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## MATT ROBSON

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In the summer of 2003 Matt Robson went on his first visit to Israel and Palestine - not as a tourist but as a volunteer peacemaker. He spent three months based in Jayyous, living with another volunteer who, like him, was there with EAPPI - the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel.

At home in the UK Matt had been at a turning point in his life as a 30-something with a career in television. "I needed a new challenge and various events, including the obvious global ones, made it feel like that had to have something to do with furthering my beliefs in peace and a nonviolent life."



The EAPPI project was set up by the World Council of Churches following an appeal in 2001 by the heads of the Churches in Jerusalem who called on "all peace-loving people from around the world to come and join us in a manifestation of just peace".

How can EAPPI volunteers help? Matt explains: "On a day-to-day basis we were monitoring violations of human rights and international law, providing protection by our presence, and supporting both Israelis and Palestinians in their nonviolent acts of resistance to the military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip."

"The situation was so volatile that it was difficult to know what to do at times... One of my jobs was to accompany Palestinian farmers in their daily struggle to cross through one of the gates in the separation wall to their land on the

other side. On some days the atmosphere when the Israeli defence forces came to unlock the gate was cordial, even relaxed... On other days it was far more tense, with the soldiers regarding this as a highly dangerous military operation and the farmers in a subdued nervous huddle."

### Nonviolent inaction

Over the weeks Matt's understanding of his role changed. At first he felt he had to justify his presence by intervening and arguing with the soldiers. "Slowly but surely over the days and weeks I was less and less active, sitting or standing in the background, I hope as a reassurance to both parties... helping to keep

the situation calm, helping to allow people to treat each other as human beings despite abnormal circumstances, preventing the tension from boiling over into violence."

Apart from being at the gate for the morning and evening crossings through the wall, "the rest of the day would be spent around the village listening to and learning from people's stories, and sharing endless cups of sweet black tea."

At times it seemed that the volunteers were not "doing" very much. Matt found this "nonviolent inaction" strange for someone brought up in Britain "where the working atmosphere is based on achievement and productivity. There were no goals or deadlines. Just watching the farmers go and return safely from work was a success."

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## A calming presence

One day Matt and his colleague, John, were called to a tense situation where soldiers were preventing a group of young Palestinian men from getting to their homes beyond a checkpoint near Nablus. Matt pleaded with the sergeant, Boris, and even rang his commanding officer, but Boris was nervous and irritated and would not let the men through. Getting nowhere, Matt and John simply went over and sat with the Palestinians. Gradually things calmed down and Boris collected the men's identity cards - usually a sign that they might be allowed through.

"Then the soldier's evening meal arrived and an amazing thing happened. Boris came over to the Palestinians, who he had kept by the side of the road for hours, and gave them his food and drink. He explained that it was sunset at the beginning of Tisha B'Av, when observant Jews fast, so he did not want to eat anything. Then, when the Palestinians had finished eating, he returned their IDs and let them through the checkpoint."

Did Matt think this was because the EAPPI volunteers were there? "I will never know how much or how little we affected that situation, but I like to think that it happened because we were there. Boris wanted to show that he was not an unfeeling soldier but a caring human being and our presence broke down enough barriers to allow that act of humanity to occur."

"For me that is the value of accompaniment: a simple quiet presence, which can allow both sides in a conflict to forget the stereotypes and misunderstandings about the other and to remember their common values..."

"Living alongside people and sharing their suffering, being a witness and a reporter of things that the world might not otherwise get to know are two more very valuable roles. At its heart accompaniment is about setting up the conditions where the opposing parties can resolve their own differences, not about trying to change things yourself, which may make it too passive for some people, but it is a very valuable model for third party intervention in a conflict."

## Faith and nonviolence

For Matt, volunteering for the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme grew out of his faith. Brought up in a Quaker family, he took it for granted that trying to live nonviolently was an important part of being a Quaker. As his faith matured he became more sure that he wanted to live according to those beliefs himself. "Though I had been on many demonstrations and vigils I hadn't been involved in working for peace in other ways and didn't feel I really understood what being nonviolent actually meant." He wanted to put nonviolence into practice in an area where there is a great deal of violence.

At a Quaker gathering at Easter 2002 Matt heard someone speaking about a recent visit to the Holy Land. "The main message I took from this talk was that the best way to support Christians, and indeed everyone else, was to actually visit Israel/Palestine. The simple fact of your presence there could show that you still cared and had not forgotten about the place or its problems." He heard about the EAPPI programme while working at Friends House in London, applied, and took part in a training course to prepare the volunteers for their role as nonviolent accompaniers.

Matt volunteered for a second period of three months in Israel/Palestine in 2004 before resuming work in Sheffield, where he teaches students of journalism, and makes films. He is determined to continue his involvement in peace work.

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*For more information visit:*

[www.eappi.org](http://www.eappi.org)

*Read:*

"The value of nonviolent inaction" article by Matt Robson in *Peace News*, March-May 2004

*Checkpoints and Chances: eyewitness accounts from an observer in Israel-Palestine.* Katherine von Schubert, Quaker Books, 2005

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