

A team approach in Palestine

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Special to *The Morning Star*

Johann Funk, a retired sociology professor from Okanagan College, has returned to Palestine, where he is risking injury and even death by accompanying Palestinian children to school, and by being present when there are Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. It will be his fourth trip to this troubled area. What keeps drawing him back?

Funk's ancestors moved to Ukraine in the 18th century to escape persecution.

"They came from the Anabaptist peace tradition," said Funk, "and as a result my grandfathers chose to serve in the Red Cross rather than be conscripted into the Russian Army during WWI."

His father refused conscription into the Soviet Army, and later the German army when it occupied Ukraine during the Second World War. Funk was born during the war, and his family immigrated to Canada in 1948.

"My parents had endured two World Wars, the Russian Revolution and the Stalinist purges, so Canada was a sanctuary for them."

His parents knew that Canada was a peaceful country in which to raise their children.

His family history, the Anabaptist peace principles with which he was raised, and the writings of Gandhi all worked together to convince Funk that conflicts can only be solved using non-violent methods.

"In 1972 I began working for three years as a volunteer agent with First Nations people in

Northern Manitoba. My role was to create interest in and find markets for aboriginal arts and crafts."

Then in 1982, Funk and his wife Vera co-directed a program for the Mennonite Church of Canada, again working with justice issues affecting First Nations people.

In 1990 Funk returned to work on a master's in sociology/anthropology at Simon Fraser University. His thesis, "The Struggle for Self-Definition in Minority Cultures," was completed in the spring of 1993. He began teaching at Okanagan College that fall.

Funk had been interested in Christian Peacemaker Teams, or CPT, since its inception in 1984. When he retired from teaching at OC in 2006, he became directly involved as a volunteer.

"I was attracted by the fact that CPT works with groups that are committed to non-violence, which fit in well with Anabaptist peace-making ideals," he said. "I learned that CPT only goes into an area when they have been asked to come, and they operate under local direction.

"Team members share in all the required jobs: patrols, crisis response, report writing, media reports, urgent actions, organizing, and household chores. This makes us as a team coordinated and accountable. We have to be, since conflict situations are unpredictable and potentially violent."

The strategy of CPT is to be present in areas of conflict, and to bear witness to whatever happens. In critical situations they

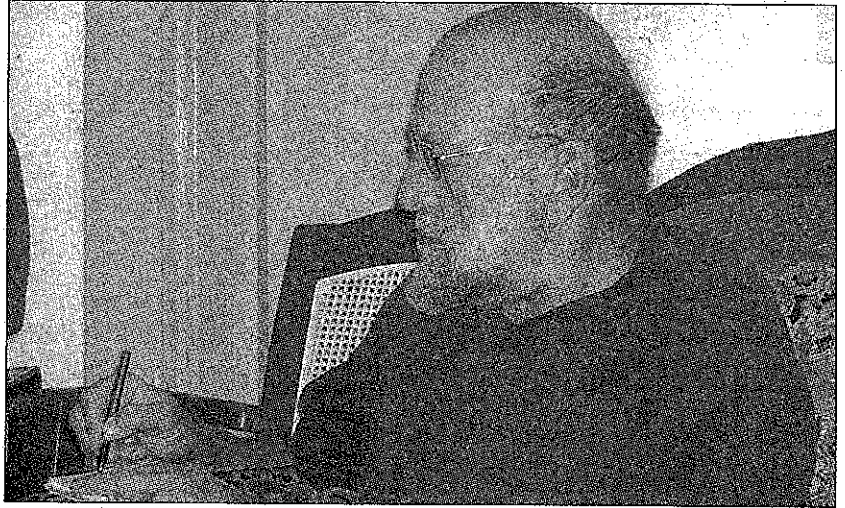


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Johann Funk is a retired Okanagan College sociology professor who is in Palestine working with Christian Peacemaker Teams.

place themselves between the antagonists. The motto of CPT is "Getting in the way." Often, that means literally.

"Our goal is to encourage the participants to moderate their behavior, since they are being observed and recorded," said Funk. "A camera present can often change a volatile situation."

The team members do not undertake their commitments lightly: Christian Peacemakers have been injured or killed while carrying out their assignments.

After joining a CPT delegation in Colombia in 2005 and a training program in Chicago in 2006, Funk has devoted eight to 10 weeks a year to CPT teams in Canada and in Palestine. Last month, he returned for an eight-week assignment to Al-Kahlil (Hebron).

"I will be living in the

heart of the old city, and will receive directions from a local advisory body."

At the present time the team is monitoring checkpoints near Palestinian schools and the Abrahimi Mosque, and doing regular patrols to areas near Israeli settlements, specifically in areas where Palestinians are not allowed. The team is also on call to monitor home invasions, settlement expansions and settler demonstrations.

The team does considerable media work and report writing, which is then shared with local and international media outlets. Reporters and photographers for news agencies, as well as Israeli human rights groups follow up on leads from the team.

Funk will return from Palestine in late January. After time to rest, he will be speaking about his experiences at All Saints Church in Vernon.

KAIROS, a partnership of Canadian churches and religious communities which works on social justice issues, is sponsoring him. To learn about KAIROS contact Karen Truesdale at katrues@telus.net. For other information, contact Steve Heeren of the Palestinian Study Group at tzsche@shaw.ca, or go to the CPT website at www.cpt.org.