



The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem

**E-mail Newsletter from
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The ELCJ serving in
Palestine, Jordan and Israel.
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Salaam and grace to you from Jerusalem, the city of Christ's death and resurrection.

Bishop Younan and the whole ELCJ invite you to come and visit us in Jerusalem, Ramallah, Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour and Amman, Jordan. What a joy it would be for us to get acquainted with you and to introduce you to the Palestinian Lutheran people, congregations and schools. In this second installment of the October newsletter we are focusing on Christian pilgrimages, trips, study groups and volunteerism, all based in justice, peace and reconciliation.

1. Conversation in an Old City Jerusalem Street

Recently Bishop Younan was walking from Jaffa Gate to the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the Old City of Jerusalem. On this particular day a shopkeeper stopped the bishop to say, "Yesterday, because of you Christians marching in Jerusalem, Jerusalem was closed." The shopkeeper was referring to the thousands of right wing Christians who had come to visit Israel during the Jewish holy days of Sukkot, the feast of the tabernacles. The television news referred to the visitors as Christian Zionists, Christians from all over the world who give unquestioning, one-sided support to Israel. A huge parade had been held the previous day in which the Christian Zionists marched through Jerusalem with music, shouting and many signs proclaiming their support of Israel as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

Bishop Younan said to the shopkeeper, "My friend, in every religion there are extremists. It is true for Muslims, Jews and Christians. The Christian Zionists do not represent Christianity although their voices are very loud. This group of Christians is even against the local Christian churches here in Palestine and Israel, and seems to be working against justice and reconciliation for both Palestinians and Israelis." The bishop continued to speak about the differences between mainline Christian churches and the groups that promote Christian Zionism.

The shopkeeper then asked, “But why do we only hear nowadays about these born again Christians? They are Protestants. Don’t they belong to you? Why do the extremist Christians come in the thousands, and the mainline Christians of which you speak do not make pilgrimages with the same numbers to this land of Jesus and to visit the Christians of Palestine?” Bishop Younan did not know how to answer the man because while it is true that small groups and high ranking delegations do come, it is a puzzle for all the Christians in Palestine how mainline Christian trips, tours, pilgrimages and meetings are consistently cancelled, yet Christian Zionists are coming in droves to support the policies of the government of Israel. These groups think they fulfill prophecy but they bring harm to the whole Body of Christ, and specifically to the Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land.

Recent Israeli news coverage of a protest in Tel Aviv shows one example of such support that becomes harmful to the Body of Christ. A small group of Norwegian Christian Zionists demonstrated outside the Norwegian embassy, protesting their government’s position on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. One sign proclaimed, “We ask forgiveness for Oslo,” referring to the peace agreements made in Oslo in 1992. The other sign stated, “Palestine has never existed as a state, and there has been no ‘Palestinians’ prior to 1964.” Bishop Younan’s reaction to the Jerusalem Post newspaper articles on September 25 and 26 was to say that actions like these make the Palestinian Christians’ position difficult before our Muslim brothers and sisters. It is important that everyone knows Palestinian Christians are grateful to God because we believe God has used the Norwegian Foreign Minister and other politicians to mediate in a charismatic way to implement mutual recognition between Israelis and Palestinians in Oslo, which was mission impossible for more than four decades. Instead of asking forgiveness, we thank God for the Norwegians and other leaders. We need to pray that another Oslo and more charismatic leaders will say, “Enough is Enough! It is time to implement a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine and end the illegal occupation. We need to learn from the mistakes of Oslo but we must keep the vision of Oslo to produce justice and dignity for all people.”

Another example of damage to the Body of Christ is the recent proclamation by Rev. Jerry Falwell that “Muhammad is a terrorist,” as reported in the Jerusalem Post on October 6. Very quickly the Chief Judge of the Muslim Court in Jerusalem wrote a press release protesting Falwell’s statement in the strongest terms. The judge stated that such statements grow extremism and stereotyping between the three religions. They contradict the role of religious people in which they show love, justice and equality and also combat all sorts of extremism and violence that degrade the human rights and dignity of all human beings. Once again Bishop Younan, who received a personal copy of the protest, is placed in the position of trying to explain to Muslim friends that mainline Christians in Palestine do not share the Falwell views, that we want to stand together with our Muslim brothers and sisters in speaking about peace, justice and reconciliation among all people. Our good relation with the Muslim people is a Palestinian paradigm that we want to offer the whole world. We want to share how to respect the other monotheistic religions, how to live with them in harmony and tolerance and accept their humanity as God meant it to be.

We are so thankful for the groups who do make the effort to come and stand in solidarity with the Palestinian Christians, and we want to encourage more to come. Please contact us for more information. Your visits and your physical presence here are a strong witness to suffering Christians and Muslims alike, showing that you are prophetic and serious about peace and reconciliation. It shows you are not willing to let the local Palestinian churches struggle alone in the ocean of injustice, in the ocean of extremism.

2. Reflection and Encouragement from People Who Have Visited Us

Pam Engberg and Maureen Andrew were both part of an April-May 2002 delegation from the New England Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

Pam from Brimfield, Massachusetts, states, “As we met more and more people, we realized that the Palestinians are just people, just like us – moms and dads, toddlers and students, shopkeepers, teachers, professional people – just everyday people who are no more able to control the extremists of the decisions of their government than we are. They just want to love and work and go to school, and live normal lives. Also the culture is very hospitable – very Mediterranean, I guess. The kids are really cherished, visitors are welcomed – it’s really remarkable! If I had the money and the opportunity, I would go back in a heartbeat. Once you are there, the Gospel comes completely alive. You realize that what the Palestinians are experiencing now, Jesus and his disciples experienced; His words about nonviolence and forgiveness suddenly have great force because you can see precisely how He and His hearers were suffering from the Roman occupation: homes demolished, imprisonment without trial, discrimination and racism, etc. And when you hear Bishop Younan or Pastor Raheb speak, or spend a few days with Mary Jensen and her patient stories and explanations, you encounter the presence of a faith so great that it is incandescent, and it warms and changes you forever.”

Maureen from Auburn, Maine, shares these comments: “I really had little fear when we were actually in the Holy Land. Well, that’s not true. I was terrified of losing my passport and visa (the latter of which I misplaced at the checkpoint going into Ramallah!). But, you know, the folks over there, Mary Jensen, the Thomases, Bishop Younan and his beautiful family, all the pastors and regular church folk that we met, all the ‘real people’ in Jerusalem and the West Bank were so awesome. They made us feel welcome, very at ease. They would never allow us to go anyplace they wouldn’t go. They knew when it was safe and/or ‘allowed’ to go to certain places. I think I can honestly say it wasn’t fear I felt when I actually got there. There were other emotions taking over..... And I tell you, I would go again tomorrow if I had the chance. The people are beautiful, the hospitality is, at times, overwhelming and puts us Americans to shame! The faith of the Palestinian people is inspiring! I will never forget the people we met.... I hope folks will take the opportunity to travel to the Holy Land at this time. My only regret is that I couldn’t stay longer and actually work there in some kind of relief effort.”

3. Volunteer Opportunities and Accompaniment Possibilities

You may be interested in volunteering your time and skills for a more lengthy stay in Palestine. By checking with your particular church body or on a new web page (www.elca.org/middleeast) you will find information about the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program from the World Council of Churches, the Christian Peacemaker Team, and other groups that prepare people with special training in order to come to this land and make a positive, tangible difference in the lives of Palestinian people.

4. Decision Regarding Jerusalem by the U.S. Congress

Recently the U.S. Congress made a decision to recognize Jerusalem as the eternal capital of the State of Israel. The Heads of the Christian Churches in Jerusalem have written a letter to President George W. Bush protesting this decision.

The letter states that the decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's eternal capital is provocative because it pre-empts the careful negotiations made in Oslo regarding the status of Jerusalem.

Bishop Younan points out that we must never lose sight of the five elements present in Jerusalem: Jews, Christians and Muslims, Palestinians and Israelis. Our call, along with many churches in the world, is that Jerusalem needs to be a shared city because it is dear for all five elements. The aspirations of all five must be recognized and implemented in any negotiation and final status agreement. The truth is that a shared Jerusalem is necessary for the sake of a just peace in the Middle East, even if congressional bodies vote to give the city to one group.

5. Reflections on Justice from Bishop Younan

“If the world will ignore justice in one country, or among one group of people, or have a double standard regarding the criteria of justice, then justice becomes loose and weakened. This is justice that becomes dependent on self-interest and not on justice itself. It is watered down and dilutes the world's understanding of true justice.

“The criteria for justice are in the Bible. There is one rule: justice is for the sake of humanity, whatever the race, ethnicity, gender or age of the people may be. The Old Testament prophets criticized foreign powers, but the strongest words were directed at their own people. They were to live in justice, to promote justice, and thereby live in safety. If justice becomes one-sided, there is no peace and no security.

“Sisters and brothers, if justice is forgotten, if power has the last say and justice loses its hold in the world, if justice is sitting on office shelves with piles of dust gathering on it, how will the future generations live? In a Lutheran World Federation Council discussion I said very clearly that our world is falling apart from the lack of justice. In our globalization we may be connected by the internet, but we are disconnected by

injustice and forgetting about our God-given humanity, and widening the gap between rich and poor, North and South, West and East. Justice must deal with the root causes of injustice.

“So I believe the sin of the Christian Church today is its neglect of raising prophetic voices insisting on justice, its neglect of swimming against the waves of injustice and extremism not only on issues that are remote to us but on issues near to us in our homes. I believe the churches must network more and more within their own countries and within the ecumenical framework because the drums of injustice are beating very loudly today and we in the Church must speak and act prophetically.

“These are my questions: Have the political leaders consumed all their diplomatic power or are they afraid to lose their intent? Is there nothing left to prevent war from devastating us, from killing us? My concern right now is for the women and children in Iraq. Will they again become victims of injustice and war? Is the world ready to give a boost for religious and political extremism in the Middle East by striking Iraq? Are we in the church ready to add more suffering and hatred to the people of the Middle East?

“I know this to be true: If Iraq is attacked the whole Middle East will be affected. The Israeli/Palestinian conflict will be much more difficult to solve. The whole political map will be changed. Power will have had the last word, not justice. Religious and political extremism will grow; the gap between East and West will widen. I plead with the leaders of the world for Christ’s sake to think of the women and children who are seeking justice to solve the disputed conflicts in the Middle East in a negotiated, civilized way.

“Again I ask for your prayers and your thoughtful consideration of your own unique ministry of presence in solidarity and Christian communion with the Lutheran church in the Holy Land. I invite you to come and see, and then to use your voice to call for justice, peace and reconciliation. We pray that together the voices of the people of God may continue to be the prophetic voices which the world will hear and respect, resulting in a turn toward justice and compassion for the good of all people in the Middle East.”

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