



The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem

**E-mail Newsletter from
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of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem (ELCJ).
The ELCJ serving in
Palestine, Jordan and Israel.
December 13, 2002**

Salaam and grace to you from Jerusalem, the city of Christ's death and resurrection.

Bishop Younan and the whole ELCJ send you blessed Advent and Christmas greetings. In this land of Jesus' birth we are lighting the Advent candles, remembering God's promises of a Savior and preparing for the Feast of the Nativity.

1. Observing Advent in the Militarily Occupied Cities

On the first Sunday in Advent, Dec. 1, Bishop Younan brought a group from the New England and Southeast Michigan Synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the ELCJ church in Beit Jala for worship. These two ELCA synods are partners with the ELCJ and were here to make solidarity visits. Ordinarily the trip to Bethlehem would not be too difficult, despite the hardships of Israel's military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. However, the whole Bethlehem area (including Beit Jala and Beit Sahour) is once again under a lockdown order. Israel considers the area to be a closed military zone. The Palestinian people have been under curfew, basically house arrest, for several weeks.

Bishop Younan had been able to obtain papers from the Israeli military commander to bring two vehicles with his family and the American visitors into this closed military zone. The purpose of the visit was to worship at the Lutheran Church of the Reformation in Beit Jala, where the bishop was scheduled to conduct the service.

We entered Bethlehem directly through the Bethlehem checkpoint, full of many armed soldiers and military equipment. Driving through Bethlehem with the vehicle flashers on, we made our way to the church through empty streets, seeing only an occasional person outside a building. Shops, businesses, schools and institutions were all closed. Arriving at the Lutheran church in Beit Jala, we entered the church compound and were greeted by people who live and work there.

About fifteen minutes before the service was scheduled to begin, the church bells were rung. Over the empty streets, into the homes of sequestered people, into the ears of Christians and Muslims alike, the bells rang out the message that worship

would soon begin, refusing to let human military laws take precedence over God's Word. The glad sounds of the bells continued for at least five minutes, pealing out the invitation to come and worship. Gradually people began to gather and they continued to come all through the service conducted by Bishop Younan and Bishop Margaret Payne of the ELCA New England Synod, in the absence of Rev. Jadallah Shihadeh, who was abroad. At least forty people, including the eight American visitors, were singing together, hearing God's Word and visiting over coffee after the service, despite the continued curfew and the Israeli tanks rolling up and down the narrow street just outside the church gate.

On the second Sunday in Advent, Dec. 8, Bishop Younan again drove up to the Israeli militarized Bethlehem checkpoint. With him were visitors from Norway and Switzerland. This time he did not have special papers but asked for admission to Bethlehem in order to worship at the Christmas Lutheran Church. He was given entry and once again, with flashers on, he drove through the empty streets. Arriving at the Christmas Lutheran Church it was apparent the curfew was very strict on this day because no one was outside walking or shopping. The stores were all closed.

After the bells had rung, worshippers began arriving and eventually twenty-five to thirty local people from Bethlehem and Beit Jala were in attendance, in addition to international visitors from America, Sweden, Germany, Norway and Switzerland. Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, Rev. Sandra Olewine and Bishop Younan conducted the service.

Just as the second Advent candle was being lit, loud voices of Israeli soldiers shouting repeatedly in broken Arabic could be heard in the marketplace, directly outside the church door. "It is curfew! Those who break curfew will be punished!" This warning applied to every person in the church. Nevertheless, the service continued as people worshipped, prayed, sang and listened to God's Word. Their hearts were being prepared for the coming of the Christ.

The text for Bishop Younan's sermon was from Luke 21. "Stand and raise up your heads for your Redeemer is drawing near." The bishop spoke of many misunderstandings regarding the Second Coming of Christ. "Christian Zionists are making their own roadmaps for Jesus. They have missed Jesus' message found in the biblical texts. Jesus does not need a roadmap. His call to us in the Church is to be prepared for his coming, to stand and raise up our heads." The bishop told the congregation, "When you break the curfew to worship, you are obeying God rather than the military occupation. You are coming to prepare your hearts and minds for the coming of Christ, and to get spiritual strength to be a Church of martyria."

The people gathered for coffee and conversation following the service, a great pleasure after more than two weeks of curfew. It is heartbreaking to know that these people along with many other Christians and their Muslim friends and neighbors are continually harassed in their own homes and towns. The Muslim people missed out on the joys and celebration of the Eid al Fitr which follows the end of Ramadan. The Christians may miss out on the joys and celebration of Christmas if the Israeli military

lockdown continues as planned. The people said their farewells, having been fed with spiritual food and fellowship. As they left for their homes they were unsure and uncertain about what would happen next.

Bishop Younan has compared the situation to that of the Jewish exiles in Babylon so many millennia ago. Their sorrow is expressed in Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon we wept when we remembered Zion. . . . Those who created our suffering said, 'Sing to us the songs of Zion,' but how can we sing a song in a strange land?" Indeed, the bishop has commented, how can we sing our songs when injustice has become a normal way of life here in Palestine, when people are kept like hostages in their houses and towns?

2. School Closures

Once again the schools have been closed in the Bethlehem area. This involves three large ELCJ schools as well as many other Christian and Muslim private schools and the public school system. The schools in Ramallah were also closed for a few days but are now reopened. Schools in other Palestinian cities such as Jenin and Nabus continued to be closed because of lengthy Israeli-imposed curfews.

When our schools are closed it is not only a matter of school days being lost at this moment, important as that is. It is also a matter of destroying the future for Palestinian people and their society. If children cannot be educated, they will not be able to support themselves economically, to make important political and societal decisions, to make important contributions to the general society or even to raise their own children with hopes and plans for the future. But Palestinian people want their children to be educated, and the children are eager to go to school.

We are receiving reports from Nablus that innovative ways are being found to educate the children in order to compensate for the school closures. "Street schools" are open, bringing neighborhood children into nearby homes for their lessons. Teachers from the schools who are also under curfew are teaching children in the houses.

Right now in the Bethlehem area, children are on the alert to come directly to school as soon as the Israeli soldiers announce that the curfew is being lifted for a few hours, for example, from 10 am to 4 pm. Adults hurry to go shopping and take care of family needs; children and their teachers run for the schools. And even then, as happened on Monday, Dec. 9, the curfew can be reimposed much earlier than 4 pm, leaving everyone unfulfilled, with shopping, schooling and visits to family once again forbidden. Please continue to pray for all the children, teachers, schools, families and churches caught in this deprivation of human rights. And please pray that the curfews which close down the schools will be lifted so Palestinian life can continue as normally as possible. Please also pray that occupation may end and justice and security will prevail.

3. A Visit to Beirut, Lebanon

Bishop Younan is a member of the NEST board, the Near East School of Theology,

located in Beirut, Lebanon. This seminary was established in the 1950s by the Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Armenian Evangelical churches in the Middle East. Bishop Younan described the board meetings as “normal,” and was also happy to make a number of contacts with religious leaders in Lebanon. He preached in the National Presbyterian Church in Beirut, giving the message of justification by grace through faith, and emphasizing the necessity of implementing God’s loving justice in our human relationships. The bishop enjoyed visiting with the Presbyterian pastor, Rev. Dr. Habib Badr.

Bishop Younan also met with the Moderator of the World Council of Churches who is the Patriarch of the Armenian Orthodox Church, His Beatitude Catholicos Aram Keshishian. With His Beatitude, Bishop Younan had fruitful discussions on the future of the ecumenical movement in the Middle East, and the restructuring of the Middle East Council of Churches. His Beatitude expressed his full solidarity with the suffering people in the Middle East. Bishop Younan was very encouraged that Middle East church leaders are committed to the Church’s prophetic role, promoting peace, justice and reconciliation. Bishop Younan accompanied by Rev. Dr. Riad Jarjour also visited with Cardinal Sfeir, the patriarch of the Maronite Church. The patriarch expressed his solidarity with the Palestinian people and with the Christian churches in Palestine. The importance of the role of the Church in being prophetic by condemning the Israeli occupation, the human rights violations and all violence was discussed. Again it was reiterated that the Church must always be working for peace, justice and reconciliation. Additional visits were made by Bishop Younan with the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) general secretary and staff.

4. Returning from Beirut via Amman, Jordan, to Jerusalem

Palestinian church leaders such as patriarchs, bishops and archbishops have special papers and permissions given by the Israeli Ministry of Religious Affairs to expedite their necessary and frequent travel within the country and at the airport and bridges as they leave and then return to the country. Bishop Younan has these papers, but on Nov. 27th he once again experienced major delays and harassment by Israeli security forces as he tried to return to Jerusalem across the Allenby Bridge from Jordan. Instead of being accorded the right of smooth passage, Bishop Younan was searched, delayed and called for interrogation. The bishop would not accept any interrogation. In a letter to the Israeli Minister of Religious Affairs, Bishop Younan stated, “I felt my whole experience was an insult and humiliation, not only for me but for the whole Lutheran Church. I am well known to the Israeli security forces as one of the thirteen heads of Christian churches in Jerusalem. The treatment I received on November 27, 2002, at the Allenby Bridge was deliberate. When I remember what happened to me, I realize that it was a kind of persecution and direct humiliation and harassment not only toward me and my Lutheran Church but toward all the local Christian leaders and communities. If I am treated in this way, then how are other

local Christians treated when they try to travel?" This letter was widely distributed to local and international church and government leaders.

5. The Joy of Welcoming International Visitors to the ELCJ

The ELCJ has been enjoying the visits of several international groups in the last two months. In addition to the visits from ELCA groups in the US, we have welcomed groups from the Swedish Council of Churches, the Norwegian Council of Churches, and the Wheatridge Foundation in the US, as well as journalists' groups from various countries. During the time of these visits, the boards of the Lutheran World Federation Vocational Training School and of Augusta Victoria Hospital have been meeting. Also gathering at this time has been the Consultative Committee for Land Development on the Mount of Olives.

It is a great pleasure to welcome all our guests and have them experience our human, religious and political situation. You are always invited and welcomed!

Blessed Advent and Christmas greetings to you all from Bishop Younan and the entire ELCJ family of congregations, schools, faculties, pastors, staff and ELCJ members.

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