**Biblical, Historical, and Theological Grounding**

*Kairos Palestine*, written by Palestinian Christian theologians in 2009 and commended to the churches by the Thirtieth General Synod, reminds us that “the communion of love says to every believer in spirit and in truth: if my brother is a prisoner I am a prisoner; if his home is destroyed, my home is destroyed; when my brother is killed, then I too am killed.” Discipleship requires solidarity with the vulnerable and the oppressed.

As Palestinians living in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip enter their 50th year under Israeli military occupation, instability and violence continue to define much of life for Palestinian children. While living under prolonged military occupation causes suffering to all Palestinians, the plight of children is of particular concern in light of the persistent grave human rights violations and violence that surround them and the physical and emotional trauma to which they are subject. Generations of children have come of age as refugees living in refugee camps and behind walls. Generations of children have waited at checkpoints to go to school and return home. Generations of children have witnessed young Israeli soldiers harass and humiliate their parents. Generations of children have witnessed the demolition of their families’ homes or businesses, theft of their land, or the destruction of their families’ farms and orchards. Generations of children have been arrested by Israeli forces and prosecuted in an Israeli military detention system notorious for the systematic and widespread ill-treatment of children.

Israel has the dubious distinction of being the only country in the world that systematically prosecutes children in military courts. Since the year 2000, over 8,000 Palestinian children have been arrested and prosecuted in this system.[6] Ill-treatment in the Israeli military detention system remains “widespread, systematic, and institutionalized throughout the process,” according to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) March 2013 report *Children in Israeli Military Detention - Observations and Recommendations March.[7]* Subsequent update reports from UNICEF published in October 2013 and February 2015 have found that the situation has changed little for Palestinian children arrested by Israeli forces in the occupied West Bank.[8]

In April 2016, Defense for Children International – Palestine (DCIP) published a study of 429 West Bank children detained between 2012 and 2015. Three out of four children had endured some form of physical violence after being detained by Israeli forces. In 97 percent of the cases, children had no parent or lawyer present during the interrogation process. Interrogators used position abuse, threats, or isolation to coerce confessions from some of these children. At least 66 children were held in solitary confinement for an average period of 13 days. One child was held in isolation for 45 days.
By signing the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, the State of Israel obligated itself to implement international juvenile justice standards. These standards require that children be deprived of their liberty only as a measure of last resort. The standards include universal prohibitions against physical violence and torture. Yet, Palestinian children arrested by Israeli forces and prosecuted under Israeli military law routinely experience human rights violations prohibited by international law.

Since 1967, Israel has operated two separate legal systems in the same territory. Israeli Jewish settlers who (in violation of international law) reside in the West Bank enjoy protections provided by the Israeli civilian legal system. In contrast, Palestinians in the West Bank are subject to Israeli military law, which fails to ensure and, in fact, denies basic and fundamental rights. Palestinian children in the West Bank thus suffer abuses and constraints of a military detention system which no Israeli child living in the West Bank ever experiences.

The occupation thus creates a system where Palestinians living in the same occupied territory as Israeli settlers have inferior rights and protections under the law – a system where Palestinian children experience an environment of fear, dehumanization and violence that is contradictory to the flourishing of life to which all children, including Palestinian and Israeli children, aspire.

The witness of Scripture grants children a privileged place in the embrace of Jesus and the vision of the beloved community. Jesus welcomed children and blessed them; he called us to become childlike in our reception of the Realm of God. Jesus himself was born in Palestine under Roman Occupation and, according to Matthew’s Gospel, escaped the slaughter of innocents by becoming a refugee in Egypt before returning to the land of his birth where he came of age. To read the Gospels is to become aware of both the blessing and the vulnerability of children. It is to know that God’s love was revealed in a child and, in particular, a child vulnerable to injustice and violence.

Justice and peace are impeded today by those who hide behind a false equivalency, refusing to acknowledge the gross imbalance of military and police power between Israelis and Palestinians, or refusing to recognize that the impact of occupation falls with greater weight on the occupied, not the occupier. Justice and peace are impeded today by those who, in the face of failed peace processes and seemingly intractable obstacles, grow resigned and indifferent, as if God were impotent and historical change impossible. To those lacking vision or energy to pursue this issue of justice, Palestinian Christians respond, “In the absence of hope, we cry out our cry of hope. We believe in God, good and just. We believe that God’s goodness will finally triumph over the evil of hate and of death that still persist in our land.”