

the Friend

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Eye-witness account

Middle East intermediaries

Overcoming barriers

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It still isn't working

Can peace churches unite?

'Yes we can!'

Responding to Conflict in the Middle East

*Michael Eccles shares his experience of an organisation
working in Israel and Palestine*

If you've ever been to Woodbrooke, the Quaker study centre in Birmingham, you might have noticed an unassuming white house on the left of the drive and wondered what goes on inside. Three quarters of that house is home to Responding to Conflict (RTC). RTC was founded in 1991 and although not a 'Quaker' organisation it has maintained close links with its Quaker roots and still has Quaker employees. RTC's recently renewed vision is of 'a world where everyone can challenge and transform situations of conflict and violence'.

RTC has worked with people in many different areas including Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, Cambodia and Serbia. One key way RTC works is through the provision of long-term support, for example working alongside partners in their own challenging circumstances. Since 2003 RTC has been working in both Israel and Palestine in this way. The aims of these two parallel programmes are to help our partners understand to what extent living in situations of conflict affects their daily work and lives, and how their activities can contribute to changing the situation.

RTC currently works with around twenty organisations in Palestine (in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip) and around fifteen in Israel. The majority are not specialist peacebuilding organisations, rather those who work on issues such as access

to water, conflict over land, education, health, human rights, inequalities within Israel, youth and so on. They range from small community-based organisations to national non-governmental organisations. The conflicts that they are dealing with are located within their own communities.

One of our partners in the West Bank recently helped resolve a conflict between a group of small-scale farmers in the Jordan Valley. One of the farmers was using more than his fair share of water. Our partner worked with the farmers and eventually offered to help the man who took the extra water to build a small reservoir on his land so he would have more water when he needed it. Everyone was happy with this solution. Although this seems like a fairly simple example of a conflict, in fact one of the major reasons for water shortages in this area of Palestinian territory is because the Israeli authorities control access to water. This shows how a bigger regional conflict can add to what appears to be a small localised dispute.

You only have to look at recent news to see how the Israel-Palestinian conflict affects the daily life of people. As I write this in early December 2008, news reports are coming in that the Israeli authorities have allowed forty truck-loads of essential humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip after days of keeping the border closed. There are 1.5 million people living in this small strip of

densely populated land (around 140 square miles), and eighty per cent of them are dependent on food aid.

Through providing training and then follow-up professional support RTC has been helping our partners in Israel and Palestine to consider the conflicts affecting their work programmes and finding ways of making their programmes sensitive to the conflicts. We are now in discussions with our partners in Palestine about the next stage of this work. Already one of RTC's partners in the Gaza Strip has been working with political leaders to negotiate a deal where they could work together in the health service, with a practical consequence being an improvement in health facilities offered to people living in Gaza. Some of them are now keen to move the work to a higher level and to influence academics, religious leaders and politicians. Watch this space!

Visit www.respond.org for more information. Michael is Responding to Conflict's Middle East programme coordinator and is a member of Cotteridge Quaker Meeting.

This article was written before the recent invasion by Israel of the Gaza Strip. RTC's partners in Gaza are all still alive; however, their work has been severely affected and they are mostly now carrying out humanitarian work helping people to survive on a day-to-day basis and to rebuild their lives.