

Report and Reflections from the Bishops' Academy Visit to the Holy Land

A message from The Rev. Mark S. Hanson and The Rev. Susan C. Johnson

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After two years of planning, bishops, their spouses, and staff members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) traveled to the Holy Land for the Bishops' Academy, an annual gathering for study and worship. The trip was planned as a witness to God's will for a just peace for all people and as an expression of accompaniment with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) and ministries of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF).

The violence that broke out in Gaza shortly before the trip raised concerns about safety, but after prayerful consideration and communication with people who live and work in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, the trip continued as planned. Throughout our time in the Holy Land, the situation in Gaza was a dramatic backdrop to our travels and for our conversations with people from different faiths and viewpoints who endure fear and bear oppression in ways that we have never known. Traveling in the season of Epiphany, we looked for the light, the manifestations of Jesus Christ in the land of his birth, ministry, death, and resurrection and we listened to stories sanctified by suffering. We visited holy places that are steeped in faith history and poignantly bear witness to God's will for an end to the waves of violence that batter this land and people.

Daily Scripture reading and worship framed our journey. Bibles and *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* were in use in hotels, buses, hillsides, and sanctuaries; we were a worshipping congregation on the move. God's Word comes alive in a startling and powerful way in the Holy Land and it spoke to us and shaped our days and our learning. We worshipped with brothers and sisters in congregations of the ELCJHL: at Jesus' baptismal site in Jordan; in a huge, historic sanctuary on the Mount of Olives; at the Separation Wall in a service of lament and longing for all barriers to fall; in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, where Lutherans were invited to celebrate the Eucharist for the first time ever in a small stone chapel marked with the stations of the cross. Our presence as we traveled throughout the week was heard as well as seen; "Dona Nobis Pacem" in Lutheran four-part harmony was often raised, sometimes spontaneously, binding our journey and our spirits to a prayer for peace.

The goals of this pilgrimage were: accompaniment, awareness, and advocacy. The trip was planned as a way to embody accompaniment of our Lutheran brothers and sisters in the ELCJHL, whose leader, Bishop Munib Younan, has been a tireless worker for peace in the Middle East. The awareness we sought was a fuller knowledge of the "facts on the ground"—the cruel details of the burden of occupation for the Palestinian people that go unreported in our countries and a deeper understanding of Israeli reactions to hateful rhetoric and killing rockets.

Advocacy arises from awareness. We see the calling to advocate for justice and peace as being central in our Christian discipleship, so we sought to gain knowledge and strength for that ministry in relation to this particular setting.

There was darkness: the strangulation of occupation, the diminishing Christian population, the remembrance of the Holocaust, the fear of war. But we saw light: the contagious joy of Palestinian children at the School of Hope, the shared witness of an Israeli and a Palestinian who both lost loved ones and now work together to end the killing cycle of revenge, sharing Shabbat worship in synagogues where congregations prayed for peace in both Hebrew and Arabic, the powerful healing ministry of Augusta Victoria Hospital, the determined presence in Bethlehem and Jerusalem of Lutheran ministries that transform lives and keep hope alive. We tried to plant hope—with our presence, with new olive trees, with words of encouragement. As we traveled, we were greeted with hospitality beyond imagining from our brothers and sisters in faith.

Reflecting on what we saw and what we heard in the context of God’s longing for justice and peace as recorded in sacred texts, we could begin to catch a glimpse of a shared land where all those who seek righteousness can work together for reconciliation. We hear God’s words from Isaiah:

*Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,
You that seek the Lord.
Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
And the quarry from which you were dug. (Isaiah 51:1)*

The Holy Land is a land of rocks—they were hewn for ancient structures and still today are used for most buildings. They fill the fields, competing with crops for limited space, and they declare strength and permanence. As Christians, we find in them a reminder of the rock that is our salvation, Jesus, the cornerstone. We look to that rock as the foundation of our faith and the guide to lead us to deeper understanding of the situation we are discovering in this land.

But silent stones cannot tell the whole story. We listened to the “living stones”—the people of faith, who are embedded in this land and who are weary of murderous extremism and the costs of war. They are the holy rocks, hewn from different religious traditions, bearing witness to the possibility of a new way of life based on a shared commitment to peace.

The most precious living stones for us were the people of the congregations and ministries of the ELCJHL and LWF. We saw their faithful and remarkable witness in worship and in their commitment to be the body of Christ now in the places where he once taught and healed. Without discrimination, the ELCJHL welcomes all children into schools, providing excellent education and the spirit of dignity and bridge-building that respects all traditions. The International Center in Bethlehem has risen as a unique witness for support of the Palestinian people by programs that encourage peace and transform lives through art, cultural exchange, and all levels of education. The Abraham House in Beit Jala is a significant site for local and global interfaith dialogue. The living stones at Augusta Victoria Hospital, whose ministry of healing fills a crucial gap in medical services, as well as other projects of LWF, which maintain a strong Lutheran presence on the Mount of Olives and in the West Bank. The pastors, leaders, and

members of these ministries are powerful “living stones” that speak loudly of God’s will for the love of neighbor and the realization of justice and peace.

During our travels, we heard many variations of the words: "You came at just the right time to uphold our spirits," and we were glad we came. In this kairós time together, God opened our hearts to one another. We began to understand more fully the details of the relentless persecution and cruel effect of the Israeli occupation of Palestine on the lives and spirits of the Palestinian people—the daily humiliations, separation from family, work, and medical care, and the endless frustration in seeking justice. It is impossible to comprehend the daily and increasing limitation of human rights without traveling here and talking with people about their experiences and hopes and fears.

But we also saw partnerships among Christians, Jews, and Muslims that offered hope that our shared Abrahamic tradition can lead to a shared land and a shared Jerusalem. As leaders of the journey, through our visits and conversations with national religious leaders and governmental leaders, we witnessed the growing commitment of both church bodies to the resolution of tensions in the Middle East. It became increasingly obvious during this journey that a commitment to the growth of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue is an important basis for building trust and ending mutual recriminations that fracture fragile efforts in peace-making. The deepening of relationships among Christians, Jews, and Muslims, beginning at local levels and continuing into a global context is crucially important to build a coalition that develops the strength to stand against the violence of extremists who regularly destroy hopes for peace.

The awareness of the attacks on Gaza and the unimaginable suffering that they have caused was just beneath the surface of every encounter and every conversation. The strife continued throughout our journey and we heard new reports each day of death and destruction. We experienced a shift away from initial concern for our own safety toward a sharing of the despairing pain, hopelessness, and anger that Palestinians were feeling as they learned the details of the invasion, powerless to save or even comfort those hundreds of people who were killed and injured. We heard the anguish of the Chief Rabbis of Jerusalem who mourned the loss of life. We prayed for an end to the attacks from both sides. As we finished our journey, prayers for a cease-fire were answered, and a temporary unilateral truce was declared by Israel, and then joined by Hamas. We pray that negotiation can continue so that the attacks can be halted from both sides and humanitarian aid can be provided for those who need food, medical attention, and housing.

*If you remove the yoke from among you
The pointing of the finger
The speaking of evil
If you offer your food to the hungry
And satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
Then your light shall rise in the darkness
And your gloom be like the noonday. (Isaiah 58: 9a.-10)*

The joint yokes of fear and occupation still are firmly in place in the Holy Land. God calls us, as people of faith, to remove them, to tend to the needs of those who are suffering, and in that way

to be a light in the darkness. We pray for the strength to continue our accompaniment, to grow in awareness of the situation and the ways we can help to change it, and to advocate in every possible way for the justice that will lead to the security and shared homeland that is the only foundation for lasting peace. We will be faithful in ongoing visitation to our Palestinian brothers and sisters, determined in our call to be a public church, and communicate with our governments for their intervention in the Middle East, persistent in our efforts to build bridges with inter-religious partners, and courageous in telling the truth of the “facts on the ground” in the Holy Land.

Our brothers and sisters in the ELCJHL pleaded, "Please do not get tired of us." We are committed to hold fast to all that we have seen and heard and not to grow weary of telling their story in our church bodies and country and to the world. As we continue to live in this season of Epiphany, celebrating the manifestation of God in the world in Jesus Christ and welcoming the Light that overcomes every darkness, we invite many more people to "come and see."

Gracious God, grant peace among nations. Cleanse from our own hearts the seeds of strife: greed and envy, harsh misunderstandings and ill will, fear and desire for revenge. Make us quick to welcome ventures in cooperation among the peoples of the world, so that there may be woven the fabric of a common good too strong to be torn by the evil hands of war. In the time of opportunity, make us diligent; and in the time of peril, let not our courage fail; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 76)

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