7 June 2008
Mount Scopus Hotel
East Jerusalem

Dear Friends,

Packing duffel bags, organizing papers, wrapping fragile gifts.

It's the last day of a five-week odyssey in the Holy Land.

How do I express the gratitude I feel for this extraordinary journey of the spirit and soul? I struggle for the words, for the right words. It's been a remarkable and challenging experience on almost every level.

Today I'm profoundly aware of your part, the church's part, in making this pilgrimage possible. Because you are the congregation you are, I've developed an insatiable hunger for interfaith conversation and collaboration. You've taught me that Christian discipleship has everything to do with building relationships, developing trust, taking risks with faith partners from other traditions. I had to take this trip.

Figure 1 - Young Palestinian, Dahar's Vineyard

Because you are the congregation you are, over two years I was able to facilitate a dialogue between local activists with pointedly different perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In that dialogue I was confronted with all that I didn't

know: about the conflict in Palestine, about Jewish and Israeli narratives, about Palestinian liberation movements, about Islam and its vision in the Middle East and elsewhere. I simply had to come – to see for myself.

And because you are the congregation you are, I need more and more to ground my living and serving in the ways and stories of Jesus. You've convinced me that I can and must follow Jesus with a wide-open mind, with a vulnerable heart, with courage and grace. You've reminded me that Christianity need not be judgmental and simplistic. And you've nurtured in me a yearning – a yearning for a closer walk with Jesus and a more dynamic commitment to his vision of the kingdom of God. That yearning makes me a grateful man, and a satisfied soul.

So every day – in Jerusalem, in the Galilee, in the West Bank – I think of you all. Watching a young Palestinian activist determined to make life better for her generation, I think of Sean and Jamie and all the other young adults who give their all to make the U.S. a better place, a wiser place. Listening to a Christian mediator, a man whose faith radiates from his eyes and heart, I think of Carol and Doug and David and Rachel and Peter and all the others at FCC who walk the walk. Breathing in the Muslim calls to prayer, broadcast from mosques all over town, five times a day, I think of Cheryl and Vlada and Art and Dinah and Lori

Figure 2 - Teens at AFSC Youth Program in Ramallah

and Kate and the dozens and dozens at FCC whose music calls me to a higher plane, to a deeper faith. And watching a rabbi express his passion for human rights, discuss the price he's paid among his own people, I think of Heather and Shannon and all the others among you whose conscience is shaped by faith. Every day, with thanksgiving and respect, I think of you all.

So I thank you! I'm really just half way through this sabbatical – but I thank you even now for the inspiration of your friendship and your prayers. I thank you for insisting that faith is a life, not just an idea. I thank you for laughing and dreaming and imagining the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven.

There will be many opportunities for us to share as fall comes. I look forward to all of these. I look forward to sharing some of the amazing stories I've heard, some of the poetry I've penned, some of the songs I've written. I look forward to your stories and all the ways your lives continue to nurture one another and stimulate hope.

In a closing circle last night, the group I've traveled with these last two weeks shared final reflections on a shared experience. As we finished, Fulani, a Black Muslim woman from Atlanta, asked to share a song. In two weeks, we hadn't heard her sing. On the last night of our delegation, Fulani shared her gift. I can't get all the lyrics right, but the song's called, "Reach Out for Me in the Whirlwind." Amazing! When she'd finished, the 32 of us stood and cheered. The group included Mexican-American activists from the border in southern California; a Chicana advocate from San Francisco; a Muslim-American leader from Los Angeles; a retired black Methodist clergyman who'd also served on the Baltimore City Council; a Native American activist from Oklahoma. "Reach out for me in the whirlwind," Fulani sang and prayed and wept. A young Palestinian

activist, a law school teacher and one of our guides, sat completely still and smiled.

She knows that whirlwind all too well – swirling storms of poverty, racism, despair, violence. Many in this delegation live in the same storms: the whirlwind is their home. On the Mexican border where another wall is erected. In the streets of LA and San Francisco where education is gutted as defense budgets swell. On the plains where Native Peoples struggle to save whatever's left.

What I've learned this month is that our only protection – spiritually, politically, physically – is the kind of companionship that puts people first, that refuses to give in to despair. I've learned that our only hope is the bond of sisterhood and brotherhood, the bond that hangs in strong as the whirlwind rages, the bond that bears witness to another world. One of the amazing young Palestinians I met this month – a woman who's paid a price for her hope – puts it this way: "I am completely confident we can turn this around; there's more love in us than there is violence in those tanks…" So reach out for love, reach out for God, reach out for sisters and brothers – in the whirlwind. We can turn this around!

Figure 3 - Rabbi Arik Ascherman, Rabbis for Human Rights

I give thanks for your kindness and all the ways you've carried me through whirlwinds unexpected. I'll be on my plane to Germany in just a few hours, and then on to San Francisco! I can't wait to see the other family that's made this possible – Kate and Claire, Fiona and Hannah!!! What a gift to return home!

Blessings and peace,

Dave