

In the words of Husam Zomlott from the Palestinian Delegation, “Town twinning is one of the most practical forms of solidarity. It transforms solidarity to friendship and transcends beyond verbal support, reaching out for the other community with a sense of shared destiny”.

Twinning with Palestine

When the delegates arrived at the first Twinning With Palestine conference in London on 25th September, we discovered that at least twenty places across Britain are taking steps to make some sort of friendship link with places in Palestine. This is bound to be an underestimate, and to judge from the enthusiasm shown by people from places with no current twinning movement, there could be thirty or more places by the end of the year.

Ranging from student unions in places like Stirling and Liverpool through church groups in Cheltenham and Godalming and broad-based friendship groups such as Oxford’s or Birmingham’s to councils such as Dundee and Chester, this is becoming a movement with echoes of the twinning campaigns with South Africa in the days of apartheid.

Twinning groups have started from different points – some from established Palestine Solidarity groups, some from the initiative of other individuals, who, having seen at first hand the appalling treatment of Palestinians under Israeli occupation, have returned wanting to stand side by side with people they have met, and tell the world that these are human beings too. However it starts, a twinning movement needs its dedicated group of activists in the middle – but then the word spreads fast as the chance to link with actual people seizes the imagination of people in groups and organisations as no amount of theory seems to do.

The rewards of a twinning movement are huge. Showing pictures, hearing stories, visitors in both directions lead people on the British side to feel connected to another place, and desperate to make a difference. In Camden, in just 18 months, hundreds of people have signed a friendship statement calling for friendship and twinning links with Abu Dis, next to Jerusalem, and a wide range of people are involved in the active Links groups who were not previously involved in Palestine in any way. Now we have children and teachers writing each other letters, nurses planning exchanges, youth groups aiming to run a Camden-Abu Dis football match. Our Friendship Association organised letter-writing when a lawyer from the human rights group was arrested and is campaigning against the redundancy of teachers being caused by the Apartheid Wall and the military pass system.

But there is only any purpose in this sort of movement if people in Palestine want it too. Some of our friends from Abu Dis came to the conference in London, and they spoke eloquently about their hopes of the twinning. They said that they find hope and encouragement from the interest from outside, and they welcome the practical projects we are devising together. As we in Camden have formed a friendship association at this end, so they have formed a friendship committee at that end, and both ends are working hard to involve people across their communities and across their political divides.

Although some of the twinning movements have been going for years, there has been to date no organisation linking towns or villages wanting partners at both ends, or helping to avoid the situation where two places both aim to twin with the same place in Palestine, leaving others with no partners. Following stimulating speeches and practical workshops that gathered questions and shared experience, this September conference had a result: a plan for a linking group for the network of twinning activists, which will now work on a website and help others to join in.

Until the website is ready, please contact camdenabudis@btinternet.com for more information.

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