



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.
January 6, 2003**

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

Bishop Younan and the whole ELCJ send greetings in the new year of 2003, praying for an end to the Israeli military occupation and a just peace in Palestine and Israel, and for peace around the world. We are very aware that our situation as Palestinians is not the only circumstance of oppression in this world, and our prayers are for all people who are not free to determine their own future. May 2003 be a year of firm and steady steps to freedom, justice, peace and reconciliation in all parts of the earth. .

1. Somber Mood among Palestinian Lutheran Christians at Christmas

"We worshipped, we prayed, we sang, of course," said Rev. Ramez Ansara of the Lutheran Church of Hope in Ramallah. The Lutheran and Anglican congregations in Ramallah shared the Christmas Eve service, held at the Lutheran church. Rev. Fadi Diab, the Anglican priest, preached the sermon, children sang and Holy Communion was received by Anglicans and Lutherans together. On Christmas Day the Lutheran congregation again gathered to hear God's Word. Rev. Ramez emphasized how important it is for us to know that God dwells with us, how God has taken the first step toward us. Later Rev. Ramez reflected, "But this was not a joyful Christmas. Many people are depressed, not feeling Christmas. Usually on Christmas Day we make many visits with family and friends, but not this year. I know a lot of people who just went to work on Christmas Day. The reasons include the re-occupation of Ramallah, the curfews which have been imposed, and our great sadness at seeing Bethlehem occupied by the Israeli military and experiencing such difficult curfews."

Similar descriptions of a somber mood at Christmas were stated by all the ELCJ pastors. In Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour – Palestinian towns clustered together just south of Jerusalem – the Israeli army temporarily lifted the curfew which had been imposed for more than a month, allowing people to prepare for Christmas and to worship at the churches on the holy days. Tanks and soldiers pulled back from Manger Square by the Nativity Church, but the military presence was still strong in other parts of the three towns. The curfew was reimposed the day after Christmas, then it was lifted the following day, then reimposed. Part of the oppression of

occupation and curfews is the great uncertainty it causes. It is nearly impossible to make any plans or implement them in any area of one's life. Adding to the uncertainty is the knowledge that the Israeli soldiers may reimpose the curfew at any time. For example, the soldiers may shout in the streets early in the morning, announcing that the curfew will be lifted from 9 a.m to 4 p.m. on that particular day. Children run to school, adults run to work, go shopping for food, try to visit relatives. But at any time the soldiers may begin shouting that people must return to their homes because the curfew is being enforced. Then everyone runs for home, fearing that they could be caught in the streets by soldiers. Sometimes the shouted announcements of a reimposed curfew are accompanied by gunfire. There is currently no indication when the curfews in the Bethlehem area will end.

Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, pastor of the Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, was delighted to see the church overflowing with worshippers on both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. *"There literally was no more room in the church,"* said Rev. Mitri, *"just like there was no room in the inn on the first Christmas in Bethlehem."* Special guests included Bishop Dr. Munib Younan, Probst Martin Reyer of the German Lutheran congregation and Rev. Michael Thomas of the English language international congregation along with people who had accompanied them to Bethlehem to worship. The curfews and occupation were momentarily forgotten as the beautiful Christmas story was told in the church but the weary, long-standing problems were waiting right outside the church door. The only Christmas decorations were the trees in the sanctuary; people did not have the energy or desire to decorate outdoors. Usually Bethlehem is filled with beautiful decorations at Christmas and people are enjoying festivities with family and friends. Not this year. Nevertheless, on Christmas Day Rev. Mitri preached about the joy of Christmas, saying that joy is a gift of God which we can celebrate even when most people find nothing to celebrate.

Rev. Samer Azar, pastor of the Lutheran Good Shepherd Church in Amman, Jordan, also described a gloomy mood among the people despite large crowds of children and families participating in the Christmas Eve and Christmas Day worship services and celebrations. In addition to problems unique to Jordan, many people have families in Palestine so the concern and fear about Palestinian difficulties spill over into Jordan. Rev. Azar stated that he drove around in Amman late on Christmas Eve. Despite the fog and occasional rain, many, many people were coming to worship at midnight services at the Latin Catholic churches. Rev. Azar believes that church attendance at Christmas was much higher this year in Amman than in previous years.

A similar story is told by Rev. Ibrahim Azar, pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem's Old City. Over seventy children were present with their families at the Christmas, filling the large church sanctuary. On Christmas Day Bishop Younan was the guest preacher at the morning service, speaking about the angel's message to the shepherds: "Do not be afraid. To you is born a Savior." Rev. Ibrahim noted that even the children who would normally be noisy and rambunctious opening their special gifts at the end of the service – even the children were quiet in their enjoyment. *"People came to worship as they had come to all the Advent activities, but they were quiet and subdued,"* the pastor observed. *"I felt the same."*

In Beit Sahour, the town of the Shepherd's Field, the Lutheran school and church are closely associated. Evangelist Hani Odeh noted that while the 9:00 a.m. Christmas Day service was well attended with people singing carols and hymns, hearing the Christmas message from Rev. Mitri and receiving Holy Communion, *"the mood of the people and town is not good. People's minds are engaged with curfew, war with Iraq and what Sharon (Israeli prime minister) will do. We have tried to celebrate Christmas with our school programs and our worship on December 25 and 26; we've tried to hear the good news of Christ's coming."* On Dec. 23 the younger school children had a program and gifts in the morning. In the afternoon the young people in grades seven through twelve presented a hastily planned Christmas program in the church, with the school choir singing and classes of voice choirs telling the familiar story of Christ's birth and the shepherds who had heard the angel message just a short way from the Lutheran school and church.

Rev. Jadallah Shihadeh, pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Reformation in Beit Jala, said it was so good to come together to pray and sing. On Christmas Eve Rev. Jadallah preached on John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Trees decorated the church and there were Christmas decorations in the boy's boarding section, located on the Lutheran church compound. The church was full for both the Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services. *"People are coming to church, as always. I don't see a difference in attendance, but people are very sad, and things are not easy."* Like Bethlehem and Beit Sahour, Beit Jala has also experienced a month of curfews, raised only for a few days at Christmas. *"But we concentrate on the Good News of the Gospel, Christ being born among us."*

2. The Situation for the ELCJ Schools

Four of the five ELCJ schools are struggling with the Israeli re-occupation, curfews and closures. Only the Lutheran Kindergarten on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem is able to keep a regular schedule.

The Lutheran School of Hope in Ramallah has lost several days of school from September through December, but it is the three schools in Bethlehem, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala which have lost the most days. Beginning about the third week of November, strict curfews have prevented the children and teachers from coming to the schools except for a few days. According to the schools director, Dr. Charlie Haddad, at least fourteen school days have been lost to date. When the curfew is lifted for a few hours, children and teachers are in school whenever possible, including Friday (usually a day off) and also during Christmas and New Year's vacation times in order to compensate for the lost days. Dr. Haddad is working with the principals of the schools to make a serious attempt to supplement whatever teaching is possible in the classrooms by giving worksheets and research papers to do at home.

Additionally, Dr. Haddad is working with Dar al-Kalima Lutheran School in Bethlehem on a pilot project intended to train teachers to educate students through “distance learning.” The whole staff will be trained in basic computer skills, telecommunication applications and classroom applications, tutoring and learning strategies. All students and teachers will have their own internet account, working through lessons, important web sites and video conferences. Eventually Dr. Haddad will be working with all the ELCJ schools to implement distance learning through computers in order to insure the education of the Palestinian children and young people.

3. Bishop Younan Declare Christian Zionism to be a Heresy

Recently Bishop Younan was interviewed by a Danish newspaper. He was asked for his opinion of Christian Zionism and the bishop said, “I hereby declare that Christian Zionism is not only a sick theology but it is a heresy, right along with Arianism and Nestorianism. I believe it is time we named this misinterpretation of Christ and the gospel for what it is.”

First of all, the bishop states, Christian Zionism promotes Christ not as the Savior but as a military general, readying his forces for a huge battle, Armageddon. The true Christ is the Christ of the cross and the open tomb, bringing hope, peace, reconciliation and new life.

Secondly, Christian Zionists pretend to love the Jewish people but in the long run they are actually anti-Jewish in their teachings. The Jewish people are simply characters in the Christian Zionist heresy and in the so-called final battle; two-thirds of the Jewish people will be destroyed because they do not believe in Christ, while the other one-third will be converted to Christ.

Thirdly, Christian Zionism is anti-peace, anti-reconciliation. Bishop Younan states that the teachings are racist, calling for the transfer of Palestinians out of this land. “Christian Zionism is the enemy of peace in the Middle East.”

Christian Zionism is not limited to one or more church bodies, but its adherents can be found in every church body, including the Lutheran church. Declaring Christian Zionism to be a heresy, Bishop Younan states, is intended to alert all Christians everywhere to its dangers and false teachings.

Blessed New Year's greetings for 2003 to you all from Bishop Younan and the entire ELCJ family of congregations, schools, faculties, pastors, staff and ELCJ members.

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