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The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan

URGENT MESSAGE
from
Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan
Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem of the
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan,
working in Jerusalem, Palestine, Jordan and Israel
April 8, 2002

PLEASE NOTE: A short press release and the longer story about the IDF search of the Lutheran Church of Hope in Ramallah are both included in this message.

URGENT PRESS RELEASE
April 8, 2002

At 12:30 pm Sunday afternoon, April 7, 2002, a group of nine or ten Israeli soldiers came to the door of Rev. Ramez Ansara in Ramallah, asking him to accompany them as they searched the Lutheran Church of Hope, a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and Palestine (ELCJ). The pastor went with the soldiers and unlocked doors for them, requesting that they not bring their weapons into the church sanctuary. Two soldiers left their weapons and came with the pastor, searching the sanctuary, the altar, the organ and the pews, all of which are holy places for the church. They also searched several levels of the bell tower including the bells themselves before moving to the church hall and the kindergarten.

Using Pastor Ansara as a human shield, the soldiers first pushed him into each room, then jumped into the room with weapons leveled. The search lasted about two and one-half hours. No gunmen, weapons or ammunition were found, as Pastor Ansara had told them at the beginning. At one point the soldiers asked the pastor if he himself had a weapon to defend himself. Pastor Ansara answered, "I don't need a weapon. God defends me."

The soldiers left the pastor to walk to his home alone, and this was dangerous since Israeli snipers are posted to shoot at people who are not in their houses. Pastor Ansara arrived safely at his home at about 3:15 pm.

The city of Ramallah, Palestine, is in the eleventh day of re-occupation by the IDF. People are living under twenty-four hour curfew and may not leave their homes.

We in the Lutheran church denounce the acts of invading and searching churches and church sanctuaries and demand that the international community and the State of Israel secure the protection and the sanctity of church sanctuaries, compounds and properties.

Noted by Rev. Dr. Mary E. Jensen
Communications Assistant for the ELCJ

For more information, call Rev. Gustaf Odquist at +972 - 2- 67-255733

DETAILED STORY OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF HOPE INVASION April 8, 2002

Today we are able to report that Rev. Ramez Ansara is safe and the church building only slightly damaged after a two and one-half hour invasion and search of the Lutheran Church of Hope in Ramallah by Israeli Defense Force (IDF) soldiers yesterday, April 7, 2002.

According to Rev. Ansara, nine or ten Israeli soldiers came to the door of his home about 12:30 pm on Sunday, April 7, 2002. The soldiers had asked neighbors who was in charge of the church building, and one of Rev. Ansara's cousins brought them to the pastor. Rev. Ansara stated later that he was not surprised to see the soldiers because other churches in Ramallah had already been searched.

The soldiers escorted the pastor down the hill to the church, speaking to him in English. Part way to the church some shooting was heard, and the soldiers all ran to hide behind a nearby tank, leaving Rev. Ansara standing alone in the street. "What about me?" the pastor asked. "What am I supposed to do?" "Sit down," the soldiers said. So Rev. Ansara sat down in the street close to the tank. After about ten minutes the soldiers said, "Let's go."

The keys to the church were in the pastor's car, parked in a garage near the church. The soldiers accompanied him to the car where he was able to retrieve the keys.

Arriving at the church building, Rev. Ansara unlocked the doors, but told the soldiers that he would not allow any weapons to be brought into the sanctuary. The soldiers protested, saying it was too dangerous, but the pastor insisted. Finally two of the soldiers left their large weapons with other soldiers, and went with the pastor into the sanctuary. They did keep a small gun with them. The two soldiers then searched in the altar, the

organ, the piano and the pews. The pastor also accompanied the soldiers up into the church tower where they searched boxes stored there and searched a broken, hollow cross kept in the tower, as well as the bells themselves.

After searching the pastor's office, the soldiers brought the pastor downstairs to the church hall. They spent an hour searching in the kitchen, the bathrooms, the classrooms and the large meeting room. Every cupboard and every drawer was opened. The soldiers put things back after they searched. A few times the pastor pointed out items that were left out, and the soldiers put them back.

Then the soldiers brought the pastor to the bottom level of the building where the kindergarten is located. The pastor did not have the key to the outside aluminum door so the soldiers removed it, damaging the door slightly. For the next hour every room and every closet in the kindergarten was searched.

Rev. Ansara described the search process: "The soldiers used me as a human shield. They would push me first into each room and then would jump into the room with their weapons leveled." The pastor could laugh about it later, saying it felt as if he were in a movie.

At one point the soldiers asked the pastor if he had a weapon. "Why would I have a weapon?" Rev. Ansara asked. "To protect yourself," the soldiers answered. "I don't need a weapon," the pastor answered. "God defends me."

After about two and one-half hours the soldiers were satisfied there were no people or weapons hidden in the church building. "Now we will take you home," they told the pastor, but when they reached the tank in the street they sent the pastor on his way, leaving him to walk alone. "Okay, go home now," they said. Rev. Ansara protested, saying that it was dangerous with snipers stationed on rooftops to shoot people outside their homes. The soldiers talked on their phones and again assured the pastor it would be okay.

"My walk home was probably the most nerve-wracking part of the experience," Pastor Ansara said later. He arrived home safely.

We denounce such invasions and searches and demand from the international community and the Israeli government the protection and sanctity of church sanctuaries and church property.

Noted by Rev. Dr. Mary E. Jensen

For further information, please contact Rev. Gustaf Odquist
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Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem Press Release

Peace upon all those who wish peace.

Peace cannot be obtained by the war nor by the tanks or by the bloodshed, especially in Bethlehem.

There is no need for more bloodshed in Bethlehem. This morning blood was shed. We refuse all bloodshed, Israeli or Palestinian. Bethlehem must not remain any more a place of war.

We ask the Israeli Authorities to withdraw all its instruments of war; to go in peace, and to send back their soldiers to their families.

On this barrier of war we proclaim the Gospel of peace, the Gospel of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace. We invite all the Churches of the world to proclaim it with us.

We invite our faithful to remain strong in their patience, faith and in the tranquility of soul which comes from the peace and the justice of God. We invite them to ring the bells of Christmas today at 2:00 p.m. in Bethlehem, Beit-Jala and Beit-Sahour, the town of the Shepherds and the Angels who proclaimed peace to the world, as a sign of the peace in their hearts and as moment of prayer and supplications.

Patriarchs and Heads of Christian Churches in Jerusalem,
On the Military Barrier before Bethlehem

Bethlehem, 8 April 2002