



Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCJ)

**E-Mail Newsletter from
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of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCJ).
The ELCJ is serving in
Palestine, Jordan and Israel.
November 5, 2003**

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

In October and November there are many celebrations of thanksgiving to God for all God's blessings to us. We in the ELCJ are grateful for God's gifts, even in the midst of war and threats of war, in the midst of oppression, occupation and poverty. We thank God, and we thank you for your prayers, concerns and contributions for the mission and ministry of the ELCJ.

In this November 2003 newsletter you will find the joyful news about Abrahams House in Beit Jala; the dedication of the parish house at the Lutheran church in Amman, Jordan; the uplifting Reformation Day Service held in the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the Old City of Jerusalem; an example of the travel difficulties experienced by Palestinians living under the military occupation; news about the Martin Luther Community Education Center just opening in the Old City of Jerusalem; information about Bishop Younan's book "Witnessing for Peace"; and excerpts from Bishop Younan's sermon on the occasion of the dedication of Abrahams House.

1. Abrahams House: A Reality at Last:

After seven long years of prayer, work, construction, delays, curfews, closures and determination, Abrahams House (Abrahams Herberge, in German) is a reality at last. On October 30 the building and its ministry were dedicated to the glory of God in the presence of hundreds of people. Located on the church compound of the Lutheran Church of the Reformation in Beit Jala, Abrahams House is a retreat and study center with a guest house where youth and adults of all three Abrahamic faiths can gather to build understanding and reconciliation.

Over two-hundred people from Germany came to celebrate the dedication, representing many churches and individuals that had contributed financially to build Abrahams House. The Lutheran Church of the Reformation was overflowing with Palestinian, Israeli, German and American people, many of whom sat outdoors or in the parish hall, listening to the service. Rev. Jadallah Shihadeh, pastor of the Reformation church, greeted the many visitors, including several Jewish rabbis and Muslim clerics. Music, God's Word, messages, expressions of gratitude and great joy filled the people and the church. Bishop Maria Jepsen of the Northelbian Church in Germany joined ELCJ Bishop Dr. Munib Younan and

Propst Helmut Glatte from Germany in bringing messages, and Rev. Herman Keller of Hamburg, Germany, brought the sermon.

The sanctuary of the Reformation church has also been completely remodeled as Abrahams House was being built. At the front of the church a stained glass window now towers behind the altar area, showing Abraham welcoming the three angels, as described in Genesis 18. The hospitality of Abraham is the model for what the [new](#) Abrahams House and its ministry is offering to Jews, Christians and Muslims as they gather to know and understand each other, leading to reconciliation. In Abrahams House the natural stone and beautiful Palestinian tiles and painting combine to create a warm, welcoming atmosphere. The guesthouse can hold about fifty people, and the youth housing also on the church compound can hold about forty.

Abrahams House, along with the recently dedicated Ad-Dar Cultural Center at the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, are now added to the mission and diaconia of the Lutheran Church of Hope in Ramallah, the Lutheran Church of Beit Sahour, the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the Old City of Jerusalem, the Lutheran Good Shepherd Church in Amman, Jordan, and all the ELCJ schools in continuing and enlarging the ELCJ ministries of worship, education, dialogue, art, music, understanding and reconciliation.

2. ELCJ Church in Amman, Jordan, Dedicates Its Renovated Parish Hall:

The Lutheran Good Shepherd Church in Amman, Jordan, dedicated its newly renovated congregational hall on Sunday, October 19, after the worship service. The Northelbian Mission Center in Germany (NMZ) generously donated the money for the extensive renovation and Rev. Samer Azer, the church elders and the congregation worked relentlessly to complete the work which adds a whole new dimension to the beauty of the entire church building. As Bishop Younan said, "The congregation hall will now serve the congregational work, the children's, youth and women's work, as well as ecumenical relations among the Amman churches and our dialogue with Muslims."

Representatives of all the Amman churches, Muslim clerics and friends and members of the Jordanian parliament joined with the Good Shepherd congregation to celebrate the dedication. Very importantly, this work and dedication follows in the line of Bishop Emeritus Daoud Haddad's statement when the congregation was established: "It is mission in the heart of the Arab world." The ministry which this renovated parish hall will enable serves not only the congregation but all of Jordanian society. The ELCJ center in the Good Shepherd church is a light for everyone in Amman, Bishop Younan said in his dedication sermon.

Many thanks go to the NMZ for the funding, to Rev. Azar, the church council and members of the Good Shepherd church for their hard work in completing this renovation, and to all those who donated gifts in kind.

3. The Reformation Day Service at Jerusalem's Lutheran Church of the Redeemer:

On October 31, Reformation Day, hundreds of people gathered in the large sanctuary of the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the Old City of Jerusalem to worship and pray, thanking God for the newness and joy of God's Word in Jesus Christ. Lutheran bishops and clergy from many countries joined the procession and participated in the service. Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan of the ELCJ; Bishop Maria Jepsen of the Northelbian Church in Germany; Probst Martin Reyer of the German speaking congregation at Redeemer and Representative of the EKD; Rev. Sani Ibrahim Azar of the Redeemer Arabic speaking congregation; and Rev. Russell Siler, pastor of the English speaking congregation at Redeemer were among those presiding and assisting with the Eucharist.

Rev. Siler preached the Reformation Day sermon based on Jeremiah 31:31-34 and John 8:31-36. "The liberation, the freedom Jesus offers comes in knowing the truth. And herein lies the stumbling block. For this truth does not flow from theological certainties or churchly rituals. It does not come from ethnic, cultural or national heritage. It is not a product of profound thought or rigorous debate. This truth is neither perceived through our performance of good works nor the sincerity of those efforts. Rather, we are enfolded in the truth solely through our discipleship with the Christ."

Pastors from Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Palestine and the United States took part in the service that was filled with beautiful organ and choral music from the German Lutheran congregation as well as congregational singing of Reformation hymns. A large reception following the service was held in the cloister. This Reformation service was a living sign of our Lutheran communion in Jerusalem.

4. Lutheran and Anglican Women Denied Permits to Attend a Church Conference:

"I was very sad when I could not go to the conference in Cyprus," Ms Reema Tannous said recently. "We need to meet other women from Jordan, Egypt and Syria." Reema and her family are members of the Lutheran Church of Hope in Ramallah and she had been looking forward to attending a week-long workshop for women in leadership, sponsored by the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches. Despite the efforts of her pastor, Rev. Ramez Ansara, and ELCJ Bishop Younan, Reema and another Lutheran woman, Hala Khader, an active member of the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, were denied permits by the Israeli military government to fly out of Ben Gurion Airport near Tel Aviv. An Anglican woman from St. George Cathedral was also denied a permit to attend the same conference. All the women had visas to enter Cyprus. Another Anglican woman who holds a Jerusalem ID was able to attend the conference because she could travel through Ben Gurion without a permit. Two women from the Lutheran Good Shepherd Church in Amman were also able to attend: Ms Nawal Attallah and Ms Amal Smir. These women could fly directly out of the airport in Amman.

Meanwhile, back in the West Bank the Lutheran and Anglican women were struggling with their problem. "They told us to go over the bridge," Reema said, "but there wasn't time." Palestinians holding West Bank ID cards are routinely denied permission to fly from Ben Gurion, but going east over the Allenby Bridge into Jordan is not easy. A special permit must be issued by the Jordanian government in Amman and a person's name must be registered at the bridge before he/she will be allowed to cross. This process can take at least a week. Precious time is lost, especially when a person needs to be at the bedside of a critically ill relative or needs to be at a pre-scheduled conference. Once in Jordan, a person can easily fly to any destination.

ELCJ pastors also have the same travel problems. Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb recently missed an important conference in the U.S. because he could not get a permit to travel from Ben Gurion. Rev. Raheb and also Rev. Jadallah Shihadeh are currently trying to get permits to fly to the U.S. and Germany from Ben Gurion, and both have been denied. Bishop Younan is still making efforts to negotiate the permits.

Reema and Hala, who both live in Palestinian West Bank towns which are surrounded by Israeli military forces, were looking forward to going to Cyprus and especially to meetings with other Christian women from churches in the Middle East. "The first day I felt really bad, very sad," Reema said. "But then, you just have to get on with your life." For Reema and Hala and the other members of ELCJ churches, that "life" is now one of military occupation, oppression and imprisonment within their West Bank towns.

5. Good News from the ELCJ Schools Director's Office:

Beginning November 11, 2003, the first class will be taught at the new Martin Luther Community Development Center (MLCDC), next door to the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the Old City of Jerusalem. Ms Diana Kattan, the director of MLCDC, has announced that the first class offered will be an "English Language Course for School Teachers of Grades 1-6." Thirty hours of instruction will enable teachers to be better prepared to teach English to their students.

In January 2004 more classes will be added, including the use of the new computer laboratory at MLCDC. This "vocational school" for school drop outs and for adults of all ages will focus primarily on preparing people to work as business and medical secretaries, as well as strengthening language and computer skills. We will report more about the purposes, goals and classes in MLCDC in 2004.

6. "Witnessing for Peace": A New Book by Bishop Dr. Munib A . Younan:

We have just heard the news that Bishop Younan's recently published book will be translated from English into Finnish by FELM (Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission). Published last June by Augsburg Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, USA, "Witnessing for Peace" is a plea for the benefits of nonviolence in the Middle East; tells the plaintive and often dramatic story of Christians in Israel and Palestine; and provides an informative and engaging way into the deeper issues of the people and the conflict.

“Witnessing for Peace” may be ordered over the internet from www.fortresspress.com. The book is in softcover, 176 pages. Locally in Palestine and Israel, the book may be ordered through the Bible Society in Israel. Telephone 2-625-1849.

7. Excerpts from Bishop Younan’s Dedication Sermon for Abrahams House:

“It is a time of thanksgiving and praise to the Lord because despite all odds, we are dedicating the House of Abraham today. It is a time of praise because a vision has come true, has come to fruition. On behalf of our Palestinian Lutheran Church, I welcome you all, Christians, Muslims and Jews from our country and all over the world. You have come to experience with us the hospitality of Abraham that says, ‘The impossible can be possible.’”

“In a time of despair and hopelessness, Abraham received the three angels, the messengers of God, calling him to be a hope in a hopeless situation. And that is the message to us today. In a time of occupation and spiral violence, we are able to tell our politicians and leaders, there is a way to just peace. In a time of building the Separation Wall and the tightening of the siege, the ELCJ wants to pull down all walls of separation and hatred and call Jews, Christians and Muslims to the heart of Beit Jala to meet and dialogue for a culture of justice, peace and reconciliation.

“In a time when apocalyptic and eschatological scenarios are increasing, the Palestinian Lutheran Church wants to tell the world that we have a vision. That vision is of a peace with justice in a two-state solution according to the international legitimacy, living side by side peacefully, justly and equitably with a shared Jerusalem. Our vision is the vision of the prophets Isaiah and Micah who wanted to change the swords into plowshares. The ELCJ believes, as Abraham believed, that what seems impossible at the moment is possible for our living God of justice.

“There are at least three particular objectives for the mission of the House of Abraham:

1) If politicians have failed to bring just peace and reconciliation, then it is the Palestinian church that has to be prophetic and continue to assume its responsibility to save the humanity in Palestine and Israel. We are called to give hope in a hopeless situation because we believe that the remedy for frustration and political and religious extremism is when justice, peace and reconciliation become a reality in the hearts, lives and minds of the grassroots.

2) The House of Abraham will be a place to allow the children of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar to see God not only in themselves but in the other, and to accept the humanity and the otherness of the other, mutually recognizing each other’s human, civil, religious and political rights. Only then will the Holy Land become a promised land of milk and honey for both Palestinians and Israelis.

3) It is the role of the Palestinian Lutheran Church to promote a culture of life

instead of a culture of funerals, killings and death. It is our call to tell Jews, Christians and Muslims the words of Jesus Christ: 'I have come to give you life and life abundantly.' (John 10:10b)"

We thank and praise God for all God's gifts, joining people around the world who recognize the love and care of God in Christ for us all, despite the situations swirling around us. May God continue to grant us all the peace that passes all understanding – the peace that only Christ can give.

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