

Playing for Peace

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A pilgrimage to the Holy Land set Tony Lynn on a new and unexpected path. *Sarah Meyrick* reports

PLAYGROUNDS FOR PALESTINE USA



A gift of hope: children at a playground built by Playgrounds for Palestine's founding branch in the United States

WHEN the Revd Tony Lynn retired from his parish in Berkshire a couple of years ago, he decided to spend the generous farewell cheque he had been given by his parishioners on his first-ever visit to the Holy Land. One tour he saw advertised caught his eye, because it was described as a "Pilgrimage for Peace" and included the chance to go beyond the usual itinerary of holy sites to meet people from all sides of the conflict.

"I'd had the idea of going to the Holy Land, but I knew I didn't want do the usual tourist thing," he says. "This pilgrimage, which was led by the former Bishop of Oxford, John Pritchard — whom I knew — sounded just the thing. Because I'd just retired, I had the opportunity to go. The timing was right."

What Mr Lynn saw on that pilgrimage had a profound effect on him. The group had some powerful and unsettling encounters with Palestinian Christians, Muslims, and Jewish settlers. And the itinerary included a visit to a refugee camp just outside Bethlehem. "The camp was a cramped, crowded housing estate: concrete flats, unpaved alleyways, grey and grim.

"The children we met were polite, smiling, but desperate. There were only the alleyways, which afford no space to play cricket or football or hopscotch, or any other game at all. And everything was grey. The only colour there was where there was graffiti on the walls."

MR LYNN came home determined to do something to make a difference. As it happened, some former parishioners had also been on a separate pilgrimage to the Holy Land at about the same time, and returned with the same idea. As former teachers (Mr Lynn had been a teacher before ordination), what they all had in common was an interest in the welfare of children.

Palestinian children suffer acutely as a result of the conflict in the Middle East. Take Gaza: the charity Save the Children found that, during the 2014 conflict, 551 Palestinian children died, compared with a single Israeli child. Another 3436 were injured, of whom ten per cent suffered a permanent disability.

In addition, 95 per cent of water is unfit for human consumption; the rates of long-term malnutrition are high; medical supplies are permanently scarce; and many children live in sub-standard accommodation, because only 1000 homes out of the 10,000 destroyed have been rebuilt.

UNICEF estimates that at least 373,000 children — nearly half of all those in Gaza — need specialised psychosocial support. The lifelong damage to children growing up in this sort of environment is not only obvious, but frightening, in a region where peace is so fragile.

“Several of us felt the need to do something for the children,” Mr Lynn says. “To attempt anything for the adults seemed impossible. We didn’t feel able to build hospitals or schools. As we’ve been teachers, we’re aware of the value of play for the emotional, social, and creative development of children.”

And then they came across an article in *The Guardian* about Playgrounds for Palestine, an American charity set up in 2001 by Susan Abulhawa, a human-rights activist and the author of the worldwide bestseller *Mornings in Jenin*. Her parents were refugees of the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict. On a trip to Jerusalem with her young daughter to visit cousins in 2001, she became acutely aware of the absence of playgrounds. She came home and set up a charity that has now built more than 30 playgrounds in refugee camps in Lebanon and Syria; and elsewhere in the region.

“Our first thought was that this was something we could support,” Mr Lynn says. One of the group, his friend Lesley Ravenscroft, made contact with the US charity with the offer of support. “But when we found out that our donations couldn’t be Gift Aided to the charity because it was American, we wondered about setting up a UK branch.”

PLAY and leisure time are enshrined as basic human rights for all children, in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The reason that it matters so much, Mr Lynn says, is that play supports creativity and learning, promotes physical and mental health, and provides a place that is about only play and friendship.

“Playgrounds offer a sense of adventure. You can test yourself on a slide, which might look too big. Or on a roundabout, where you have to overcome danger. It fires the imagination. On the top of a slide, you can be on top of the world, or about to fly. There’s the physical thing and the social thing, and it’s about being with people in a safe environment. A playground is a friendly, pleasant place where you can meet your mates.”

The playground equipment is also brightly coloured. “It’s a way of offering something intensely colourful and bright, where everything else is grey. And it’s something new, just for the children, which is quite special in itself. It’s important that play equipment is not kept for best occasions.”

HAVING identified the need, Mr Lynn floated the idea at the reunion of his pilgrimage group. They were enthusiastic about the idea. Bishop Pritchard agreed to be a patron, as did William Sutcliffe, the author of *The Wall*, a novel for young adults about an Israeli boy who ventures

through a hole into Palestinian territory. He is committing his royalties to Playgrounds for Palestine.

Between them, the group called on all their contacts, and found out what they had to do to set up a charity. Like its US counterpart, Playgrounds for Palestine UK is non-political, but simply based on the belief that all children have the right to play, irrespective of where they live.

The projects are delivered on the ground through the parent charity, which has established a way of working with local planners and communities. Children are involved from the beginning: where possible, they help with the preparation and maintenance of the site. And, of course, the building project also provides employment for local people. Once the playground is built, ownership is transferred to a Palestinian NGO or municipality, with support from Playgrounds for Palestine where necessary.

ONE year on from its foundation, the UK charity has raised enough money to build its first playground in Kobar — north-west of Ramallah, on the West Bank — in partnership with the village council, who have provided a one-kilometre plot. Kobar is a community with four schools and two kindergartens, and more than a third of the population of 3500 are aged between four and 15. There are no recreational facilities, parks, or adequate open space for play, with the result that Kobar's children tend to play tag or football in the streets at risk to their lives.

"It's not a prosperous or comfortable area," Mr Lynn says. "What we are aiming to do is to provide the children with something for them: something new, child-friendly, colourful, cheerful, and inviting."

NOW that the fund-raising for the Kobar project is complete, the next project in their sights is building a playground for the Al Shurooq School for the Blind, in Bethlehem. The school provides care and education for children, aged two upwards, who come from throughout the West Bank and Gaza. Many of the children are from very poor backgrounds, and some of them have been abandoned.

"Lots of organisations in this country are trying to support the Palestinian people, and they're all doing good work," Mr Lynn says. "We're not suggesting that we are going to make a vast difference, but if we can make a small difference to the lives of children by providing playgrounds, we will be happy. We're trying to bring hope."

For more information visit www.playgroundsforPalestineUK.org, or email

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