



Response from the World Council of Churches

8 June, 2018

Following are questions and concerns from media sources focusing on the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). EAPPI was created in 2002 based on a letter and an appeal from local church leaders to create an international presence in the Holy Land. Since then, EAPPI has advocated for justice and peace based on non-violence and a non-partisan approach.

The responses from the WCC, below, are available for all media who may have similar questions or concerns.

1. EAPPI volunteers "simply lie" when they go into Israel on tourist visas. Such visas do not allow visitors to Israel to work or volunteer in the country and that is exactly what the volunteers do. To do the type of activities or work that EAPPI activists do, they should apply for a different type of visa.

What is the WCC's response to this allegation? Do EAPPI activists mislead or lie to officials when they go into Israel?

WCC's strong advice for all new participants in the EAPPI programme is to answer honestly and precisely any specific questions put to them by Israeli border control officials.

2. EAPPI activists use the tourist visas to engage in political activism and to engage in confrontations with people from the IDF, the border patrol and even private security firms.

Is this a lawful use of the tourist visa from WCC's point of view? Is this an appropriate use of the tourist visa?

Ecumenical Accompaniers do not engage in political activism, and are advised to avoid and withdraw from any confrontation, whether with IDF personnel, border patrol officers or anyone else.

3. EAPPI activists are regularly present at a road that goes into Efrat, through an Arab village called Tuqu'. The activists stand near schools in this town to protect them from settlers who live nearby. The allegation is that EAPPI activists ignore the rock-throwing at Israeli cars that pass by on the road, but once Israeli police intervene, the EAPPI activists take out their cameras and begin filming to obtain and show only one side of the story. "They show soldiers arresting, shooting tear gas and running after pupils, but they don't show the rock throwing."

"The projecting of escorting the students is not something bad at all. But they use the project as a pretext to promote anti-Israel propaganda."

Is this true? Do EAPPI activists encourage the children to refrain from throwing rocks at Israeli cars that pass by Tuqu'.

Participants in the EAPPI programme do not encourage or condone violent actions by anyone. On the contrary, a key purpose of the programme is to help reduce violence. Ecumenical Accompaniers are advised to treat any incidents of stone-throwing as a security concern (i.e. to withdraw from the situation) and if possible and safe to do so to ask those responsible to refrain from such actions.

4. EAPPI activists sometimes go into closed military areas, "which of course is against the law," one of my sources said.

Is this true?

WCC has no knowledge or information concerning alleged entry by Ecumenical Accompaniers into closed military areas, and would not condone any such action. Ecumenical Accompaniers are instructed to obey orders from the military, and entering any area known to be a closed military area is therefore precluded. Ecumenical Accompaniers are further instructed to withdraw from any area declared on an ad hoc basis to be a closed military area.

5. Some EAPPI activists have stayed passed the time their tourist visas have expired, contrary to Israeli law.

Is this true?

WCC has no knowledge of any Ecumenical Accompaniers having stayed in Israel beyond the period stipulated in their visas (or any approved extensions thereof). If there has been any such incident, it occurred without the knowledge and against the principles and practices of the EAPPI programme.

6. EAPPI activists work with extremist organizations such as International Solidarity Movement.

Is that true? Do EAPPI activists work with people from the ISM?

EAPPI does not work with any organizations or individuals that promote violent extremism. EAPPI has no formal working relationship with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM). Any contact with ISM is generally incidental, in locations where both EAPPI and ISM are present. According to our information, ISM proclaims a commitment to non-violence in its work.

7. EAPPI activists use the vests provided to them to give them the cover of a church or humanitarian organization. "It's the vests that give them the official look but they are just tourists."

Does the WCC have a specific code of conduct for people to follow when they engage in EAPPI activism?

Extensive codes of conduct govern the work of the EAPPI programme. Fundamental principles expressed in such codes of conduct include the following:

- 1. We believe in a just and lasting settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through peaceful means and the end of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank including East Jerusalem and Gaza.*
- 2. We are committed to principles of nonviolence.*
- 3. We do not take sides in this conflict and we do not discriminate against anyone but we are not neutral in terms of principles of human rights and international humanitarian law.*

4. *We are committed to the principle and practice of promoting human rights through our work.*
5. *Our primary motivation is the alleviation of human suffering.*
6. *Our engagement in this conflict is conditional upon an invitation to engage by local actors such as the Churches, church-related organisations, Palestinian civil society and Israeli peace organisations.*
7. *We are committed to working in collaboration and in complementary ways with individuals, organisations, governments and other institutions which can contribute to the prevention and resolution of conflict and which work on human rights.*
8. *We make no discrimination on grounds of nationality, race, class or gender, sexual orientation, age, or religious, cultural and or political beliefs.*

8. The whole EAPPI enterprise is premised on denying Israel the right to determine who gets to come into its country and who does not?

WCC acknowledges the right of every sovereign nation to determine who may enter its borders. At the same time, we reserve the right to challenge any denial of entry that is based on a false factual premise or on discriminatory grounds contrary to international human rights law.

Does the WCC send activists like this into any other country?

WCC has also piloted a similar programme in Colombia, based on the EAPPI model.

9. Sometimes EAPPI activist enter into towns on shabbat, while people are praying in the synagogue, to provoke Jews. "People that present themselves as Christian believers, as pilgrims, come in on the holy day to provoke. I don't understand how the churches can accept this."

Do EAPPI activists engage in confrontations on shabbat?

Ecumenical Accompaniers do not seek or provoke confrontations with anyone on Shabbat or any other day. Any such actions would not be condoned by the leadership of the programme or of the WCC.

Has the WCC gotten any complaints from its member churches about the EAPPI program?

WCC has no knowledge of any specific complaints about the programme's purpose. The programme is a response to an invitation in 2002 from WCC member churches and partners in the region.

10. One source says that the EAPPI activists deal with Israelis in an arrogant and superior manner, in particularly they hang out at the Western Wall to revel in their moral superiority. "I think in some ways they feel they are superior and come hear to teach us how to behave."

This is a description of one person's perception of an alleged attitude imputed to Ecumenical Accompaniers in general. No specific action is alleged to which WCC could respond. Ecumenical Accompaniers do not seek or provoke confrontations with anyone. Any such actions would not be condoned by the leadership of the programme or of the WCC.

11. Also, who leaders the EAPPI locally? Volunteers from Europe?

If that's true, why?

Local leadership of the EAPPI programme is provided by a Local Programme Coordinator, who is Palestinian.

12. "They use Israeli freedom of democracy and freedom of religion in any way they can to harm Israel and to harm relations between Jews and Christians here."

What is WCC's response to this allegation?

WCC has no desire or intent to harm relations between Jews and Christians in Israel or anywhere else. On the contrary, WCC has a long-term commitment to and engagement in dialogue between Christians and Jews.

WCC has no desire or intent to harm Israel. On the contrary, WCC has repeatedly affirmed Israel's right to exist, at the same time as advocating for an end to the 1967 military occupation of the occupied Palestinian territories. We believe that an end to the occupation and the implementation of the two-state solution will help ensure the future of Israel as a democratic Jewish state, as well as respecting the right of Palestinians to self-determination.

13. "I consider them an anti-normalization organization. They work with anarchists."

What is WCC's response to this characterization?

WCC seeks a just peace in Israel and Palestine - founded on respect for equal human rights for all, both Israelis and Palestinians - as an essential basis for normalization in the region. WCC does not work with anarchists.

14. Local churches that participate in EAPPI's program recruit, vet (or filter) volunteers and train them for a few days and tell them how to get into the country. They do not come as a group, but as individuals who then connect with the folks at the Jerusalem Interchurch Center led by Yusef Daher where they go through more training and orientation.

Is this how it works

People wishing to participate in the EAPPI programme as Ecumenical Accompaniers commit to doing so through national coordinations hosted by churches or other partners in several countries. Such persons receive orientation/preparation through those national coordinations, which is complemented by further orientation/preparation provided by the EAPPI programme once they arrive.

15. There are a lot of ugly and hostile comments against Israel on the Facebook pages of EAPPI activists.

Does the WCC or EAPPI leadership instruct activists to not demonize Israel in the course of their activism?

WCC does not tolerate hate speech by participants in the EAPPI programme nor in WCC social media channels. Legitimate criticism of certain policies and practices by the government of Israel and its agents cannot be equated with hate speech.

16. When Isabel Phiri was barred from entering Israel a while back, it was done, according to the Israeli government, on the grounds of "prevention of illegal immigration consideration."

Was this related in any way to Israeli complaints about Ecumenical Accompaniers not telling the truth when they come into Israel?

That allegation was raised during the interrogation of Dr Phiri, and refuted.