can we talk®...

Community Sharing on Trauma & Healing

Can We Talk… Palestine

Rev. Liz Walker and Rev. Dana Baker traveled November 11–19, 2024 to the West Bank in Palestine to co-lead the first international Can We Talk… - a space to process grief, loss and trauma - with Palestinian Christian women.

We were invited by Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) to do this as part of a three-day summit they were holding in Jericho.

To be in Bethlehem, just before Advent, somehow seemed fitting. Because of the war, Nativity Square the birthplace of Jesus – typically filled with pilgrims to the Holy Land, was empty. Finding places of peace surrounded by hardship and danger is a part of the Christmas story that we sometimes overlook. The two of us were never in personal danger – but we heard stories daily of those that were. We often don't SEE everything there is to see, unless we are in relationship with the people that have the lived experience to see at a deeper level.

We never take pictures during the main part of Can We Talk… but we always end in some kind of ritual to release and or acknowledge the sacredness of the storytelling. One of the international leaders had created a beautiful ritual that we were able to adapt for Can We Talk… it ended with us all in a circle. Healing from trauma happens best in community.

The invitation was one of the most profound that CWT has ever received since beginning the program. Over several days, in different settings, we shared stories and tears, as we reached out in abiding community. No matter what or where the trauma, healing can happen when we share our pain.

Rev. Liz

"We've come to see about you" were my first words to the 70-80 Palestinian Christian women gathered at the second day of the *And Still We Rise Conference* in Jericho. They were the same words my grandmother, a poor preacher's wife, used decades ago when she walked out into the harsh and hostile Arkansas delta country weekly to support church members struggling for a life. They are the words of Christian witness, a way of **abiding** or **"walking with"** neighbors. But to **"see about"** the traumatized folks struggling to live in the shadow of a horrifying and deadly war, was witnessing on a different level. Accepting the invitation to take our Can We Talk… trauma healing model 5000 miles on the other side of the world in the West Bank was weighted in uncertainty. What could we expect to accomplish? While the model has been incredibly successful in urban American communities, what kind of impact could Can We Talk… have in the Middle East?

We were told there is no such thing in Palestine as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Trauma here is manifested every day by the ongoing restrictions on movement, mass displacement, joblessness, growing poverty, and an overall sense of helplessness and hopelessness. How could this trauma healing model work in a culture where people do not typically speak publicly about their difficult experiences? That first night, I didn't sleep at all. "What are we doing here?" kept churning over and over in my head.

I had forgotten that witnessing is as much about **how you listen** as **what you see**. Sadly, too many Christians believe our job in the world is only about preaching, fixing or giving answers. The listening we practice in Can We Talk…, which I explain in my book *No One Left Alone*, revolves around a ministry of an abiding heart. As the Holy Spirit is present with us, we listen, as a way, to be fully present with others.

> *"Listening to people in pain takes time that in our loud, fast-paced lives, may seem too heavy a burden to bear. We are uncomfortable hearing things that may challenge what we believe to be true. It's hard to listen to things that make us sad or angry, especially when we're unable to act or fix anything. Sometimes people ask for or demand things we can't give. Listening can be risky. It may require us to change or admit we're wrong. Who wants to do that? Listening, according to Adam McHugh, is a choice. 'Hearing is an act of the senses, but listening is an act of the will,' he writes. 'In listening, you center not only your ears but also your mind, heart and posture on someone or something other than yourself. It is a chosen obedience, like soldiers falling into line the moment their commanding officer calls them to attention.'*
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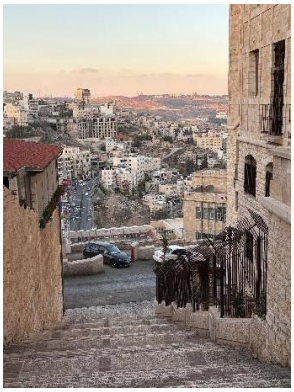
> *"A first step in this 'chosen obedience' is honest reflection on what motivates us to listen. During our training for churches that want to replicate Can We Talk…, we begin with the question why. Why is your church called to offer this program? Why will people in your community come to your gathering? Why are you here? In other words, why do you want to listen? Asking why helps us get to the core of our thoughts and actions."*

In listening to our sisters in the West Bank, we honor their stories and their lives. We silently say to them, 'You matter to us and most importantly, to God.' We went to the West Bank to let people know we care about them, and they are not alone. That is a witness of abiding hearts.

Bethlehem Training

Prior to the summit in Jericho, we traveled to Bethlehem to lead the 2nd part of the training with the team of Palestinian Christian women. The first part of the training had been online earlier in the month.



When the two of us awoke the morning of the 13th, we both ended up reading one of our favorite daily devotionals from the Center for Action and Contemplation, by Richard Rohr. It just "happened" to be about John 15:4 – "**abide** in me and I in you…" – the core verse and word that inspires Can We Talk…

We are meant to be tangled up together. *We are meant to live lives of profound inter-dependence, growing into, around, and out of each other. We cause pain and loss when we hold ourselves apart, because the fate of each individual branch affects the vine as a whole. In this metaphor, dependence is not a matter of personal morality or preference; it's a matter of life and death.…*

This only brought further confirmation to both of us that it was God that had brought us there.

The training was hosted at Bethlehem Bible College. We shared a meal together (from a lovely organic restaurant recommended by the women), getting to know these amazing women a bit better. Hospitality is so important for our model – and the Palestinian culture has so much to teach us about hospitality and their connection with the land. And then we spent time sharing about the Can We Talk… model, listening and seeking to understand how this model might work in the Palestinian context.

It was an amazing evening, and we left energized to share Can We Talk… with the 60-70 Palestinian women who would gather at the summit a couple of days later. To learn more about Bethlehem Bible College check out their website - **https://bethbc.edu**

***And Still We Rise* Summit**

And Still We Rise is a women's empowerment program at CMEP that creates a safe space for women to build community, invite transformation, and take action. The name is inspired by the poem by Maya Angelou, "And Still I Rise."

The summit in Jericho was the realization of a dream from a 2018 gathering in Washington D.C. and intended to help Palestinian women be a part of an international community that seeks to share some of the pain as well as finding ways to heal and take collective action by talking about a shared struggle. The Can We Talk… model, birthed at Roxbury Presbyterian Church in Boston, provided two opportunities embedded within the larger program to create safe spaces where women could share stories of grief, loss, pain and trauma.

In adhering to the Can We Talk guideline of confidentiality, we don't share the stories that we hear during any sessions, but we will never forget the outpouring of grief and anger during those two sessions in Jericho. Many women were anxious to get to the microphone. Stories that had gone untold for many years (even decades) – were shared. Some in the conference expressed concern that there was too much "opening of wounds." But as we reflected later about those concerns, we were reminded that the Can We Talk… guidelines exist to create safe spaces, and that one of those guidelines' limits sharing to only three or four minutes to help contain the flooding of overwhelming emotion. After the session, one young woman tearfully thanked Rev. Liz for creating a space that she never thought she would find to safely release some of her pain. Her words were a powerful gift.

God also had wisely guided the ASWR leadership team to prepare a prayer team; and mature, wise women followed as some left the room; gathered in corners with women after the Can We Talk… sessions were over; or connected later in small groups in a variety of settings. The team had prepared other self-care opportunities; liturgies; rituals; yoga and other movement/embodied practices; and beautiful worship and praise in both English and Arabic. The summit worship leader, pastor of multiethnic church in the US, introduced a song from her community to help someone in her church who was missing their homeland and the Palestinian women joined in enthusiastically… it brought them together as a community, too.

And there was so much more at the summit beyond the theme of trauma and resilience in which the two of us played a part - themes of the integration of faith and spirituality with the roles to which we are called; family; human rights and collective action for liberation. It isn't possible to even begin to describe all that happened in the three days - but here is a link to the full program and bios of the speakers and leadership team for those that might be interested.

https://cmep.org/aswr-2024-summit-program/

God was at work on many levels over the time we were in Palestine – in ways seen and unseen. As the summit ended on the third day – it seemed like God was smiling on the efforts of the amazing ASWR team. As a few of us went outside on the grounds of the Oasis Hotel (the name itself such a wonderful metaphor), there was a full moon rising above the hills in Jordan across river. And then the next morning as we awoke there was a rainbow over the Judean hills on the other side of the Jordan valley. It felt like God was offering a promise that He would be with us in the journey ahead.

Rev. Dana

Abide & Sumud - Rev. Liz wrote earlier in this report about the significance of abiding with one another in the work of Can We Talk… Throughout the three days of the summit, I kept hearing references to "sumud". I finally asked someone what that meant. I was told that **sumud** is an Arabic word that means "steadfastness" or "steadfast perseverance". I was immediately struck with how parallel that word was with the word **abide**.

But as I dug deeper after returning home, I learned that the word is significant to both Palestinian history and current reality. As the term has developed, Palestinians have distinguished between two main forms of *sumud*. One is defined as the "remaining of Palestinians on their land." The second, aims to seek ways of building alternative institutions to resist the damage caused by decades of Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. We heard stories throughout our time about Palestinians' profound sense of connection to the land. Some families can trace their heritage back to the time of Christ.

The ultimate symbol associated with the concept of *sumud* and the Palestinian sense of rootedness in the land is the olive tree. This was another thread woven throughout our time – we saw them in so many places. One of the women on the ASWR leadership team shared about the olive trees that her family cultivates – how central they are to their family, traditions and livelihood. The women loved sharing with me the significance of one of the "savories" at lunch - *musakhan* - olive oil, bread, chicken and spice. It was more than just something tasty to eat.

The complexity of storytelling - Can We Talk… is a ministry of shared stories. Our stories are very precious to each of us. We long to tell them, but then wonder why it is so hard to share them with others; why it is so hard to be vulnerable. One of the reasons is fear – fear of being misunderstood; of someone invalidating our experiences; of being told we shouldn't feel that way. As mentioned earlier, our guidelines seek to address those fears. In Can We Talk… we are learning how to honor one another's stories. Storytelling has the potential to move mountains.

We also were reminded of the importance of being able to share one's story in one's heart language – which in this case was Arabic. The women who attended from Palestine were bi-lingual – Arabic and English. Because it was to be a gathering of Palestinian and international women, it had been initially planned that most of the program would be in English, with translation only being provided the first day. The ASWR team quickly realized that it would be important for the women to share their stories during Can We Talk… in their heart language and decided to continue the translation on the next two days. Such an important decision to help the women feel heard and connected in community.

Filled with Gratitude

We are so incredibly grateful for the generous donation of a private individual to cover the costs of our time in Palestine. It was the only way that the trip would have been possible, and we have learned so much from this trip that not only opened our eyes to realities in Palestine of which we unaware – but it has also brought wisdom and insight that will be beneficial to all our replication sites going forward.

We aren't quite sure yet what will come out of this summit in terms of any long-term partnerships with Can We Talk… but it was a blessing to meet so many courageous Palestinian women (as many as 100 on the first day and around 65-70, the other two days). But as with all the growth of Can We Talk… since its beginning in 2014 - we will wait for God to lead and "let things unfold" in His timing.