

LUTHERAN WORLD INFORMATION
PO Box 2100, CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland
Tel: (41.22) 791.63.54
Fax: (41.22) 791.66.30
Editor's e-mail: pmu@lutheranworld.org

* * *

FEATURE: Israel-Palestine - Inspired by Their Resilience, Hope and Faith
Personal Reflections after Visit with Palestinian Communities

(Peter Prove, Assistant to the General Secretary for International Affairs and Human Rights, traveled to Israel-Palestine to attend the June 7 meeting of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Executive Committee. Together with Rev. Thorbjörn Arnason, Chairperson of the LWF Standing Committee for International Affairs and Human Rights, he spent some days in the region meeting with Palestinian and Israeli human rights groups, as well as with pastors and members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem, and representatives of the LWF Department for World Service Jerusalem program, which includes the Augusta Victoria Hospital. These are his personal reflections on the visit.)

JERUSALEM/GENEVA, 2 July 2002 (LWI) - I have recently returned from Israel-Palestine, not depressed by the destruction and violence but inspired by the incredible hospitality, resilience, hope and faith of the Palestinian communities in the midst of the current appalling situation.

Accompanying an Augusta Victoria Hospital (AVH) health clinic team to Kharbatha Bani Harith village near Ramallah, Rev. Thorbjörn Arnason and I were invited to the home of a Palestinian Muslim family. We, complete strangers to them, sat in honor, under their olive tree, and were served the very best they had?home-made bread and goat cheese, cucumbers, tomatoes and olives picked from their garden. They could not afford to buy any goods. While neighboring Ramallah lay under another Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) curfew, and forgetting for a moment the three military checkpoints in the 25 or so kilometers between East Jerusalem and the village, we enjoyed this family's kindness.

Eight-year-old Abed brought out his English school books, testing his fragmentary vocabulary?the only one in his family who could speak a word or two of English. Ali, the youngest boy sat on Thorbjörn's knee, holding up three fingers to indicate his age. Their 12-year-old sister gave me an intensely fragrant rose from their well-kept garden, as Walid, their father, counted his children for us?ten in all. His wife displayed her embroidery as we drank the tea which she had flavored with freshly picked herbs. Not knowing how else to show gratitude for their hospitality, Thorbjörn tried to offer young Abed a 10 shekel coin, which he rejected waving his index finger. When we parted company, Walid held my face in his rough hands with a gentleness that those hands and that weather-beaten face hardly seemed capable of.

Walid and his family are a perfect antidote to preconceptions of Palestinians as an aggressive, violent people? a nation of suicide bombers and terrorists. Having experienced the kind of hospitality that we did, it is not easy to cling to the popular stereotypes that make policy on Israel-Palestine so much easier to form.

Jamil Injas, the local English teacher, showed us around the village school, and his 'labor of love'? the children's community center which he tries to keep going on almost nothing. Although only a few relatively bare rooms with no electricity, he had an obvious pride in the attempt to keep the community together and provide the children with an oasis of hope and freedom.

The last patients to the village health clinic that morning were a young couple with their 12-month old baby girl, who had developed a sudden rash on her face and body. The checkpoints between their village and the medical clinic had been closed as a result of the military action in Ramallah. They had walked five kilometers to get to the clinic, over stony hills in 40-degree heat. Assured by the doctor that their child had only a minor condition, they left the clinic smiling broadly and cuddling their daughter, and set off for the long walk home.

In Bethlehem, we visited the Christmas Lutheran church and its young pastor, Mitri Raheb. A man with incredible vision and drive, he dreamed of building an international conference center, a place of interfaith encounter inside the old buildings in the church compound. Against all odds, he raised the necessary funds and started the work. Then came 'Operation Defensive Shield'. Mitri spent several terrifying hours inside the buildings, with Israeli tanks stationed on either side of the compound, firing intermittently down the narrow alleyways into the old town. A tank shell grazed the side of the compound. Windows throughout the building were shattered, and the walls pock-marked by bullets. Mitri himself was detained, and disappeared. Frantic appeals from around the world led to his release. And when the soldiers left, the community banded together, cleared the debris, repaired the damage to the best of their ability, and resumed building their dreamed-of center.

Similar story in Beit Jala. No sooner had the occupation of the town ended than Pastor Jadallah Shihadeh of the Resurrection Lutheran church started work again on their project? 'Abraham's House'? designed to be a place of retreat and encounter for youth from Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities. A suffering church itself, Jadallah's church also has a social program that reaches out to the wider community with support for the unemployed, sick, elderly, university students and a children's boarding home.

And at the Hope Lutheran School in Ramallah and Dar al-Kalima Lutheran School in Bethlehem, in the aftermath of 'Operation Defensive Shield', the local people surveyed the hateful vandalism of the school buildings and equipment, including the children's artwork, then rallied to repair, restore and resume. Within days, the children began to return to a functioning school.

Claims for compensation for even the most obvious and purposeless cases of vandalism have been rejected, since the damage was, of course, the result of legitimate wartime actions.

But what faith these people have! Such incredible resilience, optimism and hope for the future. And with so little earthly reason in the current context. I want so much to help give them more reasons to believe in a better future. But in truth the example of their determination and irrepressible warmth and joy is a greater gift to me than any I could give them.

(The LWF is a global communion of Christian churches in the Lutheran tradition. Founded in 1947 in Lund (Sweden), the LWF now has 133 member churches in 73 countries representing over 60.5 million of the 64.3 million Lutherans worldwide. The LWF acts on behalf of its member churches in areas of common interest such as ecumenical relations, theology, humanitarian assistance, human rights, communication, and the various aspects of mission and development work. Its secretariat is located in Geneva, Switzerland.)

[Lutheran World Information (LWI) is the information service of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). Unless specifically noted, material presented does not represent positions or opinions of the LWF or of its various units. Where the dateline of an article contains the notation (LWI), the material may be freely reproduced with acknowledgement.]