

2023 Narrative Report

The year 2023 has emerged as one of overwhelming tarbulence and suffering in a land often respected as sacred. The scale of human loss, devastation, and despair is both overwhelming and heart-wrenching. The global community's failure to enforce international law and hold perpetrators of crimes accountable has left many of us deeply disheartened and infuriated. At Sabeel, however, our faith remains unshaken. We trust in a God who has shown us that life overcomes death. We believe that communities have the strength to forgive, rebuild, and move forward. Against all odds, hope lasts if we believe in ourselves, our communities, and a God of love and justice. Now, more than ever, it is crucial for Sabeel to reaffirm its commitment to the principles of Liberation Theology:

Inclusivity: We recognize that every individual is created in the image of God, making us all children of the Divine, irrespective of our identities or beliefs. Every life is sacred, and we categorically reject racism and prejudice, affirming that there can be no justification or tolerance for such ideologies.

- Justice: Our faithfulness to God is reflected in our role as a prophetic voice advocating for justice and peace. We are dedicated to championing restorative justice, upholding human rights, and staunchly opposing all forms of injustice and crimes, particularly genocide, apartheid, and military occupation.
- Nonviolence: We firmly believe that nonviolence is the sole path to confront evil, surpassing it through goodness. Nonviolence is accessible, effective, and ethical. For Sabeel, it represents the only acceptable course of action. Resorting to violence, whether by Israelis or Palestinians, invariably results in further loss and devastation. We must steadfastly resist the temptations of violence.

Despite the myriad challenges we have encountered, Sabeel has managed to achieve significant milestones this year. Through this report, we are eager to share with our friends and partners the pivotal work undertaken by Sabeel.

Omar Haramy Sabeel

Sabeel Vision

Inspired by Liberation Theology, Palestinians live in prosperity and dignity within a just, peaceful, and inclusive society, where religion thrives devoid of exclusivity, injustice, or violence.

Mission

Sabeel is an ecumenical grassroots movement advocating for liberation theology, founded in Jerusalem in 1988 by a collective of Palestinian Christians, both laity and clergy, women and men. Our mission is to reclaim theology from political and social misuse. We strive to educate, network, and inspire local Christians through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, fostering a commitment to justice and peace-building. Sabeel envisions a society characterized by justice, equality, and nonviolence, achieved by nurturing the faith of the local indigenous church, addressing the root causes of injustice, discrimination, and violence. Supported by Friends of Sabeel, volunteers, and other stakeholders, Sabeel collaborates with duty bearers and rights holders to foster a just, peaceful, inclusive, and equitable society in Palestine.

Strategic Goals

- 1. To foster the development and understanding of Palestinian Liberation Theology, emphasizing inclusivity, justice, and nonviolence, engaging local, national, regional, and international communities.
- 2. To enhance the capacities of Sabeel Jerusalem, strengthening its presence and public relations efforts both within Palestine-Israel and globally.

I. Theologies of Inclusivity, Justice and Nonviolence

Palestinian Liberation Theology began by groups of Palestinians coming together, Clergy, women, men and youth and reflecting on scripture. Sabeel helps the Christian community in the land of our Holy One to be faithful to God today by:

- Helping ordinary Christians to use the Bible as a tool for justice and peace. The need is not only to critique the violence and the evil which is being done in the name of God and the Bible, but equally to point out the rich biblical traditions in both the Old and New Testament. This can help us in our pursuit of peace and freedom based on the biblical teachings of justice, truth, and non-violence.
- Taking a good look at our own churches' theologies and seeking to liberate them from biblical misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

On the local level:

Sabeel Bible Study Groups



Today, Sabeel supports over 30 contextual Bible study groups spread out in the country. The groups are formed of youth, young adults, and women. Most of the groups meet on a weekly basis, while others meet on either biweekly or on a monthly basis to read the Bible and explore how we can be faithful to Christ as we live in the land of our Holy One today.



A highlight of the year was Lent and International Women's Day Meeting 2023 in Jerusalem



On Wednesday, March 8, 2023, the Sabeel Center organized a gathering for women to celebrate Lent and International Women's Day in Jerusalem. 25 women from Jerusalem participated, studying together Proverbs 31:10-31, "The Virtuous Woman." Each woman delved into this text, discussing the qualities of the capable woman and connecting them to the concept from the text of her representing a complete government with its ministries. Sawsan Bitar shared her experience of participating in the General Assembly of the Synod held in Lebanon two weeks prior. The meeting also highlighted some of the challenges women face in work, church, and society, and their perceived role in the church. It became evident that one of the challenges facing women is a lack of knowledge of the Bible. Thus, responding to this challenge, the women agreed to continue meeting on a monthly basis for bible study. The meeting concluded with a dinner, uniting all the participants in a spirit of fellowship.

Training Session for Bible Study Group Facilitators





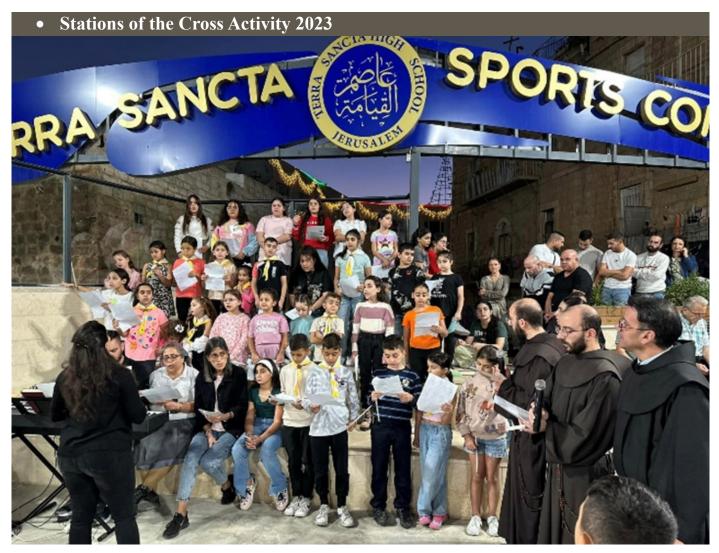
On the final weekend of September, Sabeel facilitated a training program for leaders of Bible study groups. A total of 27 individuals, both clergy and laypeople, participated. Attendees were from many areas including Zababdeh, Jalamah, Tubas, Nablus, Ramallah, Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour, Jerusalem.

Ecumenical Services:



Ecumenical prayer service for Christian school students

In full partnership with the Christian Education Office of the Latin Patriarchate, Sabeel organized an ecumenical prayer service for the students of Christian schools in Jerusalem. Over 200 students attended, along with school faculty staff, and bishops and clergy representing various churches in Jerusalem. The service also coincided with the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity on Monday, January 23, 2023, at the Greek Catholic Patriarchate of Jerusalem – Jaffa Gate.



On 4/4/2023, the Sabeel Center organized a Contemporary Way of the Cross procession for Fifty women from Zababdeh and Jerusalem. The group walked together following the steps of Jesus Christ through the stages of the Passion, starting from the imprisonment of Christ and concluding at the Church of the Resurrection, where participants lifted prayers and hymns for their people, families, and communities. At the end of the procession, the women went to the Arab Catholic group to share a meal.

• Moment of Silence, Prayer, and Candle Lighting

Upon the invitation of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, the Arab Catholic Scouts Group, and the Saint Mansour Association, a prayer vigil and candlelight procession was held on November 9th to call for the cessation of the war, and for peace within the Terra Sancta School - Al Jabsha. The service was led by His Eminence Cardinal Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa. Bishops, priests, monks, and nuns from various denominations in Jerusalem attended. The Cardinal affirmed that a good Christian is also a good citizen, stating, "We cannot detach ourselves from the reality of our country today, especially during this war, but as Christians, we must not lose hope and must believe that our God is a God of life." He added, "I am in daily contact with our people in the Gaza Strip, and every day they reaffirm their resilience and their determination to stay in the Strip, refusing to leave." Despite all the difficulties they are facing, His Eminence emphasized that the Christians of Gaza are teaching us how to cling to our faith at all times.

The event concluded with a candlelight procession towards the image of Jesus Christ, hung on the wall of Jerusalem within the school courtyard, and the recitation of the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic. Father Ibrahim Faltas thanked all those present and the organizations that arranged this spiritual evening. Hear our prayers, O Lord, and have mercy.

• "Emmanuel" Christmas play

Due to the current situation, this year, all Christmas celebrations in Palestine were cancelled. For this reason, Sabeel did not host its usual Christmas dinner, but instead organized with Youth of Jesus' Homeland Palestine and local artists and actors to put on a special play. The play reflected creatively on the suffering Palestinians in Gaza faced this Christmas, while also including themes of hope, that God is with us in the birth of Christ. After the success of the first performance in Jerusalem, with over 200 attendees, the production team worked tirelessly to put on two more performances, one in Ramallah, with over 700 attendees, and one in Bethlehem, with over 300 attendees. This was an important event to bring members of the community from all walks of life together during this difficult Christmas season.



International

In addition to many local bible study groups, Sabeel holds a weekly online service. This online service is open to the community and friends and is conducted in English. The services are a time when the community joins together to discuss how the weekly scripture readings apply to our lives today, especially in Palestine & Israel, and to pray for the specific needs of this region through the Sabeel wave of prayer. These services are led by Rev. Naim Ateek and many of our friends, clergy and laypeople. The Thursday online services are modeled after the Sabeel Thursday noon services that many of our friends have taken part in over the past years.

In addition to the weekly ministry of the word service, we held multiple online prayer services and webinars in 2023:



Sabeel Publications in 2023:

Booklets:

Booklet 11: Who Is My Neighbor? The Sabeel of Jesus

Booklet 12: "Sermons Preached on Special Occasions" by Reverend Naim Ateek

Booklet 13: Sabeel published a number of publications in 2023. What Is God's Plan for the Palestinian People? The Bible, Theology and the Palestinians

• Cornerstone:

Issue 85: "On Love and Betrayal". This publication contains articles which focus on the Jews of the Middle East and the Arab world. Cornerstone 85 seeks to shed light on many Jews who have their origins in the Middle East and have the Arab identity as part of their identity and heritage. The issue's contributors are Hadar Cohen, Regine Basha, Noam Keim, Liel Maghen, and Father David Neuhaus SJ.

Issue 86: "Christmas Amidst Massacres". This issue of Cornerstone highlighted a number of articles which reflected theologically on the meaning and significance of Christmas amidst the current situation in Palestine. Samuel Munayer, Shadia Qubti, Yousef AlKhouri, John Munayer, Marah Sarji, and Tony Deik were the contributors to this issue, which was published <u>online</u>.

• Sabeel Wave of Prayer

The Wave of Prayer is an ecumenical prayer which is written weekly, with relevant news from Palestine and related prayers. The Wave of Prayer is sent by email every Monday and aims to send a "wave" of prayer from Palestine around the world as groups and individuals pray with Sabeel at 12pm on the following Thursday. The Wave of Prayer is currently translated into 10 languages: Arabic, Dutch, English, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish.





LORD hear our prayer

Sabeel, Wave of Prayer.

Building bridges:



At Sabeel, we firmly believe in the significance of nurturing relationships with both Muslims and Jews, highlighting the enduring principles of faith rooted in inclusivity and justice.

In collaboration with Al-Najah University and Muslim leaders, Sabeel orchestrated various meetings throughout the year, bringing together Christian and Muslim leaders. These gatherings serve as a platform to collectively brainstorm and devise strategies aimed to reinforce the bond between Palestinian Christians and Muslims and confront the challenges posed by extremism.

The group is dedicated to working on:

- Countering extremism
- Denouncing violence within the community
- Crafting joint statements
- Reviewing and refining the Palestinian curricula to ensure it fosters a culture of tolerance.

• Collaborative Efforts with our Jewish partners:

Sabeel put forth important publications and activities this year with our Jewish partners to strengthen cooperation and networks:

1. Publishing Cornerstone 85, a special Cornerstone issue on the topic of Jews from the Arab world and the topic of "Love and Betrayal".



This Is Where We Stand A Sabeel Reflection on Antisemitism



- Launching the Sabeel reflection on the topic of Antisemitism "This is Where we Stand" on April 19th. This reflection is the culmination of 4 years of collaboration. We are thankful for all who participated in the launching especially our guests: Hana Bendcowsky, Rabbi Guy Alaluf and Fr. David Neuhaus.
- 3. Sabeel held several meetings with partner Jewish organizations and activists to reflect on the escalation of violence since October



7th. The group met several times, which has led to weekly meetings of Jerusalem residents assembling in silence outside Jaffa Gate. The group was a mixture of Muslims, Christians and Jews, who came

to pay their respects for all victims of the Israel-Gaza war. The half-hour vigils were taken up mostly by silent reflection among those who attended, their eyes fixed on the ground. Many were in tears. The meeting concluded with a short Jewish prayer, followed by a few words from a Sabeel leader.

4. Sabeel led a delegation of both internationals and locals to meet with the families of Israeli hostages. The delegation expressed its solidarity with the families of the hostages and prayed for their immediate release.



5. 'Shining a Brighter Light Together': Sabeel co-sponsored a prayer service at St. Andrew's, marking it as an interfaith event. By collaborating with Rabbis for Human Rights, Praying Together in Jerusalem, The Jerusalem Rainbow Group, and the Elijah Interfaith Institute, we united during this difficult period which has been marked by lament and hope. Our collective prayer for justice and peace aims to reach the God in whose image and likeness we are made. We strive to learn and embody practices that contribute to genuine human security.



With Theology, Action is Needed

We do more than just talk; we walk the walk. It's crucial for liberation theology to be practiced, and for the ideals we develop to be manifested in our daily lives.

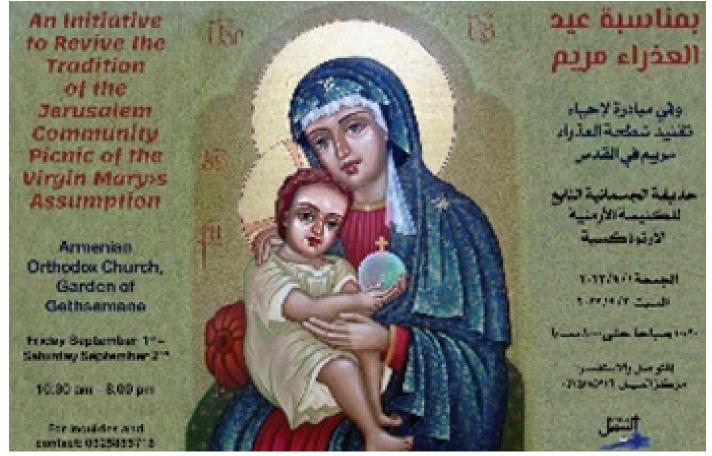
Local

Egg Hunting 2023



Sabeel Center organized its annual egghunting event for children in foster homes on Friday, March 31, 2023, at the Marie Doty Park in Bethlehem. 100 children from Bethlehem and Jerusalem participated. The event began with an entertaining performance by the fantastic duo "Sesame and Zaatar," bringing joy to the children's hearts and smiles to their faces. After the entertainment, the children rushed to the garden to search for and joyfully collect eggs. The event concluded with a light dinner, followed by the distribution of sweets and gifts to the children.

Feast of Mary



Sabeel, in partnership with civil society groups in Jerusalem, successfully revived a cherished tradition by organizing a three-day bazaar during the Feast of the Virgin Mary. This initiative was a significant revival of the historic week-long festivities, which had been dormant for over 40 years due to the first intifada and subsequent restrictions on gatherings by the Israeli Army. Re-establishing this tradition is significant to affirm the Christian presence in Jerusalem and Palestinian cultural and entrepreneurial spirit.

The event attracted over 5000 visitors, including locals and internationals who came to explore and celebrate the rich array of Palestinian crafts, foods, and traditions. This substantial turnout not only demonstrated the community's enduring attachment to their cultural heritage but also underscored the universal appeal of Palestinian culture and the global community's support for their cause. By providing a platform for 24 Palestinian organizations to generate income and gain visibility, the event served as a catalyst for economic empowerment and cultural resurgence. Moreover, the bazaar's success in drawing such a large crowd, especially amidst the challenges and attacks faced by the Christian community and their sacred sites, is a powerful testament to the resilience and unity of the Palestinian people. The presence of both local and international visitors highlighted the bazaar's role as a vibrant cultural exchange hub, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation for Palestinian heritage and identity. The event went beyond mere economic and cultural revival; it was a profound act of solidarity and a celebration of Palestinian heritage, signaling hope and resistance, and reaffirming the community's dedication to preserving and propagating their rich cultural legacy against all odds.

Christian Zionism

Once again, Sabeel organized an event to distribute flyers and educational materials to over 4,000 Christian visitors participating in the annual Feast of Tabernacles, co-sponsored by the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem (ICEJ). The ICEJ is considered a hub for Christian Zionism, a theological position with which Sabeel disagrees.

National level

• Leadership trainings

Sabeel organized Training Workshops on Christian Leadership for Scout Groups

Sabeel organized a series of training workshops as part of the "Young Christian Leaders Project," in collaboration with the "Community Partnership Institute" at Bethlehem University. These workshops targeted facilitators of Bible study groups and scout groups from various regions and denominations.

1. The first session, held on May 19, 2023, included facilitators from Tubas, Jalamah, Jerusalem, Beit Jala, Bethlehem, Zababdeh, Nablus, Ramallah, and Jifna. A total of 18 facilitators attended, along with Father Issa Abu Saada from the Greek Catholic Church in Ramallah. The training focused on Christian leadership principles, encouraging leaders to instill these values in their respective groups.



2. The second workshop was tailored for scout groups in Jerusalem, attended by 18 leaders from the Arab Catholic Group, Greek Orthodox Scouts Group, Armenian Homenetmen Scouts Group, Greek Catholic Scouts Group, and Syriac Orthodox Scouts Group. This session marked the commencement of a series of future workshops aimed at enhancing leadership skills and fostering a strong community of young Christian leaders.



3. The third workshop catered to scout groups in the Ramallah area, with participation from 15 individuals representing the Orthodox Club Group – Ramallah, Jifna Scouts Group, and the Greek Orthodox Group of Birzeit. Like the other sessions, this workshop served as a foundational step towards a continued series of training and development for young Christian leaders in the region.





4. The final workshop was held on September 15 in the village of Haddad - Jenin, targeting scout groups in Northern Palestine.
15 young individuals from St. George Orthodox Scouts and Guides in Zababdeh, Christian Arab Scouts and Guides – Nablus, and Salt of the Earth Scouts and Guides encompassing five villages from the Jenin governorate participated in the traning. This training represents the start of a series of future gatherings.

For all four workshops, the Sabeel Center extends its heartfelt gratitude to Mr. Albert Hani, the trainer, for his valuable insights and guidance throughout the sessions. His expertise and dedication significantly contributed to the success of these training initiatives, aiming to build a robust network of capable and compassionate Christian leaders.

Health Insurance

Since its launch in 2020, Sabeel has initiated a health insurance project in collaboration with over 80 organizations, schools, universities, and parishes. This project enables individuals who previously had no access to health insurance- including those with preexisting conditions, the elderly, and the unemployed- to become members. Prior to the introduction of this project, there was no health plan available to these groups. Despite facing challenges such as COVID-19, two wars, and economic hardships, the project continues to operate.



In partnership with Christian organizations and independent academics, Sabeel has been actively reviewing the Palestinian curricula to evaluate the portrayal of "the other." Our goal is to ensure that the curriculum accurately reflects the diversity of our people and promotes tolerance and inclusivity. During the 2018-2019 period, Sabeel undertook a similar project, resulting in a report that offered over 170 recommendations for curriculum enhancements. We are grateful that at least 118 of these suggestions have been implemented by the Palestinian Ministry of Education.

Regional



1. Conference on Creation Care and the Bible – Amman

The Sabeel Center, along with six female facilitators of Bible study groups from various regions, participated in a conference held in Ajloun, Jordan. The conference gathered Christians from different churches across the Middle East and South Africa, focusing on "Creation Care and the Bible." We are grateful to God for this experience, which inspires us to care for our environment starting from our streets, neighborhoods, and regions, and to be faithful stewards of all creation. THE LAUSANNE/WEA CREATION CARE NETWORK

2. Regional Consultative Meeting on Religion and Public Affairs - Larnaca, June 13-14, 2023



In strategic a partnership between Choose the Life group, Dar Al-Kalima University (Palestine), the Civil Impact Forum (Lebanon), Pathways for Cultural and Media Development (Iraq), and Sabeel (Palestine), a twoday regional consultative meeting on religion and public affairs took place on Tuesday, June 13, 2023. The meeting was called, "Halting the Politicization of Religion and the Sacralization of Politics,"and included

the participation of 21 experts from Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. The program included a session on Tuesday, June 13, 2023, which discussed how to deal with political choices influenced by religion, and another session on "Religions and Human Rights – Exclusion or Constructive Management?" The meeting continued on Wednesday, June 14, with discussions on "How much religion can the public space tolerate?" followed by sessions to discuss the final statement and future strategies and roadmaps.

3. Safe Migration Workshop

Dubai, January 24-25, 2024

The Middle East Council of Churches, in collaboration with The Gulf Churches Fellowship, the Anglican Alliance, Kerk in Actie, Al Amana Center, and Al Sabeel Center, organized a pilot workshop on safe migration. The workshop was held at Christ Church, Jebel Ali, Dubai (UAE), on January 24-25, 2024 and aimed to address issues related to safe migration and provide practical solutions.

4. Sawsan Participation in the Synod of the Catholic Church

Sawsan participated in the Synod of the Catholic Church held in Lebanon from February 12-18, 2023, engaging in discussions and contributing to the collective efforts of the church in addressing contemporary challenges and opportunities.

International

• Witness Visits

In 2023, Sabeel hosted 3 international groups on witness visits. These visits are designed to introduce people to the current realities on the ground.

1. South African and Palestinian civil society solidarity trip, thereby enhancing our collective presence and impact on the global stage. 25



- 2. Sabeel arranged an insightful visit for African American leaders to Palestine. This initiative was geared towards creating networking opportunities and encouraging an exchange of knowledge and strategies, thereby enriching the coordination efforts between diverse groups with varied experiences.
- 3. Over the summer, Sabeel extended a warm invitation to 10 emerging leaders from European and American civil society groups, welcoming them to Palestine. This visit was aimed at showcasing solidarity with Palestinian civil society and providing these young leaders with first-hand experience of the challenges and resilience characterizing the region. Through these initiatives, Sabeel continues to foster international understanding, cooperation, and a unified approach to advocacy and civil rights.
- 4. Sabeel organized a special delegation of youth leaders from seminaries to Palestine to learn about the developments on the ground and discover areas for cooperation.

PAL ACTIONS

• Palactions

In response to the clear need for coordination among the myriad activities surrounding the war, efforts for justice and peace, and the pursuit of a ceasefire, Sabeel engaged in productive discussions with various civil society actors. The outcome of these meetings was the rapid development and launch of a comprehensive platform, palactions.com, aimed at centralizing and streamlining the coordination of these crucial initiatives that support for nonviolence and joined action. Remarkably, within just one week, the website was operational, showcasing Sabeel's commitment to responsive and timely action in moments of critical need. The platform's effectiveness and necessity were further underscored as, within a span of less than two months, it became a bustling hub of activity and collaboration, with over 1600 actions shared by various individuals and organizations. This swift and significant engagement on the platform highlights the intense demand for a centralized space where civil society actors can not only share but also synergize their efforts towards achieving justice, peace, and an end to the conflict. The website has not just been a repository of information; it has evolved into a dynamic and interactive community of activists, peacemakers, and change-makers, all united by a common goal. The success of palactions.com is a testament to the power of collective action and the importance of providing a structured, accessible, and reliable platform to support these endeavors. As the site continues to grow and facilitate impactful actions, it is a beacon of hope and an invaluable tool in the quest for a peaceful and just resolution to the ongoing strife.



• Kumi initiatives

Through a partnership of over 100 Palestinian, Israeli, and international organizations, The Kumi Initiative empowers people here and around the world to rise up in support of Palestinians through simple nonviolent actions on a weekly basis. Since June of 2020, Kumi sessions have taken place online, bringing together different members of our local and international communities. Please check www. kuminow.com

• Ahlan Wa Sahlan

Providing the opportunity to meet with local Palestinian Christians, find out more about Sabeel and the current realities on the ground for Christians in Palestine and Israel. Groups generally meet with Sabeel for a talk and a simple Palestinian lunch. Sabeel in Jerusalem and Nazareth have hosted around 65 groups this year (over 2000 people), from 11 countries.