



## OUTLOOK REPORTING

# PC(USA) mission co-worker shares an update from the Holy Land

Teri McDowell Ott speaks to Doug Dicks, the PC(USA) regional liaison to Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

BY **TERI MCDOWELL OTT**

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Two of Islam and Judaism's holiest sites, Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock and the Western Wall, seen through barbed wire. Photo by rrodrickbeiler.

“Our prayer list is long,” Doug Dicks said, heaving a big sigh after I asked him how we could help and how we could pray.

Living now in Bethlehem, Dicks has served as a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) mission co-worker for 24 years. In April, he returned to his previously held role as regional liaison to Israel, Palestine and Jordan. His work on the ground in the Middle East enables the larger PC(USA) community to be in relationship with Arabs and Jews – Palestinians and Israelis – who advocate for peace and justice in the Holy Land. Most days, Dicks’ work includes a lot of emails, sometimes meetings, hosting church groups on pilgrimage and study tours, and helping our partner organizations apply for grants — organizations like [Sindyanna](#) of Galilee, a non-profit led by Arab and Jewish women who work cooperatively to produce olive oil and other premium products that support local growers.

On Tuesday, Oct. 10, he was scheduled to go to Gaza to connect two Church of Scotland pastors with partner organizations such as the Middle East Council of Churches — a group that helps young people in Gaza seek better employment through vocational training programs. That visit was canceled after Hamas terrorists led a surprise attack on Saturday, Oct. 7, focused on the border between Israel and Gaza. In addition to a music festival in



Doug Dicks at Saint Andrew's Scots Memorial Church in Jerusalem, where he serves as an ecumenical associate there with the Church of Scotland. Photo provided.

southern Israel, Hamas militants attacked several *kibbutz* (Israeli communities organized around shared principles), [killing at least 1,400 Israelis and taking 199 hostages](#). Dicks, who lives about 60 miles from the border attacks, says he is safe.

“I’ve not felt unsafe,” Dicks says, noting that there was a long line of cars to get gas at the beginning of the conflict — and that the gas stations sold out, but a fuel truck arrived later. Dicks says as of yet there has not been any interruption in the food supply to Bethlehem.

He explained that every PC(USA) mission co-worker is required to have a contingency plan in place and that he updates his every year. The first option, depending on the

situation, is to “hunker in place, as during COVID. If for any reason I would feel threatened or unsafe, and Israel’s airport would become inaccessible, then the next logical option would be to get to Jordan by land.”

Dicks described the mood on the ground in Bethlehem as quiet. “Both Palestinians and Israelis are in shock over what happened. People are worried, wondering how long this situation might last. Bethlehem relies heavily on tourism, and it has immediately dried up. There are no functioning hotels, no tourist-style restaurants, no souvenir or olive wood shops that are open. It’s as if COVID has re-visited all over again.”

Dicks is also very worried about the people he knows in Gaza, where Palestinian officials report that [Israeli bombings have killed 2,750 and injured more than 9,700](#). The number of Palestinians killed and wounded in the conflict is expected to rise after a deadly rocket attack at the Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza, a ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, on Tuesday, Oct. 17. [Early estimates say more than 500 people have been killed](#). Thousands of Palestinians were sheltering there after Israel issued an evacuation notice to northern Gaza on Friday, Oct. 13. Palestinian authorities say the blast was an Israeli airstrike. The Israel Defense Forces denied responsibility for the attack, saying a failed launch by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad caused the blast. At this time, neither report has been verified.

With about 2.3 million people confined to about 140 square miles and the borders to Gaza closed, the population is pressed to find safe spaces. Dicks has heard reports that Palestinian Christians are sheltering in the Roman Catholic Church and in the [Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius](#), one of the oldest churches in the world.



Credit: Dimitrios Karamitros

“Without any fresh water, without any food, people are going to end up starving or dying of thirst if supplies aren’t soon allowed into Gaza. These people will probably not flee to the South because what’s waiting for them there (with the border to Egypt closed)? Where will they find shelter? Where will they sleep? The Christian population of Gaza is probably no more than a thousand people. They are turning to the church for aid and assistance, but above all, for sanctuary.”

“Hospitals in Gaza are only hours away from running out of fuel for their generators,” Dicks continued “which means that anyone requiring kidney dialysis, any baby in an incubator, anybody requiring life-giving support that requires ventilation run by electricity— these (machines) will stop running. And how do hospitals move their patients to the southern end of the Gaza Strip? For them, it will be physically impossible, and patients will surely die.”

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“Everyone is seeking retribution and revenge, and herein lies the danger.”

Dicks reiterated that there is nothing he physically needs at the moment. Also, “I’ve always felt supported by the church.” But he is worried that the situation in Gaza will spread, leading to a broader war. “Everyone is seeking retribution and revenge, and herein lies the danger.”

He also worries about the damage to the relationships between Arabs and Jews that he’s seen form over the years. “For example, where I sit to have my coffee, there are Palestinians and Israelis working side-by-side, together. What will happen to those relationships? Will they be able to look at one other again without fear or suspicion?”

So, how can we pray?

“Pray for all the victims, Israelis and Palestinians. Pray for those who have been killed. We have to pray for the hostages still held by Hamas, civilians of Gaza, Israeli communities devastated by the attacks, for peace and calm to prevail, for humanitarian aid to be allowed into Gaza, and that the situation doesn’t lead to a wider conflict in the Middle East. Pray that we do not let hatred win out over compassion.”

As Dicks said, “Our prayer list is long.”



**TERI MCDOWELL OTT**

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