with social outreach projects, including the sewing circle, a cross-stitch cooperative started by Mansour so refugee and village women could sell their handicraft work, and the Am'ari playcenter, which was the special ministry of Violet Zaru until her death in 2006. The Quaker testimony of equality and the particular concern that Quakers have always had for gender equality in particular may be a contributing factor to the continued presence of these strong women in the Ramallah meeting, even while the early Quaker stance against smoking kept their husbands from attending. The actions and beliefs of two of the strong, independent Quaker missionaries, Mildred White and Annice Carter, seem to have influenced local Quakers as well.[i]

The ecumenical Sunday School run by Mansour, which occurred for an hour each Sunday before meeting, was perhaps the most cited ministry of the meeting. "Everyone" went to Sunday school, from the current mayor of Ramallah, to the Christian and Muslim friends of meeting attendees. There were more than ninety children on the roll in 1950, approximately one-third refugee children, with only eleven of these from Quaker homes. Several local Quakers reflected positively on their Sunday School experience, saying, "I remember a very vibrant team of friends from my school who were non-Quakers who came to Sunday school ...we still talk about our days at Sunday School today...that was a special group." (Author Interview 2010g) Beyond personal friendships, the Sunday School experience instilled Quaker values in the local community. One local Friend noted that many of his friends reflect positively on how accepting the Quaker meeting was and how supportive of the issues they faced. "How people treat each other and accept each other regardless of background or color or religion is still a major impact locally." (Author Interview 2010i) This Friend continued, saying

Sometimes we take these things for granted, but when I sit back and evaluate how I'm dealing with my friends how I'm dealing with others in the community or even with my family and daughters and stop to think about why I am doing these things, I think that is a major impact of the way I was raised as a Quaker within my family, within the community in the Quaker way of beliefs and teaching. And if this affected me, it affected the hundreds who attended over the years.

The impact on individual behavior and openness to others is difficult to measure or demonstrate beyond anecdotal evidence, although

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the large number of Ramallah residents attending the re-dedication of the meetinghouse in March 2005 and the Centennial in March 2010 speaks to the import of the Quaker community. The Sunday School continued up until the first intifada, when the location of the meetinghouse rendered it no longer safe. The loss of the meetinghouse as a central space for meeting resulted in the loss of the Sunday School, and a major sphere of Quaker influence on the community. Many of these graduates were grateful to see a renewed Quaker presence when the building was renovated; despite the Quaker belief that worship can occur in any space, the presence of Quakers openly worshiping in the center of Ramallah sent a symbolic message to those historically connected to the ministry of the meeting.

Many of the peace and justice efforts of Ramallah Friends have been “outside the corporate meeting framework” largely “because the Palestinian Friends are so few in number. [Yet the meeting] projects an attitude of nonviolence and commitment to justice. It’s not terribly visible and public, but I think nonetheless these have been important contributions.” (Author Interview 2010h) Another interview subject noted that

And I think Quakers at their best, with this quiet diplomacy, are sort of like a chemical agent that disappears when it all comes together. So that’s in some ways, you know, that’s what makes it hard for you to do this particular project about the meeting. Because some of the best Quaker work is not known. And people don’t claim ownership ....they are quiet, the kind of presence, and the modesty, the genuine humility of Quakers (Author Interview 2010e).

Several examples of this type of quiet peacemaking work include a story of foreign Quaker teachers providing space for their high school students to sleep during the Tawjihi exams because of the Israeli practice of rounding up kids right before the exams and holding them for two weeks so that they missed the exams and had to wait until the following year, or the impact of the Quaker work camps run by AFSC, FUM, Friends Center and other Quaker organizations over the years that have impacted the lives of Israelis, Palestinians, and the international participants (Author Interview 2010e).

One of the more visible forms of peace and justice outreach done by a meeting member, again, outside of the “corporate meeting framework” but nevertheless connected to the Quaker presence in Ramallah, is the ministry of Jean Zaru, who has become internationally

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known as a representative of Palestinian Quakers. Jean has been active in international women's activism and in interfaith dialogue efforts over the decades. In addition to her role as clerk of the Ramallah Friends Meeting, Jean has served on the Board of Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem, was honored with the Anna Lindh memorial prize in 2010 for her commitment to nonviolence and to challenging systems of structural violence and injustice, serves on the Council of the Charter for Compassion, and is the author of *Occupied With Nonviolence: A Palestinian Woman Speaks*. As one Friend noted,

Jean is a public Friend and one of the best known Friends of her generation. She is well known in Europe and Australia and the United States. She has been a principle spokesperson for Palestinian Friends in Europe and the United States. I think that is a very important and the most far-reaching contribution the meeting has made. Yes, it's personal, but Jean's faith and involvement grows out of her involvement in the meeting.

Jean has travelled around the world giving talks on nonviolence, the role of justice, the equality of women, and providing a Palestinian Quaker perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; she has helped many understand the Quaker testimonies of peace, justice and equality in the context of conflict and oppression. (Author Interview 2010c, 2010d, 2010e, 2010h)

## CONCLUSION

Although a very small meeting, the Ramallah Friends Meeting has continued to play a critical role in supporting those working for peace and justice in the region, expanding the conception of peace and justice work to one that includes a ministry of presence and a space for nurturing and connecting visitors engaged in short- or long-term peace and justice activities. Through its ministry of hospitality for Quakers and fellow travelers working in the region, as well as through providing meeting space for groups working for a better future, the meeting has secondary and tertiary impacts beyond the individuals who physically walk through its doors.

It has been challenging for the meeting to conduct peace and justice work in the way Western Quakers conventionally think of peace and social outreach committees that engage in demonstrations

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or awareness campaigns or fundraisers in part due to the size of the meeting (although the meeting engaged in that type of work with refugees in the wake of the Nakba) and in part because of the location of the meeting is a conflict zone. The meeting house has literally been on the front lines over the past century because of its location on the main street of Ramallah. This has had negative repercussions on the meeting's physical structure and spiritual life. Because of conflict during the 1967 war and again in the first and second intifadas, meeting members often could not worship in the meetinghouse itself, but gathered quietly in rooms at the Ramallah Friends Schools or in private homes. This lack of a public gathering space meant that it was more difficult for Friends to attract visitors or new members, and it made it more difficult to organize activities like the Sunday School. Despite the physical, sociological, psychological and economic challenges of working within a zone of protracted conflict, including many restrictions placed on Palestinian freedom and movement by the Israeli military, and the fact that the core membership of the meeting was women with domestic responsibilities, the meeting engaged in local peace and justice efforts focused on educational activities (the play center, the refugee school, the Sunday School) and handiwork (sewing circle, cross stitch cooperative), building on their individual strengths.

At the same time, precisely because of the on-going conflict, the meeting has served as a focal point for Quakers and fellow travelers who come to the region to engage in peace and justice work. By supporting these individuals and helping connect them with other individuals with similar concerns, the meeting has served a vital peace and justice function through both its spiritual and physical hospitality. Thus, the meeting in many ways is an international one, with weekly attendance comprised primarily of foreigners living and working in Ramallah along with visitors passing through. In many ways this demographic parallels those found in the United States, where many visitors enter the doors of Quaker meetinghouses, but membership continues to age and numbers decline.<sup>5</sup> Although the future of the local Quaker community remains unclear, the meeting will endure in some manner due to the on-going commitment of the International Friends of the Ramallah Meeting community and the importance of Ramallah meeting to so many Quakers around the world, who continue to foster relations with the Ramallah meeting and local people working for peace and justice.

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## ENDNOTES

1. This piece is drawn from a longer article originally published in *Quaker Studies*, vol. 18.
2. More on Khalil Totah and his relationship with the Friends Mission Board can be found in (Ricks, 2009). Unfortunately the diary is missing entries from the time period surrounding the departure of Totah from the meeting.
3. Palestinians, particularly women, embraced Quaker principles of equality and peace as well as the manner of worship (Author Interview 2010; (Jordan, 1995).
4. Although Ramallah is historically Christian, it is now majority Muslim, and Sunday is a working day for most.
5. At the July 2011 New York Yearly Meeting Summer Sessions, General Secretary Christopher Sammond noted that in the past 56 years, the Yearly Meeting lost 50% of its members, and that lack of outreach programs means visitors do not stay.