



Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCJ)

**E-Mail Newsletter from
BISHOP DR. MUNIB A. YOUNAN
of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCJ).
The ELCJ is 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.

As the threats of war in Iraq continue and increase, our prayers for peace are also continuing and increasing. We thank all of you around the world who are in solidarity with us, praying and working for peace in the whole Middle East, including Palestine and Israel.

1. Opposing the War in Iraq

The thirteen heads of Christian churches in Jerusalem are against any war in Iraq. Such a conflict will only increase bloodshed and hatred. Bishop Younan comments:

** We are living in the 21st century, not in the middle ages. Certainly it is time that people are intelligent enough to dialogue with each other, using brains to bring about peaceful solutions rather than muscles to create war and catastrophe. There are many places in the world where dialogue and negotiations are the norm rather than the horrors of war. We call on the world community to insist on dialogue and negotiation rather than war in Iraq and in the Middle East as a whole in order to solve the conflict in a peaceful way.

** We are very concerned that an attack on Iraq and the war and suffering that will certainly follow will put the Israeli-Palestinian issue in the backyard of world politicians. This crucial conflict will continue and perhaps even worsen while the world's attention is focused on Iraq. We find this to be a very dangerous situation. The Middle East needs justice and peace – not war. We call on the world community to insist that a just and equitable solution be found for Israelis and Palestinians, as well as for the people of Iraq and the neighboring countries.

** We are also very concerned that an attack by western countries on Iraq will be interpreted as an attack on the Muslim world, thus creating more political and religious extremism.

** Finally, a war in Iraq will make the position of Arab Christians in the Middle East even more difficult. Arab Christians are very much in the minority here, but we believe the western countries must take them into account. We are reminded of the biblical story of Abraham who asked God to restrain for the sake of a very small group of people (Gen. 18:16ff). We call on the world community to take note of the fact that Christians are living in every country of the Middle East, including Iraq. We do not say this to create divisions between Muslim and Christian people but rather to educate the world about the presence of Christians in the Middle East and their bridge-building role, noting that in most places Christians and Muslims live together as neighbors and friends.

2. ELCJ Church in Amman, Jordan, to Provide Housing for WCC/ACT Volunteers

The Lutheran Good Shepherd Church in Amman, Jordan, is getting ready to house volunteers in its guesthouse. Volunteers from the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Action by Churches Together (ACT) will be coming to Jordan to serve refugees and others coming out of Iraq during the seemingly imminent war and also in the post-war period. The Lutheran church will provide space and also pastoral counseling for the volunteers for a period of fifteen months. Rev. Samer Azar, pastor of the Amman congregation, has been organizing the refurbishing of the church's guesthouse and will be available to the volunteers. This is a joint cooperation between MECC/ACT and the ELCJ.

Bishop Younan is emphatic in saying that as a church we do not look only at our own problems but look to the needs of others. In this troubling situation the ELCJ will be assisting the volunteers in Amman to do their work with Iraqi people – people who undoubtedly will be experiencing great need.

3. The Israeli Elections: What Effect Will They Have on the Peace Process?

The Israeli elections were held on January 28, 2003, and the Likud party won the most seats in the Knesset (the Israeli governing body). This means that Ariel Sharon, the previous Prime Minister and head of the Likud party, will be invited by the President of Israel to form a coalition government. There are 120 seats in the Knesset; a majority (61) is needed to give control of the Knesset and thereby have control of the Israeli government. The Likud party has won 38 seats; the next largest count is 19 seats won by the Labor Party. The Likud party must form a coalition with other parties in order to gain at least 61 Knesset members (MKs) who will vote as a block and thereby have control. Ha'aretz newspaper, in its report on the final election results, shows that 13 different political parties will be represented in the new Knesset. There is now much speculation about which political parties will eventually vote with the Likud party. Will they be parties that are interested in peace with the Palestinians? Or will they be parties that will turn the Israeli government even more to the right, opposing peace plans?

We as Palestinians await the formation of the new government and are very concerned about its make up. Will there be peace talks now? Or will there be an even harder line taken against Palestinians? We are in favor of any government that

promotes justice and peace. We hope and pray for an Israeli government that has the goal of ending the Israeli military occupation and building understanding among nations. We also pray that God may create in a miraculous way new opportunities for justice and peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

4. Welcome! Day Center for the Elderly Has Re-Opened

The Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the Old City of Jerusalem has been able to re-open the Day Center for the Elderly in the former Martin Luther School premises. Helped by a grant from the Commission of the European Communities, the Day Center is open Monday through Friday. On Mondays and Wednesdays the women come to socialize and work on handcrafts. On Tuesdays and Thursdays the men come to visit with each other and also to play games. Backgammon is a favorite. On Fridays the physical therapy and exercise room is open for both men and women.

Rev. Ibrahim Azar, pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem Old City, is the manager of the day center project. Abeer is a young woman who is in charge of the day to day activities in the center. Recently Abeer stated that the most recent population study in Jerusalem showed that more than 1600 people over the age of 60 live inside the walls of the Old City. This means that the Redeemer church is meeting an important need; there is not another day center for elderly people in the Old City. This center was open previously but ran out of funding. It is with much gratitude to the European Communities that we are celebrating the re-opening of the Day Center for the Elderly.

5. Current Difficulties: Obtaining Visas; Tax-Related Court Cases

In the past few months we have noted more and more difficulties for church workers to obtain visas from the Israeli Ministry of the Interior. International workers in churches and also in church related organizations are encountering problems in receiving and renewing the necessary visas. We are also aware of visa problems for Roman Catholic seminarians from Arab countries who are studying in Jerusalem. Some church workers who have been in the land for many years are now being told they cannot renew their visas. This development is very disturbing for the future of Christian churches and their institutions in this country.

Lutheran World Federation and Augusta Victoria Hospital on the Mount of Olives are continuing to work with difficulties in regard to a recent ruling in a court case involving an Israeli-imposed employers tax. This ruling is worrisome because it may adversely affect all the churches and church-related institutions in Jerusalem and makes us concerned for the future of the Church and its institutions.

6. ELCA Communicators Visit the ELCJ

A group of twelve communicators from various ELCA synods and from the ELCA headquarters in Chicago, IL spent seven days in Palestine and Israel, Feb. 1-8. Led by the Director of the Department of ELCA Communications, Rev. Eric Shafer, the group was able to visit two ELCJ schools in Ramallah and Bethlehem; to worship with

the ELCJ congregation in Beit Jala; to visit the LWF Vocational Training School and also Augusta Victoria Hospital; and to hear personal stories from many people in both Israel and Palestine. We were very happy to welcome the people from the ELCA who will tell the story of the Palestinian people and of the Palestinian Lutheran church.

7. Bishop Younan Makes Visits to Officials in Sweden and Norway

Bishop Younan returned to Jerusalem on January 29 after meeting with many church and government officials in Sweden and Norway. The bishop met in Sweden with church representatives from Finland, Sweden and the ELCA in the US in regard to the Endowment Fund that will ensure future funding for ELCJ schools.

In Sweden the bishop visited with Prime Minister Goran Persson, Foreign Minister Anna Lindh and with Archbishop K.G. Hammar. In Norway the bishop met with church leaders and also with Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevick. An important feature of all the visits was the desire to find a quick and imminent solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Also discussed was the opposition of the grassroots for any war against Iraq, searching for a peaceful solution.

Bishop Younan commented, "It was heartening for me in my visits with church and government leaders to see their concern for the Middle East. Their seriousness about the continuation of Palestinian Christianity was very clear. They see bridge building between peoples, countries and churches as being their role in helping to maintain the Christian presence in Palestine. When I hear these government and church leaders speaking like this, it raises my hope that Palestinian Christianity is encouraged to continue its role of being salt in our society."

May this Epiphany season be a time of light and new understandings in our relationships with God and with each other.

Noted by Rev. Dr. Mary E. Jensen

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