



# The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem

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**E-mail Newsletter from  
BISHOP DR. MUNIB A. YOUNAN  
of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCJ)  
November 15, 2002**

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

Political changes, threats of war and continuing efforts for peace dominate our lives, together with increasing humanitarian crises and pleas for justice. Through it all the ELCJ schools, churches and programs continue their ministry in the name of Christ. We thank you for your prayers and support as this ministry goes on in the midst of such turmoil.

## **1. The Political Situation**

At the moment the State of Israel is on the brink of new elections. There are many Israelis and Palestinians who have a great fear of these elections and the changes or the continued status quo that they may bring. Instead of any concentration on the peace process, the next few months in Israel will be focused on the activities leading up to the elections that have been announced for January 2003.

Bishop Younan has described the best candidate for the position of the Israeli Prime Minister as the person ready to see the future of Israeli and Palestinian children living together in peace. The best candidate is not the one who sees only the narrow interests of national rights, forgetting about the symbiotic relationship between Israelis and Palestinians. In the midst of election fever, we must be sure that justice for Palestinians is not forgotten in relation to the Israeli army checkpoints, the economic and humanitarian crises being experienced in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the spiraling violence, and so many malnourished Palestinian people and anemic children.

The Israeli elections and the U.S. threatened strike on Iraq seem to be the only focal points right now, putting the Palestinian situation in the shadows. For example, Mr. Netanyahu has said that it will be easier for Israel to deport Mr. Arafat if there is a strike on Iraq. This and other statements related to the "transfer" of Palestinians show the intentions of some Israeli leaders. There is a real fear among Palestinians that if a major military strike is made on Iraq, there may be severe consequences in Palestine. The Palestinian issue is so small to the world. The ones who hold power will be able to finish their plans in the shadows of a war in Iraq. While there is a sense of relief that Iraq has accepted the UN resolution, people are not totally convinced that a military strike is not coming. We pray that this whole situation can be resolved by peaceful means.

*“When I drive from my home near Bethlehem to my office in the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the Old City of Jerusalem,” Bishop Younan states, “I see signs and posters in Hebrew near Tantur Ecumenical Institute which say, ‘I am here. They are there. Transfer of Palestinian people. Jordan is Palestine.’” Although the signs come from extremist groups, the words produce fear, Bishop Younan says. “We know we are not wanted in our country where we were born.”*

At the same time, we feel hope when we hear the voices of a free conscience raised to ask for the truth regarding the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and to solve the problems in a peaceful dialogue. We are aware of many demonstrations around the world – in Italy, in London, in the U.S., and also in Tel Aviv – demanding a peaceful settlement in both the Iraqi and Palestinian crises. These voices and demonstrations are a sign of an alert conscience concerned about the future of the Middle East and its people and we are encouraged to know that people around the world are calling for peace and justice.

On Saturday, November 2, the Labor Party of Israel held a demonstration in Rabin Square on the occasion of the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rabin’s assassination attended by thousands of people. Bringing greetings by means of telecommunication were former U.S. President Bill Clinton and President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah II of Jordan. Many demonstrators were holding signs that proclaimed “Equal Justice.” Large numbers of people believe that only a two state solution will bring “equal justice,” meaning security for Israel and freedom for Palestinians.

## **2. A Follow Up Conference on the Alexandria Declaration**

On January 21, 2002, an historic document was signed in Alexandria, Egypt. Calling for measures to resolve the Israeli/Palestinian conflict through peaceful means, the document was signed by many leaders in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith groups.

A follow up meeting was held in London on October 24-25, 2002, to discuss the progress that has been made to date. Bishop Younan tells about his experience at the Ben Gurion Airport in Israel as he and other Palestinian church leaders were about to leave for London and the Alexandria conference. Ironically the experience was a telling example of the very injustices the Alexandria Declaration is trying to solve.

*“Anglican Bishop Riah Abu-al-Asal and I traveled to the airport together in the morning. As church leaders we have special VIP papers from the Israeli Ministries of Religious Affairs and the Foreign Ministry to enable us to travel easily within and outside the country. However, as has happened so many other times, our special papers meant nothing to the security guards at the perimeter of the airport. Because we were Palestinians, Bishop Riah and I were stopped and forced to wait at the side of the road while other cars with Israeli occupants were quickly allowed entrance. Based on our Israeli-issued VIP papers, we refused to submit to a search of the car and of our persons. After a wait of about a half-hour, we were allowed to continue into the airport.*

*“We entered the airport’s special VIP lounge area which is intended to speed up security and boarding procedures. Now we joined with two of our colleagues, Archbishop Boutros Mouallem of the Greek Catholic (Melkite) Church and Father Elias Chacour, a Greek Catholic priest from the Galilee. Two major problems quickly presented themselves,*

*despite our Israeli-issued VIP status: 1) We were told that we must carry our luggage to the main airport hall to be X-rayed and to be opened for a hands-on check. Let me say that none of us have ever refused a normal check such as Israeli Jewish people experience. 2) Archbishop Mouallem was harassed and humiliated because the airport security tried to discover if he really was an archbishop, despite the fact that his name had been sent to them by the Israeli Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Foreign Ministry. After a time of such indignities, the four of us opted to leave the airport and return to Jerusalem because we were not ready to be humiliated any further.*

*“Upon our return to Jerusalem we held a press conference to voice publicly our experience and displeasure. Very quickly we received apologies from the Israeli government ministries. We returned to the airport in the afternoon. For the first time in my life I left Ben Gurion Airport feeling like a human being. We were treated well in our leaving and upon our return a few days later.”*

Bishop Younan found the Alexandria follow up conference to be interesting and important, despite some major disagreements on what the peace process would entail. Two paragraphs from the final communiqué of the London meeting describe the content of the disagreements:

*“From the Palestinian side it has been underlined that the ending of occupation, the withdrawal to the borders of 1967, the alleviation of the suffering of their people and the establishment of a strong, viable Palestinian state are preconditions for a peaceful future for all people living in the Holy Land.*

*“From the Israeli side it has been underlined that the end of violence and the open acceptance of their presence in a Jewish state in the Holy Land are fundamental to the attainment of peace.”*

In his frustration, Bishop Younan began wondering how these disagreements could ever be overcome. *“I thought, before we deal with political problems, we have to deal with different mentalities. There is the Semitic Western mentality, which is found in Israel. There is also the Semitic Arab mentality. Sometimes we as Palestinian Christians are the bridge builders between the two mentalities, helping one group to understand what the other group is saying. I began to think, perhaps this is an important way in which to build understanding and then peace in other parts of the world, too – a dialogue among cultures may be the most important thing we can do to promote a culture of peace, tolerance and understanding.”*

Such a “dialogue of cultures” would in no way undermine the justice issue. On the contrary, it may strongly promote justice. Returning from the London conference and energized by his experience, Bishop Younan presented his Reformation Day sermon on October 31 which emphasized the fact that as Christians we are justified by God’s grace through faith. This justification by grace through faith is closely associated with the search for justice.

*“The injustice of our modern world is dividing the world’s people and countries into an ‘axis of evil’ in contrast to an ‘axis of good.’ This division is a challenge to religious communities and to our understanding of humanity. . . . Unfortunately, the rhetoric of ‘axis*

*of evil' blinds the world to justice and to the reality that life is interconnected. . . . Our Creator fashions a unity in which each element is connected with the other. . . . For these reasons, justification by grace through faith proclaims that the compassion of God has no respect for the world's judgment of purity, acceptability or net worth. (Rom. 3:23-24) . . . I believe that justification by grace through faith calls the Church to be prophetic and even to swim against the waves of injustice in our world,"* stated Bishop Younan in his Reformation Day sermon.

With all the difficulties encountered in the Alexandria Declaration follow up meeting, we are still convinced as Palestinian Christians that there is a great need to dialogue with people who are different from ourselves in agenda, ideas and political aspirations. It may be that the London dialogue can be a small step to help the cause of justice in the Middle East. Whatever the solution, justice must be on the agenda. Bishop Younan describes his own "dream agenda" for another Alexandria Declaration follow up conference:

- 1) To learn what each religious group and Israelis and Palestinians mean by "justice."
- 2) To join hands in not allowing any derogatory remark about any religion.
- 3) To network together for a just peace in our country.
- 4) To respect all holy places for the three religions and the status quo which has existed for over a century, and to guarantee freedom of religion.

### **3. Festive Confirmation Service for the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer**

In the midst of all our struggles, we must seek for signs of hope. Each ELCJ congregation is trying to have a normal congregational life, continuing with its preaching and teaching of God's Word, its distribution of the Holy Sacraments and its service within the congregation and in the community. A wonderful sign of hope occurred on Sunday, November 3, as nineteen young people from the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem affirmed their baptisms and confirmed their faith in the Lord Jesus. The celebration service was held at the Lutheran Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives, a sanctuary that is attached to Augusta Victoria Hospital. Many parents, families and friends witnessed the confirmations and then enjoyed a reception just outside the Ascension Church.

Bishop Younan, former ELCJ Bishop Naim Nassar and Rev. Rudiger Scholz, pastor of the Ascension church, joined Rev. Ibrahim Azar in the service of confirmation. Rev. Azar, pastor of the Redeemer congregation and the instructor of the confirmands, introduced each of the young people and joined Bishop Younan in the laying on of hands and the prayers of confirmation.

In his sermon, Bishop Younan told the confirmands they need to know they are judged but are liberated by Christ, that they are occupied but are freed. He encouraged the young people and the whole congregation to be strengthened by their faith in the Lord in the midst of their struggles, continuing to carry the banner of Christ's resurrection.

### **4. Welcome to Visiting Groups**

We have recently welcomed several groups who have made solidarity visits to the ELCJ and to the Palestinian community. The Jerusalemverein group was here, representing the German mission organization which established the ELCJ mission in the Holy Land. Other groups also visited us: a Minneapolis, Minnesota, group led by Chuck Lutz; a group

from the ELCA Metro Chicago Synod led by Rev. Paul Koch; a group representing the Swedish Council of Churches; and a group from FELM (Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission) accompanying the new FELM director, the Rev. Dr. Seppo Rissanen. Our visitors have encouraged us greatly. In addition, we are expecting visits from an ELCA headquarters group and another group from the ELCA New England and Southeast Michigan Synods. We thank all the people who come to learn about our situation, be in solidarity with us and strengthen us with their presence.

## **5. Our Muslim Friends and Neighbors Are Observing Ramadan**

*A note from Rev. Mary Jensen: "Ramadan began on November 6 for Muslims around the world. The month of fasting, devotion and good works is the holiest month in the Islamic calendar. Our Muslim friends and neighbors in Palestine and Israel are fasting from dawn until dusk during Ramadan, and then in the evening they are able to eat and even to celebrate with family and friends. A taxi driver took time to describe Ramadan to me in his halting English. 'It's not just fasting here,' he said, pointing to his mouth. 'We are fasting with our eyes, so I do not look lustfully at a woman. We are fasting with our ears, so I do not want to hear bad words. We are fasting with our minds and hearts, so I try to think good things and do good things. Ramadan is fasting with my whole body, to be a good person.' The man was very intent on helping me understand what Ramadan meant to him. At sundown during Ramadan a loud boom like a cannon shot is heard in Jerusalem. It is the signal that Muslim people may now eat. As soon as the boom is sounded, I can hear a door open down the hall in the Victoria Guesthouse where I live. Then I hear a young boy's running footsteps as he races for the kitchen. As Christians we want to be respectful of our Muslim friends' Ramadan observance. We try not to eat in their presence during the day, for instance. But a Muslim teacher at Dar al-Kalima Lutheran School in Bethlehem graciously prepared a delicious lunch for the Metro Chicago group, and in the Al Ama'ri refugee camp, a Muslim woman cooking food for needy families to eat after sundown offered food to members of the Chicago group in the afternoon. She insisted we eat it immediately. Seeing the Ramadan observance up close and personal is reminding me of God's love for all people and how we share God's love with one another."*

Thank you again for your prayers and support. Please continue to pray for us, for all Palestinian and Israeli people and for peace and stability in the Middle East.

Noted by Rev. Dr. Mary E. Jensen

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