



EYE-OPENING EXPERIENCE OF PALESTINE

Karo Wilson's recent visit to the Holy Land has imbued her with a deeper understanding of the importance of advocacy in the role of mission.

After visiting Palestine through a Council of World Mission (CWM) exchange programme, she arrived back in New Zealand with a new determination to speak out on the injustices she had witnessed.

The experience impacted her deeply.

"I may not be able to solve the crisis faced by Palestinians, or bring peace to the area, but I can share the stories of injustice, oppression and discrimination that I saw and heard. Perhaps it will encourage others to look further into ways that they can have an impact for those in this world who live on the margins," says Karo.

The part-study, part-sightseeing tour was organised as a CWM Face-to-Face programme, which offers theological students an opportunity to participate in a cross-cultural ministry experience outside their familiar context.

Karo, who is children and youth pastor at Oamaru's Waiareka-Weston Presbyterian Church, completed her theology degree in July, and will graduate in December. An essay she wrote on faith in the context of empire, accompanied her application to participate in the Face-to-Face programme.

The Church's Global Mission Co-ordinator, Rev Phil King, says the value of the Face-to-Face programmes reaches well beyond the benefit to any individual student.

"The Palestinian programme is just one of many that CWM offers. They can help students gain a greater understanding of the diverse world we live in and hopefully challenge them to think more broadly about their future ministry," he says.

"In programmes like this, the primary benefit is undoubtedly for the individual concerned. In Karo's case, it is a wonderful gift to be given the chance to travel to Palestine and share in an organised programme with students from around the world, all experiencing the history and culture and complexity of the Holy Land for the first time.

"It will be life-changing for her; so first and foremost it is a gift to her personally," Phil adds. "But as a Church, we hope she can use that gift to share her insights and learning with others and help broaden their understanding about the Middle Eastern context. We hope it will add colour and content to her preaching, when leading Bible studies, and in conversations about the Middle East, which can often be controversial."



Karo Wilson, pictured in Bethany, during her CWM visit to the Holy Land. She was deeply affected by stories of injustice, oppression and discrimination in Palestine.

Students on the 10 August to 10 September visit to Palestine were based in Bethlehem and hosted by Dar al Kalima University. They visited sites of biblical significance and attended lectures covering Palestinian history, faith in the context of occupation, Palestinian film, and women in Palestine. Various non-profit organisations spoke to the students about the work they are doing to advocate for Palestinians.

Karo says the programme centred around hearing the stories and experiences of individuals and gaining a first-hand experience of life in Palestine.

"While it was confronting, and at times extremely upsetting to see what life is like for Palestinians living under occupation, it was necessary to experience that to fully understand the situation. It definitely opened my eyes. It made me realise that sometimes there is a disconnect between what we think we know and reality.

"One of the biggest things I brought back with me is to not always believe what you read in mainstream media. The situation for Palestinians living under Israeli occupation is dire... there are huge injustices being played out every day. Yet because Israel is monopolising the narrative, many people have no idea what is going on."

Since coming home, Karo has addressed the topic in her preaching and has started on a series of speaking engagements with church and community-based groups.

"Sometimes we get so focused on mission being to bring people to God," she says. "However, mission also calls for us to be advocates for those who have no voice of their own. The Bible demands a care and concern for those who are marginalised, oppressed and discriminated against. To be Jesus-like, we too must be prepared to speak out against powers that aim to treat others in this way."

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