



2022-2023 Review Summary and Recommendations

# **ELCA Peace Not Walls:** **Accompaniment, Awareness-raising** **and Advocacy for Palestine and Israel**

Prepared Oct. 2023



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# Introduction

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*The ELCA approaches this strategic plan for engagement in Israel and Palestine with a renewed sense of urgency. The situation in the region, bleak for many years but now with signs of hopeful possibility, calls for action.*

“Churchwide Strategy for Engagement in Israel and Palestine,” p. 48

## Why a Review Process? Why Now?

In January 2022 the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) area desk of ELCA Service and Justice initiated an in-depth review of Peace Not Walls (PNW), the campaign for justice and peace in Palestine and Israel that is based on the ELCA’s “Churchwide Strategy for Engagement in Israel and Palestine” (2005). This strategy, adopted by the ELCA Church Council and endorsed by the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in 2005, was developed to bring coherence to the church’s previously adopted resolutions on Palestine and Israel since the formation of the ELCA in 1987, and to update and strengthen the church’s overall approach after the intervening years.

For nearly 20 years Peace Not Walls has functioned as a program within the ELCA organizational structure (currently administered by the MENA desk) that supports a grassroots network of ELCA synods, congregations, members and affiliates. The purpose of PNW has been defined by three “interlocking ‘A’s ... awareness building, accompaniment, and advocacy” (“Strategy,” p. 54). As the main implementing body of the 2005 strategy, PNW was designed to address the realities on the ground at that time: a time “with signs of hopeful possibility” due to factors such as the end of the second intifada and the recommitment of Palestinian and Israeli leaders to the “Roadmap for Peace” at the February 2005 Sharm el-Sheikh Conference. A two-state solution (the policy endorsed by the 2005 strategy) was then widely considered a real, just and viable possibility. The separation wall was still in its early stages of construction; the hope of attaining “peace, not walls” gave the campaign its name.

Today much is different, and these “signs of hopeful possibility” have largely vanished. Twenty years of wall-building, settlement expansion and systemic denial of Palestinian human rights by the state of Israel have created conditions for a permanent occupation. Seventy-five years after the forced displacement and ethnic cleansing of the nakba (catastrophe) that accompanied the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, generations of Palestinians have lived their entire lives as refugees, as residents of occupied lands, or as residents or citizens of Israel with tenuous status and limited access to civil rights. Growing extremism and ultranationalism, enabled by the rightward trend in Israeli governance, have led to greater marginalization and persecution of Palestinians, largely with impunity. West Bank settlers have attacked

Palestinian communities and properties, including places of worship, causing deaths, injuries and destruction. Palestinian children have been taken from their homes during nighttime military incursions, held without charges, coerced and beaten. Humanitarian NGOs, especially human rights monitors such as Defense for Children International Palestine, have had their offices raided and have faced unfounded accusations of terrorism that have effectively frozen their international funding. Journalists have been harassed, attacked or – like Palestinian-American Christian Shireen Abu Akleh – even killed.

Within the larger context of occupation, Palestinian Christians have faced additional hardships that have reached a crisis level. In recent years, leaders of Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches across Palestine and Israel have documented a range of existential threats facing local Christian presence in the Holy Land. These include a dwindling of the community due to Christian emigration from the Holy Land on account of the pressures of the occupation, the takeover of Christian properties and neighborhoods by groups intending to remake these as Jewish-only areas, and Israeli laws that relegate even Christian (and Muslim) citizens of Israel to second-class citizenship in a Jewish state. Attacks on Christian property and persons have also increased, and lack of equal access to and freedom of worship has been noted.

Yet the Palestinian people persist. And the Palestinian church persists. Therefore, the present time again brings to us, the church of Jesus Christ, both a “renewed sense of urgency” and “signs of hopeful possibility.”

The reasons for urgency are clear. The current situation in Palestine and Israel is one of perpetual humanitarian, political, economic and ecological crisis. Without international pressure from nations like the United States, the occupation and its attendant injustices will not end. Moreover, the Indigenous church in the Holy Land, which has maintained a continuous local Christian presence since the time of the resurrection of Jesus, is in danger of disappearing. This would be a spiritual tragedy because the “one holy catholic and apostolic church” would lose an essential part of Christ’s body; it would also be an irreplaceable loss to Palestinian society, in which Christian churches and organizations play a vital role in education, health care, social services, leadership and cultural contributions in scholarship, entrepreneurship and the arts.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL), the only Lutheran World Federation (LWF) member church in the Holy Land and the entire MENA region. A small church of 2,000 members and six worshipping congregations, the ELCJHL – with support from international partners including the ELCA – operates four K-12 schools, an environmental education center, a gender justice ministry (including an ecclesiastical court to apply gender justice to family law) and a diakonia center (including a Deaf ministry). The ELCJHL is a partner in the Augusta Victoria Hospital and in vocational

training centers operated in Israel/Palestine by the Lutheran World Federation Jerusalem Program. The ELCJHL also helped found the Dar al-Kalima University in Bethlehem, which shares a campus and name with the ELCJHL's Dar Al Kalima Lutheran School.

It is therefore precisely here that we may also find “signs of hopeful possibility” in the Holy Land today: in the *sumud* (perseverance and steadfastness) of the Palestinian people, including and especially Palestinian churches such as the ELCJHL. The Arabic word *sumud* has been used for decades by Palestinians, including Palestinian Christian theologians such as Naim Ateek and Mitri Raheb, to describe ways in which Palestinians counter dehumanization and identity erasure through a lived strategy of “resistance through existence.” *Sumud* is a contextual theological principle grounded in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, who, with his disciples, also lived under occupation, and in the scriptural witness of the early church, which was also a minority-faith community. As such, *sumud* can ground and guide the engagement of the global church in Palestine and Israel in this crucial time.

This is especially true for the ELCA. As a church committed to an accompaniment approach to global relationships and partnerships, and in our ecumenical and interreligious cooperation, the ELCA recognizes that we are called by God and invited by our Palestinian siblings into the relational work of accompanying communities in the Holy Land – most particularly the ELCJHL – and to leading awareness-raising and advocacy efforts in our own context to help advance justice for Palestinians, and through justice, a real and lasting peace for all Palestinians and Israelis.

The recommendations included in this report follow the justice principle of “nothing about us without us” by seeking to center the leadership, wisdom, and expertise of our Palestinian siblings as we develop strategies and approaches, language and terminology, and mission and vision for our future engagement in Palestine and Israel through accompaniment, awareness-raising, and advocacy. Following the urging of the Palestinian members of our review team, these recommendations also encourage the ELCA to take a more intersectional approach to Israel/Palestine that incorporates global issues and perspectives on colonialism, gender justice, Indigenous justice, and environmental justice, to name a few.

The review process that led to these recommendations has not been easy. While it has been a process that invited and trusted in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it has also been a human process, and as such, it has involved difficult conversations, the balancing of diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives and opinions, and the need to adapt and adjust timelines and processes (for good and life-giving reasons as well as difficult ones).

Nevertheless, it has been faithful work, and we believe that the following summary and recommendations are likewise faithful to what we have learned and how God is calling us to move forward as a church. At the same time, we recognize that this is only the first of many steps that will need to be taken to implement recommendations and further develop new and renewed approaches, both now and in the future. As realities on the ground, both in the ELCA and in Israel/Palestine, continue to change, the work of the church in this area – especially for a church that is part of an ongoing Reformation – will naturally need to adjust.

What has not changed from 2005 until today is the same conviction that shaped the current strategy, which has guided Peace Not Walls for 20 years and was unanimously shared by all the stakeholders and partners we interviewed: the time is now for this church to be bolder, to do more and to grow in accompaniment, awareness-raising and advocacy to help bring, alongside our Palestinian partners, “signs of hopeful possibility” that come from the God of Jesus Christ, the source of resurrection and abundant life.

## **Review Team**

The Peace Not Walls review team formed in spring 2022 as 10 members appointed by the MENA desk. The makeup of this team was 50% women, 50% men; 30% ELCJHL members, 70% ELCA staff; and also 50% Palestinian membership. ELCA team members represented the MENA desk and MENA missionary personnel, Arab and Middle Eastern Ministries, the Association of Lutherans of Arab and Middle Eastern Heritage (ALAMEH), ELCA Witness in Society and senior leadership from ELCA Service and Justice. The review team members were:

### **ELCA:**

- Rev. Gabi Aelabouni, Area Desk Director for Middle East and North Africa (convener)
- Rev. Meghan Aelabouni, Theologian-in-Residence for MENA desk (facilitator)
- Ms. Karin Brown,\* Program Director for Peace Not Walls and MENA relationships
- Mr. Dennis Frado, former Director, Lutheran Office for World Community, currently Consultant, Witness in Society
- Rev. Khader Khalilia, Program Director, Arab and Middle Eastern Ministries
- Rev. Barbara Lund, Senior Director, Service and Justice Operations and Innovation
- Rev. Amy Reumann, Senior Director, Witness in Society

### **ELCJHL:**

- Rev. Sally Azar, pastor of Evangelical Lutheran Church of Beit Sahour and Lutheran Church of the Redeemer (English-speaking congregation) Jerusalem; LWF Council member

- Rev. Munther Isaac, pastor of Evangelical Lutheran Church of Beit Sahour and Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem; Academic Dean, Bethlehem Bible College
- Rev. Ashraf Tannous, pastor of Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Reformation, Beit Jala; Head of the ELCJHL Ecclesiastical Court

\* *Served on the Peace Not Walls review team from January to December 2022.*

## **Review Process and Overview**

The Peace Not Walls review process began in January 2022 with the formation of the review team, which met via video conferencing throughout the process to accommodate members from both the United States and the Holy Land. Early meetings focused on the rationale for review, review purpose and goals, and review methodology: how best to invite, gather and analyze representative feedback from various stakeholders as well as to provide space for the insights and expertise of review team members. Following this planning, two working groups from the team carried out feedback-gathering processes and reported findings back to the whole review team. A separate working group from the team met to synthesize this information and to create a draft summary and recommendations, which were then also reviewed and finalized by the whole review team in August 2023. The main review components were as follows:

- ***Review team listening sessions***

Because the review team members themselves brought significant expertise of different kinds to the table, time was set aside in review team meetings for “listening sessions” that gave all review team members an opportunity to share their own thoughts and perspectives with the group. All review team members were also invited to participate in the wider feedback gathering processes (surveys and interviews) and/or to submit written feedback to the whole review team, as they felt comfortable.

- ***Working groups for ELCA-related and ELCJHL/Palestine-related feedback gathering***

The review team was divided into three working groups to participate in different aspects of the feedback-gathering process. The first working group (Rev. Tannous, Rev. Isaac, Rev. Azar) was assigned the task of identifying key leaders from the Palestinian Christian community for in-depth interviews, either in person or through writing. The second working group (Brown, Frado, Rev. Khalilia) was assigned the task of developing an online form for feedback gathering and inviting targeted stakeholder groups related to Peace Not Walls to complete the form. The third working group (Rev. Lund, Rev. Reumann) was

assigned the task of creating the draft summary and recommendations. As convener, Rev. Gabi Aelabouni did not join any working group but did participate in some interviews of Palestinian stakeholders. As facilitator, Rev. Meghan Aelabouni assisted all working groups with planning, implementation, analysis and summary of the feedback gathering.

Before separating into working groups, the review team discussed the advantages and disadvantages of various methods for feedback gathering. While noting that it might prove more difficult to synthesize feedback collected through different methods (interviews for Palestinian stakeholders and an online survey for ELCA stakeholders), the team also recognized that the cultural contexts and perspectives of these groups were different. ELCA-related stakeholders would likely be more familiar with the impact of Peace Not Walls among ELCA and U.S. constituencies, whereas Palestinian stakeholders would be better positioned to speak about changing conditions on the ground and what is needed from U.S. churches in response.

Due to the large number of ELCA-related stakeholders spread out across different regions, who also brought different kinds of experience and connection, the team decided that an online survey form could provide easier access for a wider circle of respondents. Likewise, the team acknowledged the importance of offering to Palestinian stakeholders the choice of speaking in Arabic or English, and the opportunity to discuss sensitive topics in a more confidential in-person format. The decision was therefore made to take a contextual rather than a standardized approach to feedback gathering.

- ***ELCA/U.S.-related feedback gathering***

For this process the ELCA working group created an online survey form that included both objective and subjective data points. Respondents were asked to identify, from a provided list of categories, ways that they had been connected to Peace Not Walls and/or Palestine/Israel, and from which perspective(s) they were offering feedback. Respondents were then invited to give free-form answers to questions related to an analysis of the impact, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges of PNW, as well as ideas for how PNW could better engage new, young, diverse members and improve its work overall in the future. Nearly 80 responses were collected, and the working group created a summary and analysis that is included in this report.

- ***ELCJHL/Palestine-related feedback gathering***

For this process the ELCJHL working group identified a list of key church and community leaders to interview. Interviewees were asked to give their

perspective on current challenges, opportunities and needs in Palestinian (and Palestinian Christian) communities; to reflect on what has changed in recent years and where the situation may be heading; and to advise the ELCA, as a U.S. church and ELCJHL partner, on future directions, approaches and priorities in our engagement in Israel and Palestine. The working group created a summary and analysis that are included in this report.

- ***Ecumenical partner–related feedback gathering***

In addition to the ELCA-focused online feedback form, the ELCA/U.S. working group identified several key ecumenical stakeholders and invited representatives from these groups to submit free-form answers to questions about Peace Not Walls' overall impact, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges, as well as suggestions about areas for new or greater ecumenical collaboration. These responses were included in the working group's summary and analysis of ELCA/U.S. stakeholders' feedback.

- ***Summary reports and discussion from feedback gathering***

After the completion of the working groups' feedback-gathering processes, each working group was invited to present its findings to the whole review team for discussion. Areas of discussion included identifying common points of agreement among all/most respondents (e.g. moving toward updated language and bolder advocacy efforts to end the occupation) as well as areas of contrast (e.g. when some ELCA-based respondents advocated for PNW to continue its work as currently configured, and Palestinian stakeholders argued for deeper change to PNW identity and mission). Throughout, the review team endeavored to keep in mind the need to center the voices and perspectives of Palestinian partners in discerning ways forward. At the conclusion of this step the third working group was assigned the task of drafting a summary and recommendations to be reviewed by the whole review team, finalized by that group and submitted to the MENA area desk director (Rev. Gabi Aelabouni) and the executive team of ELCA Service and Justice.

- ***Creation of PNW review process summary report and recommendations***

Through a series of meetings and a shared writing process, the summary and recommendations working group created a draft summary and recommendations. This draft document was received by the review team in June 2023 and discussed in a whole-team meeting, with every member invited to give input individually during the meeting and to submit additional suggested additions or edits to the draft document in writing by mid-July. In August a revised draft was circulated to the review team members by email and approved by email consensus for submission to the MENA desk and the Administration

and Finance Committee (the executive team) of ELCA Service and Justice. As of August 29, 2023, the work of the review team was completed. The summary and recommendations were received, reviewed and approved by ELCA Service and Justice in September 2023 and by the Office of the Presiding Bishop in October 2023.

## Summary of Review Findings

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### **Celebrating Peace Not Walls**

From the start of the review process, one stated goal was to recognize and celebrate the accomplishments of Peace Not Walls within and beyond the ELCA during this first phase of its life. The first 20 years of Peace Not Walls as a campaign of engagement in Palestine/Israel through accompaniment, awareness-raising and advocacy brought many significant, faithful and timely accomplishments.

Highlights of this work have included the planning, leading, facilitation and/or advising of Holy Land accompaniment trips for ELCA-related constituencies, especially trips for young adults and young adults of color; the development of Peace Not Walls networks that actively participate in advocacy both with the U.S. government and within ELCA institutional bodies through representative presence, memorials and resolutions; and awareness-raising resources such as webinars, advocacy alerts, PNW presence at synod and churchwide assemblies and at ELCA Youth Gatherings, and an annual “Advent Pilgrimage to Palestine” resource for small groups.

The review team gives thanks to God for the dedicated leadership of ELCA staff, synodical and congregational leaders, and individual members (both rostered ministers and laity) for a legacy of service that has provided a strong foundation for the future. It is because of this legacy that the ELCA, in relationship with our Palestinian and other global, ecumenical and interreligious partners, can now build upon this foundation in ways that are as faithful to our current time as Peace Not Walls was to the times in which it was conceived and developed.

### **Changing and Current Realities on the Ground**

The work of Peace Not Walls has always been intended as a response to realities on the ground: how the ELCA is called “for such a time as this” to work for justice and peacemaking in Palestine and Israel. Importantly, the ELCA has also recognized our calling to root our engagement in deep and true relationships with impacted

communities on the ground, particularly our Palestinian Lutheran partners in the ELCJHL. The ELCA's theological model of global engagement through accompaniment is designed as a decolonial model: where the ELCA as a U.S.-based church is present, we are present by invitation; our purpose is not to project our context and expertise onto a local context but to learn from local experts, center local perspectives and empower local leadership. In that spirit this review process deliberately prioritized listening to and learning from ELCJHL team members and Palestinian stakeholders to better understand the current realities – challenges, opportunities, needs and gifts – of Palestinian communities living under occupation. At the same time, concurrent changes within the ELCA and in the U.S. context also bear examining, in order that this process look forward to what will be needed now and in the future. The summary reports from the ELCJHL/Palestine working group (p. 15) and the ELCA/U.S. working group (p. 20) further detail some of these changes and current realities; but following are some current realities and key changes since 2005 that we observed.

### **Changes and Current Realities in Palestine/Israel**

- Development of physical and legal infrastructure for a permanent Israeli occupation of Palestinians in the Holy Land, including:
  - Construction and technological development of a separation wall and permanent checkpoints in the West Bank and continued enforcement of the total enclosure of Gaza, which isolate and control entire Palestinian populations.
  - Collective punishment of Palestinian populations, including repeated bombings of Gaza and incursions into Jenin and other West Bank communities.
  - Strategic land seizures and forced displacement of Palestinian residents from areas identified by international law as occupied Palestinian lands, including in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem.
  - Arbitrary withholding and/or limitation of natural resources such as water, electricity and internet capacity from Palestinian communities.
  - Systemic deprivation of other internationally recognized human rights.
- Mainstream media consistently underreport violence against Palestinians (home demolitions, land seizures, physical attacks, killings and repeated Israel Defense Force incursions) while covering Palestinian displays of force; when present, “both sides” rhetoric minimizes or ignores the power differential between occupier and occupied.
- Christians comprise a small religious minority now shrinking to levels that suggest an imminent, existential threat to local Indigenous Christian presence.

- A right-wing trend in Israeli politics and governance that includes the implicit or explicit sanctioning of ultranationalist and religious extremist groups in Israel and the codifying of racist discrimination against non-Jews in both Palestine and Israel within Israeli law.
- A persistent refugee crisis, beginning in 1948, and growing diaspora (both of Palestinians and others in the MENA region)
- Some (albeit limited) growth of Israeli anti-occupation and Palestinian human rights movements, including B'Tselem, Breaking the Silence and Al-Haq.
- Greater political instability across the MENA region, particularly in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.
- Israeli diplomatic and commercial efforts to “normalize” relations with countries in the MENA region through initiatives such as the Abraham Accords, which draw the attention of global actors and the Arab world away from the occupation.

### **Changes and Current Realities in the ELCJHL**

- Leadership changes (retirement or departure of some publicly known leaders, most notably Bishop Emeritus Munib Younan, and transition toward younger pastors – all current ELCJHL parish pastors are in their early 40s or younger).
- ELCJHL leaders’ participation and input into the creation of the Lutheran World Federation Gender Justice Policy (published by the LWF and adopted by the ELCJHL in 2013), translation of the policy into Arabic, founding of the ELCJHL Women’s Desk (now the ELCJHL Gender Justice Ministry) and establishment of the ELCJHL Ecclesiastical Court to incorporate the Gender Justice Policy into family law (the first MENA church body to do so).
- Growing diaspora of Palestinian Christians (including Lutherans), created in large part through the emigration of young adults.
- Development of new gender justice, environmental justice and diakonia programs.
- Women’s ordination (ordination of the first female ELCJHL pastor in January 2023).
- Ongoing financial challenges due to a gap between the size and scope of the church’s community-based educational and social services and the inherent

limitations on church size and economic ability of church members to fund church operations.

- Continued impact of the occupation on church members, including loss of economic resources, constant need for permits for access to work and worship, family separation, COVID-19 effects on tourism, double taxation, etc.
- Diminishing capacity of international partners to support ELCJHL ministries due to shrinking membership and budgets and to political obstacles (e.g. European Union laws designed to combat anti-Semitism, which have led to a reduction in European funding, including church-related funding, to Palestinian organizations, including the ELCJHL).
- In strategic future planning, ELCJHL plans to focus on developing greater financial sustainability (through revenue-producing projects as well as an endowment) in order to rely less on external partners for overhead operational costs.

### **Changes and Current Realities in the United States**

- A political context of hyperpolarization, the mainstreaming of white Christian nationalism, unconditional support for Israel as a political litmus test (across both major political parties, though there has been some burgeoning political questioning of that support), PACs and undisclosed election spending.
- U.S. military aid to Israel of nearly \$4 billion annually, which remains essentially unconditional.
- Christian Zionism and Jewish Zionism as powerful political movements in U.S. politics.
- Bolder commitments in advocacy and action by some ecumenical partners (Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ); new possibilities for ecumenical and interreligious cooperation amid the increasingly dire situation for Palestinians and concerns about the actions and aspirations of the 37th Israeli government, formed in late 2022.
- Tacit or explicit U.S. support for Israel's increased settlement building and open movements toward West Bank annexation, despite the illegality of these actions.
- Growth of some anti-occupation movements within U.S. Jewish communities, such as Jewish Voice for Peace and IfNotNow, some of which reflect a largely generational evolution of views about human rights.

## **Changes and Current Realities in the ELCA**

- Future Church: Restructuring within the churchwide organization to create the Service and Justice home area, bringing together (among other things) Global Mission/Global Service, Witness in Society (Advocacy), and Ethnic-Specific and Multicultural Ministries (including Arab and Middle Eastern Ministries and the Association of Lutherans of Arab and Middle Eastern Heritage).
- Gradually (and generally) stronger advocacy policies adopted by churchwide assemblies.
- Realignment of Witness in Society/MENA advocacy to create a full-time policy position focused on advocacy related to the Middle East region.
- Expanded ELCA communications and social media platforms.
- Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) program in Jerusalem/West Bank.
- Leadership changes (presiding bishop, Conference of Bishops and senior executives).
- Decline in ELCA membership and funding (Fund 1) since 2005.
- Information sharing about corporation activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories through the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) program; development of a Political and Civil Human Rights Investment Screen on the basis of the ELCA social message “Human Rights” (2017).
- Growth of ELCA projects and ministry support in the region.

## **Changes and Current Realities Affecting the Lutheran World Federation**

- Leadership changes (e.g. LWF Council, general secretary).
- Decreased funding.
- Some European partners’ advocacy for Palestine being interpreted or labeled as anti-Semitism within those partners’ own political contexts, creating obstacles to advocacy.
- Mount of Olives housing project (now Beit Hanina housing project) delayed.

- Persistent Augusta Victoria Hospital cash flow challenges due to shifting political winds in the region (including both Israeli and Palestinian governments) and in the U.S.; for example, ongoing holdups in Palestinian Authority payments to the AVH/East Jerusalem Hospital Network and significant cuts to U.S. Palestinian aid made during the Trump administration.
- The Thirteenth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation (2023) adopting a statement that, *inter alia*, called on member churches “to examine, discuss, discern and respond to the implications of the recent reports by international human rights organizations, which describe the discrimination against Palestinians living under occupation or as citizens of Israel, as overt and systemic, and find that the occupation continues to ignore the equal human dignity and human rights of Palestinians living under this system of control.”

## Input From Palestinian Partners

**Summary of process:** In November and December 2022 a variety of stakeholders from the ELCJHL and the wider Palestinian Christian community were invited to take part in interviews (in person, over Zoom, by phone or via email) to assess current realities and needs on the ground in Palestine/Israel, evaluate the work of Peace Not Walls so far (as able), and share ideas for how the ELCA as a U.S. church can better partner with the Palestinian church and people. This feedback process included interviews with the following stakeholders:

- Rev. Ibrahim Azar – ELCJHL bishop.
- Rev. Munther Isaac – ELCJHL pastor of Bethlehem and Beit Sahour congregations, academic dean of Bethlehem Bible College.
- Rev. Ashraf Tannous – ELCJHL pastor of Beit Jala congregation; chair, ecclesiastical court.
- Ms. Ranan Issa Abu Shanab – ELCJHL director for the Gender Justice program.
- Mr. Simon Awad – ELCJHL director for the Environmental Education Center.
- Ms. Tamar Haddad – ELCJHL member, ELCA International Women Leaders alum.
- Rev. Jack Sara – President, Bethlehem Bible College.
- Ms. Shireen Awwad Hilal – ELCJHL member, director of Bethlehem Bible College Community & Development Outreach.
- Mr. Rifat Kassis – ELCJHL member, founder of Defense for Children International–Palestine and Kairos Palestine.
- H.B. Michel Sabbah – former Latin patriarch of Jerusalem.
- Mr. Xavier Abu Eid – Palestinian Christian diplomat.

**Toward analysis of data:** Our working group identified some key contextual factors that the review team kept in mind as it analyzed the findings of the interviews:

- **Local knowledge.** Knowing that our Palestinian stakeholders are intimately familiar with the current realities on the ground in Palestine and Israel, we deliberately began our interviews by asking respondents to identify key issues in the current context, especially things that may be new or have changed since 2005.
- **Less focus on internal ELCA structure and engagement.** Many interviewees had some knowledge and/or points of connection with the ELCA but less familiarity with the internal structure of Peace Not Walls and the aspects of PNW focused on education and engagement with ELCA constituencies. Therefore, we phrased questions broadly to ask about the impact of, and advice for, the ELCA as a whole, “as a U.S church.” This allowed respondents to speak from their areas of greatest expertise and concern.
- **More focus on impact on the ground.** Overall, the focus among interviewees was less on advising the ELCA on internal matters (structure, programming, engagement among our own members) than on explaining the need to foreground impact over intent. Every interviewee emphasized the urgency of current needs in Palestine/Israel, particularly in the Palestinian Christian community, and the kinds of participation by U.S. churches and other international churches that can better accomplish what is needed.
- **Sensitivity to free speech constraints.** As Palestinians living in Jerusalem/West Bank, some of our interviewees were sensitive to the potential risk of discussing some topics and terms “on the record,” particularly terms such as “apartheid” or references to the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement (discussion of which is illegal in Israel). The review team sought to preserve confidentiality whenever possible and for this reason has opted to provide a summary rather than personal and individual responses. Though we heard a variety of opinions about whether such terms and actions were recommended or not, it is worth keeping in mind that at least some Palestinians may not consider themselves as free as U.S. citizens do in their choice of terminology and their advocacy for particular actions. On the other hand, we also spoke with interviewees who believed strongly in using this and similar language despite any potential risks.

**Key Findings:** With these contextual factors in mind, our working group identified some of the most common responses.

### 1) **New Realities and Priorities on the Ground**

- **Christian Presence:** One of the occupation’s effects (driven by lack of jobs/opportunities and basic freedoms) is the emigration of Palestinian

Christians, which threatens to shrink the Indigenous church to a nonviable level. Palestinian Christians both preserve the Indigenous roots of the global Christian church and play a unique and irreplaceable role in Palestinian culture and civil society. Young people in particular need both material possibilities for life and spiritual support in finding a purpose for staying. The Palestinian church (of all denominations) is asking the global church, as church, to stand in solidarity with Christian Palestinians, to demand equality and to invest in this church's future – both for the sake of Christian presence in itself and for the sake of Palestinian society as a whole, which needs the church as an integral partner in providing education, health care, social services and spiritual services in a holistic community presence.

- **From Two-state Solution to Equality and Human Rights Approach:** Ongoing settlement creation and the development of a permanent Israeli occupation apparatus (Fourth Geneva Convention notwithstanding) have made a two-state solution largely impossible. Respondents advocated shifting to an understanding and discourse that lays bare the humanitarian crisis of the occupation in depriving an entire population of basic human rights, and in creating two separate systems of rights and status in the same areas, based solely on ethno-religious identity. This crisis has led to a number of deeply concerning effects: the withdrawal and emigration of Palestinians, especially young people; the acute despair and anger that fuel violence; and long-term trauma that affects the mental and physical health of all Palestinians, including those who stay and remain committed to nonviolence. Respondents acknowledged a diversity in current Palestinian thought about possible solutions (one state with equal rights for all; cantons similar to Switzerland's, or others) but generally agreed that an international emphasis on ending the occupation and on advancing equality, human rights and land-sharing now promises the best way forward.
- **Growing International Recognition of Israeli Occupation of Palestine as Apartheid and/or Settler-Colonialism:** Since 2005, there is a growing recognition by ecumenical partners (e.g. the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ) and international and Israeli human rights organizations that the occupation of Palestine meets the definition of apartheid and/or settler-colonialism. These human rights organizations include B'Tselem, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Jewish Voice for Peace, the South African Council of Churches, and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967. In 2022 the World Council of Churches asked member churches to study reports to

the WCC detailing the facts on the ground in relation to these definitions. In this context Palestinian partners feel that the ELCA should recognize that it might take a stronger justice-based position and still work in a relational manner with ecumenical and interfaith partners and with sensitivity to Lutheran-Jewish relations.

- **Permanence of the Occupation and Rise of Extremism:** The “Nation State of the Jewish People” law passed in the Knesset in 2018 codifies justification for discrimination even against non-Jewish Israeli citizens and Jerusalem residents, which contributes to inequality for Palestinians (and is felt keenly by Palestinian Christians). Preserving the multifaith character of Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza and Israel is crucial in ensuring that Palestinian Christians and Muslims have a future in the Holy Land, which is increasingly threatened by far-right attacks on Palestinians throughout Israel/Palestine and by the legitimization of extremist voices in the current (37th) Israeli government (e.g., the election of Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezelel Smotrich).
- **Theological Shifts in Palestinian Self-understanding and Advocacy:** Several respondents identified a shift since 2005 in Palestinian theological understanding from a theology of interpersonal reconciliation (e.g. from “conflict,” “peace” and “reconciliation”) to a liberation-based theology of a Palestinian struggle for justice and an end to the occupation of their land and peoples.

2) **Accompaniment as Foundation and Guide:** Though interviewees rarely used the word “accompaniment,” there was consensus that the ELCA (and international church) presence in Palestine must be grounded in a relationship of mutuality rather than colonialism: to seek in all ways to empower and amplify the voices of local leaders, to listen and learn from Palestinian voices, and to invite and allow Palestinian partners to lead and guide the ELCA in formulating strategy for engagement and advocacy. This includes:

- **Presence:** Relationships built through in-person presence continue to be vital for framing the approach, strategy and investment of the ELCA in Palestine. This includes short-term trips, theological study/immersion programs (such as YAGM) and the presence of long-term personnel, as long as such presences do not attempt to replace or overshadow the visibility and authority of local leadership. It is also important for visiting ELCA groups and leaders to deliberately build Lutheran connections into their Holy Land trips, both in terms of opportunities to meet, worship with and hear from the local church and in consideration of which tour

agencies, hotels, restaurants and other establishments are patronized, as this is also a key material component of accompaniment.

- **Relational strategy and investment:** Financial and programmatic investment, and strategies for advocacy, are very much needed; but these must be driven by the question “How can we reduce the suffering of the Palestinian people?” and must be shaped according to what actually helps the situation on the ground (versus what makes privileged people feel helpful). Investment and advocacy without accompaniment are more likely to be disconnected and to become paternalistic or self-serving. For example, BDS is favored by many respondents, yet a BDS approach that would prevent U.S. Christians from visiting the Holy Land entirely would cut off not only crucial relational and educational possibilities but also the livelihood of countless Palestinian families.
- **Advocacy:** There is a general need to ground advocacy in ongoing relationship, both to stay current with realities on the ground and the needs of Palestinians and to ensure that advocacy is happening with (not only for, or to) Palestinians. However, there are places where the privilege of U.S. Americans to speak more freely than Palestinians means that the ELCA can speak up in ways and in places where the local church may not be able to speak (or speak as boldly). It was also suggested that advocacy should be to both U.S. elected representatives and the president’s administration, given the significant financial and political role of the U.S., and also to the U.S. public, to educate them about realities. Consistent with but expanding the approach utilized in the 2005 strategy, advocacy should be undertaken in closer relationship with U.S.-based ecumenical and interfaith networks, including Palestine-Israel networks (PINs), for greater impact and mutual accountability.
- **Education:** Respondents stressed that the majority of Americans, including the majority of ELCA Lutherans and even ELCA Lutherans who come on pilgrimage trips to the Holy Land, have little to no understanding of the Palestinian struggle and little to no knowledge of, or engagement with, the local church. Therefore, they stressed the continued importance of education, especially theological and introductory education, for ELCA and U.S. audiences. This includes the “come and see” approach to education through trips, particularly advocacy-focused trips planned specifically for policymakers and decision-makers in the ELCA churchwide organization, as well as clergy, seminarians, bishops and laypeople, focused on deep learning about the Palestinian people, the struggle for a just peace in Palestine and the role of the church. Many advocated sending Palestinians on more educational trips to the U.S. as

well as creating digital resources to allow Palestinian leaders to have their voices amplified without overburdening them or limiting education to in-person opportunities.

- **Theology:** There was an emphasis on the need for theological education, both for U.S. audiences in general and for policymakers and decision-makers, rostered ministers and other leaders in the ELCA, to combat Christian Zionism and other theologies that justify or normalize the occupation. This theological work should include actively differentiating between Judaism, as a religious and cultural identity and a global community, and Israel, as a nation-state. Ongoing development and clarification of the ELCA's theological position on justice in Palestine and Israel, guided by Palestinian theologians, pastors and community leaders, is crucial and will help provide a foundation for clearer and stronger action in development of policy, engagement and advocacy.

### 3) Theology, language and action that are bold and clear and reflect current realities

- All respondents agreed that too much has changed since 2005 for the ELCA to continue basing its approaches, engagement and discourse on the 2005 strategy.
- “Peace Not Walls” and other “peace” and “conflict” language can normalize the occupation by framing the issue as an equal conflict between two sides that must reconcile to create peace, rather than as the unjust occupation and deprivation of human rights of Palestinians by the wealthier and more powerful state of Israel. The issue identified by respondents is not just linguistic or semantic but theological and conceptual. The theological perspective must shift from a focus on peacemaking and reconciliation that ignores power analysis to one that advocates justice for a marginalized people.
- Statements that appeal to “both sides” to end violence are often received as attempts to avoid criticizing Israel, which minimizes the seriousness of Palestinian suffering and inequality and contributes to Israel acting more aggressively, with impunity and without meaningful consequences. Some respondents clearly call for use of “apartheid” terminology and approaches such as BDS. Other respondents suggest that the debate over specific terms can be a distraction and that more specific description of circumstances (killing and detention of children, no freedom of movement, etc.) is more helpful. All agreed that the goal and the language must be clear: not peace but justice, not an end to walls (which some interpret as

outdated, since the walls are built) but an end to the occupation of Palestine by Israel.

- 4) **Holistic approach:** Though respondents did not necessarily claim deep familiarity with the internal structure of Peace Not Walls (as separate from ELCA mission personnel in Palestine/Israel, grants to the church and other organizations, the YAGM program, etc.), several did advocate for a holistic approach in engagement, with a clear strategy guiding all aspects of engagement and all aspects of engagement related to one another. Working in a more integrated way, with both the ELCJHL and other Palestinian (especially Palestinian Christian) partners, was recommended.

## Input From ELCA Constituencies

**Summary of process:** In November 2022 a variety of PNW-related ELCA stakeholders were invited to fill out an online feedback form indicating the kind(s) of engagement they have had with Peace Not Walls and offering their assessment of the overall impact, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges of PNW, as well as ideas for how PNW could better engage new, young, diverse members and improve its work overall. This feedback process received nearly 80 responses from the following constituencies: current and former ELCA staff, ELCA bishops, ALAMEH members, PNW network members, former YAGM volunteers, and former PNW young adult trip leaders and participants.

**Towards analysis of data:** Our working group identified some key contextual factors that we recommend our review team keep in mind as we analyze the findings of the survey form:

- 5) The scope of the perspectives received was limited to ELCA-related networks and, in most cases, to people who are already engaged with PNW in some way – though a few respondents were ecumenical colleagues and people active in Palestine/Israel issues but disaffiliated from PNW and/or the ELCA.
- 6) The working group acknowledges that the timing of the review process, coming after almost three years of pandemic-related limitations on travel and work and during a time when staffing for PNW was limited to a half-time or quarter-time position, likely affects these November 2022 responses about the recent activity and engagement levels of PNW.
- 7) External factors (the U.S. and Israeli political climates, U.S. media coverage of Palestine and Israel, etc.) should be included in any analysis of impact.

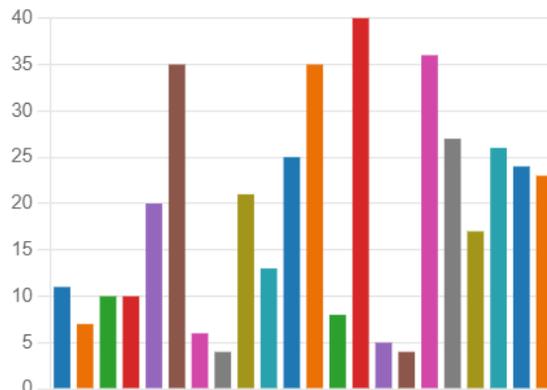
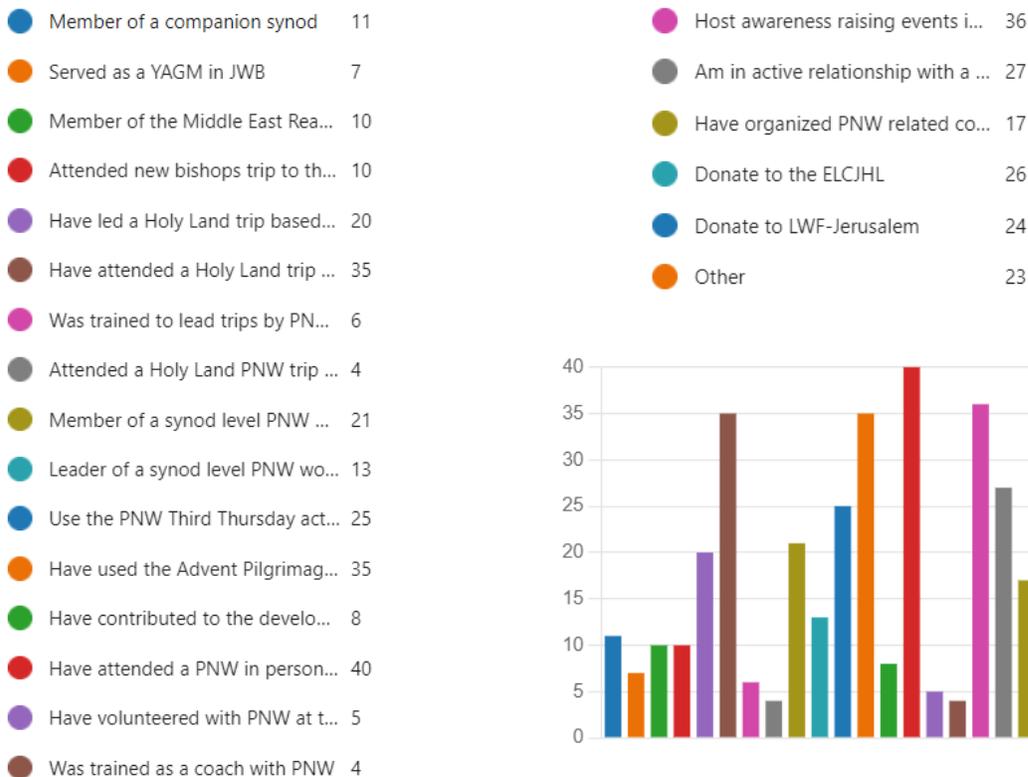
- 8) Analysis of how to turn the input of the feedback-gathering process into concrete recommendations will need to consider implications of implementation (in budgeting, structure, staffing, etc.).
- 9) Our working group also identified some elements that were mainly absent from responses, including Augusta Victoria Hospital (despite it being the topic to which ELCA members responded more than any other, based on action alerts) and the need to invite Palestinian partners' feedback to lead and guide PNW efforts (for example). The description of the survey did explain that the PNW review team is also engaging our companions in the ELCJHL and partners in Palestine to gather their feedback. We emphasize that these aspects of our work remain crucial despite a lack of mention in the feedback; asking why such elements were absent will also be important for analysis.

## Key Findings:

### Points of Connection or Relationship to Peace Not Walls

4. In what ways have you engaged with Peace Not Walls? (check all that apply)

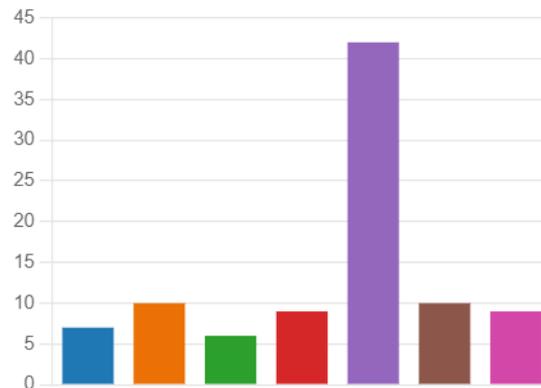
[More Details](#)



5. Based on your engagement with Peace Not Walls, from which perspective are you answering this questionnaire (select all that apply):

[More Details](#)

● JWB YAGM Alumni	7
● Young adult trip leader or trip p...	10
● ALAMEH member	6
● ELCA synod bishop	9
● PNW network member	42
● Former ELCA staff	10
● Current ELCA staff	9



### Strengths of Peace Not Walls:

- Bringing and advising groups who travel to Palestine.
- Accompaniment relationships with ELCJHL and other Palestinians.
- Having a strategy as a foundational document to support education and action (though consensus was that contents of current strategy must be changed/updated).
- Having church-based mechanisms and resources for advocacy.
- Opportunities for gathering and networking, both virtual (webinars) and in-person (conferences and assemblies).
- Education and information, e.g. Advent resource and reference documents.
- Engaging a diverse group of young people in leadership opportunities with PNW.

### Weaknesses of Peace Not Walls:

- Lack of funding/staff resources to support the needed scope of the work.
- Current 2005 strategy limits ELCA advocacy and response due to outdated, unhelpful terminology and policy recommendations, some of which may be considered to have been overtaken by events (e.g. “conflict,” “two-state solution,” lack of reference to BDS).
- Engagement beyond a small, sometimes insular network is needed, especially more engagement with synods, seminaries, congregations, YAGM alums, BIPOC communities, young people and ecumenical interfaith partners working in similar areas (i.e., Palestine/Israel Networks). PNW network members have not self-organized as have other denominations’ networks.
- Introductory-level theological educational resources desired and needed.

## Challenges for Peace Not Walls:

- How do we measure effectiveness?
- Limited success of advocacy efforts in changing policy and situation on the ground, especially because of the largely uncritical pro-Israel stance of the U.S., the rise of right-wing Jewish nationalism in the Israeli government, accusations of anti-Semitism hindering critique of Israel, and the strength of Christian Zionism.
- Evolving views within the American Jewish community on Palestinian justice and the resulting need to consider new partnerships that may raise questions or cause tension with other Jewish organizations and partners.
- Lack of understanding of the history, dynamics and current realities of the Israeli occupation of Palestine by the majority of ELCA members and U.S. citizens.

## Opportunities for Peace Not Walls:

- Increase resources (funds and staff) available for PNW programs and projects.
- Deeper accompaniment of Palestinian people, the ELCJHL and wider Palestinian church, and organizations and communities through the building of ongoing direct relationships and the centering of Palestinian perspectives and leadership.
- Expand and deepen engagement, experientially (trips and digital opportunities) and otherwise, with constituencies listed above.
- Expand educational resources, especially introductory and theological resources.
- Update strategy with more accurate description of the current situation and room for bolder action and advocacy (e.g., “apartheid,” “BDS,” etc.).

## Report Conclusions: Rethinking “Peace”

*They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.*

—Jeremiah 6:14

### From the ELCA social statement For Peace in God’s World, p. 5:

*The Church is a **disturbing presence** when it refuses to be silent and instead speaks the truth in times when people shout out, “‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14). The Church is this presence when it names and resists idols that lead to false security, injustice, and war, and calls for repentance. We therefore denounce beliefs and actions that:*

- **elevate our nation or any nation or people to the role of God;**
- **find ultimate security in weapons and warfare;**
- **ordain the inherent right of one people, race, or civilization to rule over others;**

- **promise a perfect, peaceful society through the efforts of a self-sufficient humanity; and**
- **despair of any possibility for peace.**

As a **reconciling presence**, the Church creates bonds among different peoples, whether local or distant. It has special opportunities to bring conflicting parties together and to keep tenuous lines of communication open during times of crisis and war. The Church serves reconciliation by countering religious movements—including ones claiming to be Christian—that preach and practice hate and violence, by challenging stereotypes of “the enemy,” and by encouraging imaginative solutions to conflicts. The Church is called to be a **servicing presence** in society. The Church serves when it holds power accountable, advocates justice, stands with those who are poor and vulnerable, provides sanctuary, and meets human need. The Church serves when it supports efforts by governments and others to secure a just peace and when it encourages public debate about what is right and good in international and domestic affairs. It serves by calling for compassion in meeting human needs.

The Church as a community for peace is also to be a **deliberating presence** in society. As a community of moral deliberation, the Church is a setting of freedom and respect where believers with different perspectives may learn from one another in the unity of faith. Issues that shape our world—including dilemmas of military service and confronting human evil through nonviolence—are proper themes for discussion in the Church.

As the summaries from our feedback-gathering processes show, there are many areas of agreement between respondents from the ELCA/U.S. and from the ELCJHL/Palestine in terms of evaluating the past and looking toward the future engagement of the ELCA in the Holy Land in accompaniment, awareness-raising and advocacy. Nearly all respondents recognized the value of Holy Land accompaniment trips as an incomparable way for people from the U.S. to gain a better understanding of the occupation of Palestine and its effect on Palestinians, and all recognized a need to help Holy Land travelers in the church remain (or become) connected to ongoing justice work. Most expressed a need for bolder words and actions on the part of the ELCA to advocate for an end to the occupation. Palestinian and U.S. respondents alike pointed to a gap in U.S. understanding of the occupation and the harmful effects of Christian Zionism, which churches such as the ELCA can and should counter.

However, one area of significant contrast between ELCA/U.S. and Palestinian respondents was the question of how deeply, and on what levels, Peace Not Walls should change. Should the ELCA keep the identity, mission, vision and general configuration of Peace Not Walls and build on its progress to date by essentially doing more of the same? Or does the central concept of “Peace Not Walls” itself need to be rethought, to reflect a current reality that demands new approaches and priorities? If

different stakeholders answer these questions in different (or opposite) ways, how do we as the ELCA decide on the way forward?

For this task force, the name “Peace Not Walls” was emblematic of these larger questions. Most ELCA respondents who mentioned Peace Not Walls as a campaign name advocated for its continuation because they found it effective in communicating the identity and overarching purpose of the campaign for ELCA and U.S. audiences. Not a single Palestinian interviewee agreed. On the contrary, many had an adverse reaction to this name, categorizing it as naive (at best) or offensive (at worst), and in any case no longer effective.

Why? In recent years, Christian talk of “peace” (and of the “Israeli-Palestinian conflict”) in the current political context has too often ignored or dismissed the real power difference between the state of Israel and the people of Palestine. Too often, Israelis and Palestinians are portrayed as two groups of people of roughly equal power and agency, locked in an intractable personal conflict, who need “reconciliation.” Or, “peace” is determined by the cessation of violence, regardless of whether underlying structures of inequality are changed.

When “peace” is used as a central organizing principle in these ways, then the rhetoric of peace itself normalizes the occupation by ignoring it completely or by implicitly treating it as a side product or consequence of conflict (“the walls can come down when Palestinians stop using violence”) rather than a cause of conflict (“the walls create a system of injustice that elicits violence as one response”). When “both sides” are urged to work for peace, this places an impossible onus for change on an occupied people who do not have this power. Only the state of Israel can end the occupation and dismantle its unjust structures. For the Palestinians we interviewed, “peace” language has become another tool of the occupation by framing the issue as one of personal conflict rather than systemic injustice.

This is not to say that peacemaking is not the goal. The above excerpt from the 1995 ELCA social statement *For Peace in God's World* defines Christian peacemaking as a multifaceted *disturbing, reconciling, serving and deliberating* presence in the world. This fuller sense of what it means to work for peace has guided, and will continue to guide, the ELCA in its engagement in Palestine and Israel, as in every part of the world where this church is called into relationships of accompaniment, awareness-raising and advocacy. Yet Palestinian theologians living under occupation caution us to remember that justice is the root of peace, not the reverse. As the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. also observed, “True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.”

We also learned from Palestinian stakeholders that a focus on “peace, not walls” as the primary articulated goal of ELCA engagement, even when understood as a campaign for justice, suggests an exclusive focus on advocating for the political policy solutions of

the future, which leaves unanswered the question of *how we are called to be present now in communities on the ground*. For the ELCJHL and Palestinian churches in general, peace is not merely an eventual political reality to be hoped for but a reality made flesh in the church's efforts to bring and build conditions for human flourishing now, in spite of a lack of political "peace." This is crucial work and work in which the ELCA is already engaged through financial support and personnel accompaniment of local Palestinian communities. These aspects of ELCA engagement in Palestine and Israel have largely been treated as separate from Peace Not Walls; yet as the local Christian community today struggles to maintain its viability and the viability of its ministries, this is an area of focus which our Palestinian partners have pleaded for the ELCA to prioritize going forward.

Certainly Peace Not Walls has, from the beginning, recognized the principle of justice as the foundation for peace in its work. However, words matter, and to be true to our commitment to accompany our Palestinian partners is to prioritize the *impact* of our words and actions on Palestinian communities rather than our *intent*. However effective "Peace Not Walls" has been as a name and central concept for ELCA and U.S. audiences, for our Palestinian partners it no longer says what they need us to say, nor does it fully address the various ways in which Palestinian Christians are calling for the global church to stand with – and walk with – them. For these reasons we on the review team begin our recommendations by *rethinking peace*, in a way that is not a departure from the ELCA's understanding of peacemaking but rather is fully in the spirit of peacemaking as *disturbing, reconciling, serving and deliberating* work.

## Review Team Recommendations

The following recommendations from the Peace Not Walls review team represent our synthesis and analysis of (1) the current realities, needs and opportunities in Palestine/Israel and the ELCA; (2) feedback from ELCA/U.S. and ELCJHL/Palestinian stakeholders; and (3) the ELCA's commitment to global engagement grounded in the theological principle of accompaniment. These recommendations have been articulated with the goal of being clear in our ELCA commitments while also broad enough so that they may be implemented in ways that are responsive to changing conditions on the ground. Overall, these recommendations represent our overarching assessment that *the ELCA's calling and purpose in relation to Palestine and Israel is to deepen and extend our engagement, action and impact both within the ELCA and as part of the global Lutheran communion to accompany, raise awareness of and advocate for justice for Palestinians, pursuing a just peace for all inhabitants of the Holy Land*.

# 1. Rebrand and Rationale: From “Peace Not Walls” to “SUMUD”

*ELCA Service and Justice will rename and reshape the campaign now known as “Peace Not Walls”; the proposed new name is SUMUD: For Justice in Palestine and Israel.*

As stated in the previous section, “Rethinking Peace,” it is clear to this review team that the time has come to retire the name “Peace Not Walls” and to choose a new name that reflects the ELCA’s ongoing commitment to accompaniment, awareness-raising and advocacy for justice in Palestine and Israel. Taking inspiration from the work of Palestinian Christian theologians, and Palestinian justice work more broadly, the name the review team proposes is *SUMUD: For Justice in Palestine and Israel*.

*Sumud*, an Arabic word meaning “steadfastness,” is a term widely used to signify Palestinian resistance to the dehumanization and injustice of the Israeli occupation. For Palestinians *sumud* can encompass both advocacy for political change and “resistance through existence,” embodied in community relationships (with people and the land) and in education, social work, scholarship and the arts, to name some key examples. As a central organizing principle, *sumud* recognizes advocacy and awareness-raising within the U.S. context, as well as accompaniment of the Palestinian church and the Palestinian people, as equally important and connected components of the ELCA’s engagement.

“For Justice in Palestine and Israel,” as a tagline, identifies *justice* as the root and foundation of peace and abundant life that is intended by God *for all Palestinians and Israelis*. In naming Palestine the ELCA stands against the state of Israel’s attempts to erase Palestinian state identity; by naming Palestine first the ELCA points toward the reality of a current imbalance of justice and power. At the same time this tagline acknowledges the existence of the state of Israel and upholds also the rights of Jewish and non-Jewish Israelis for a safe and secure homeland, as well as our interreligious relationships with, and commitments to, Jewish communities.

This statement echoes what the ELCJHL has long proclaimed – that *justice in Palestine and Israel* will bring all the peoples of the Holy Land a true and lasting peace. Finally, the preposition “for” adds both direction and humility to this goal. In all our ELCA engagement we remember that this work is primarily *for* the sake of our Palestinian partners, not us, and that, though we work *for* justice, we do not pretend that we are the source *of* justice.

## 2. Theological Reflection and Resources

*ELCA Service and Justice, through SUMUD, will develop and/or share accessible theological resources to:*

- Shape the ELCA's strategy and witness in (and in relation to) the Holy Land as a disturbing, reconciling, serving and deliberating presence for justice and peace.
- Consider the role of the ELCJHL as an Indigenous church and clarify the role of accompaniment with an Indigenous church and population.
- Build intersectional theological connections between the Palestinian context and related justice struggles (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, colonialism, indigeneity, ecology and others) within the U.S. context and globally.
- Build an understanding of the historic and present occupation of Palestine to counter harmful theologies of Christian Zionism among and beyond ELCA membership, and to aid ELCA and U.S. audiences in differentiating between anti-Semitism/anti-Judaism and criticism of the state of Israel.
- Utilize ELCA social teaching to evaluate current ELCA policies and procedures, alongside resources from Palestinian, ecumenical and interreligious partners, to study terminologies and strategies including apartheid, settler-colonialism and the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement for consideration by the ELCA.
- Work within existing relationships to review and recommend ethical approaches to investment and/or divestment in ELCA bodies and separately incorporated ministries such as Portico Benefit Services, the Mission Investment Fund of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Endowment Fund of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA Foundation).
- Provide liturgical and study resources for use in ELCA ministry settings (e.g., the Advent pilgrimage to Palestine) and equip leaders for use of these resources.
- Provide relational opportunities for theological learning around Palestine/Israel (e.g., seminars, workshops, conferences and classes) both within and beyond ELCA settings (e.g., the ELCA Youth Gathering, synod/churchwide assemblies, synod/rostered minister gatherings, and ELCA camps, colleges/universities and campus ministries).

### 3. Building Networks

*ELCA Service and Justice, through SUMUD, will develop new and existing networks for engagement to:*

- Analyze, diversify and expand current and potential future ELCA networks (e.g. the ELCA presiding bishop and Conference of Bishops, especially the Middle East Ready Bench; Palestinians living in diaspora in the U.S.; the Association of Lutherans of Arab and Middle Eastern Heritage; Young Adults in Global Mission; Young Adult Ministry/Christian Community and Leadership (CCL); ELCA synods and congregations; ELCA colleges, universities and seminaries; outdoor and campus ministries, etc.)
- Analyze the current PNW Network for growth opportunities:
  - The current size of the PNW advocacy network is 1,300 subscribed addresses. Open rates are 34-41% through 2022 (the standard open rate for advocacy mailings is 23%).
  - The current size of the ELCA advocacy network is around 30,000, with 19,200 usable addresses. After bounce-backs, the average audience is closer to 18,500.
  - The number of ELCA members who visit the Holy Land each year is estimated at 500-plus. How can these visitors, and other ELCA-related people interested and involved in Palestine/Israel but not yet connected to PNW networks, become connected to SUMUD networks?
- Develop clarity on roles of ELCA advocacy networks for policy engagement, planning and impact for communication, stories and alerts related to Palestine/Israel.
- Identify and coordinate internal engagement within the ELCA churchwide organization, including but not limited to:
  - Accompanying Peoples, Communities and Networks.
  - Building Resilient Communities.
  - Broader MENA (and MENA desk) strategy.
  - Office of the Presiding Bishop (including Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations, Theological Discernment, Worship).
  - Connections related to mission exchange, ethnic-specific communities and related associations.
  - ELCA Strategic Communication.
- Continue and advance existing coalition relationships and ecumenical and interfaith relationships (e.g., Faith Forum on the Middle East, Churches for Middle East Peace [CMEP], Palestine/Israel networks [PINs]) and continue within

these existing relationships to take a clear position, consistent with ELCA strategy and SUMUD goals, of advocating for justice for Palestinians that will lead to a lasting peace for all Palestinians and Israelis. The ELCA can learn from and with its ecumenical and interreligious partners so that our work and witness for Palestinian justice upholds our commitments to our ecumenical, Jewish and Muslim partners (“A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment” [1991], “A Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community [1994/2021 update] and “A Declaration of the ELCA to the Muslim Community” [2022]). Critical theological and practical resources to support this have been developed over the years by the ELCA consultative panels on Lutheran-Jewish and Lutheran-Muslim relations.

- Develop new ecumenical, interfaith and global partnerships that align with SUMUD goals and are consistent with ELCA approaches, including Jewish and Muslim partners, and collaborate with these partners in areas where opportunity and purpose align.
- Identify and coordinate with companion churches to build alliances in support of the ELCJHL (e.g., Indigenous LAC region churches, South Africa apartheid work).
- Engage artists and musicians for creative storytelling.

#### **4. “Come and See”: Physical and Virtual Visits**

*ELCA Service and Justice, through SUMUD, will facilitate Holy Land trips for ELCA-related groups to:*

- Determine purpose and objectives of all SUMUD trips with set goals and evaluations.
- Set clear and bold expectations and follow-up commitments for ELCA constituents, including bishops, for all SUMUD trips.
- Structure SUMUD trips for long-term network mobilization: identify key stakeholders, leaders and affinity networks for cross-network collaboration (e.g., AMMPARO, Indigenous Ministries and Tribal Relations, etc.).
- Develop and provide more substantial resources for ELCA clergy and others planning and/or preparing for Holy Land trips, and promote these resources through relational networks with the goal of “every trip an accompaniment trip.”
- Collaborate with the ELCJHL and other Palestinian partners to develop virtual study trips and experiences for individuals and small groups.

## 5. Strategy Review

*ELCA Service and Justice, through SUMUD and in partnership with the Office of the Presiding Bishop, will initiate a review of “Strategy for Engagement in Israel and Palestine” (2005) to:*

- Determine language, goals, strategies and priorities that no longer fit the current realities in Palestine and Israel, the ELCA and/or the U.S., as well as those that are still applicable and should be pursued (e.g., ending the occupation).
- Develop a new or significantly revised strategy for engagement with the goal of bringing this strategy forward through the channels most appropriate and necessary for adoption, keeping in mind the timelines and dates of future ELCA Church Council meetings and churchwide assemblies if needed.

## 6. Staffing and Structure

*ELCA Service and Justice will work with the MENA desk to create staffing and determine structure for SUMUD within the ELCA churchwide organization ecology to:*

- Create new permanent staffing (at least one new full-time position or the equivalent) that will work with ELCA Service and Justice and the MENA desk to launch and oversee SUMUD.
- Identify and coordinate engagement with Witness in Society (state, federal, United Nations, Corporate Social Responsibility program), particularly through collaboration with the new program director for Middle East and North Africa policy positions.
- Identify and coordinate engagement with the ELCJHL and Palestinian/MENA partners, particularly through collaboration with the MENA area desk director.
- Oversee the ongoing strategic work of SUMUD:
  - Appoint a SUMUD advisory committee and/or advisory circles for specific SUMUD areas or projects (e.g., theology, network, trips, leadership).
  - Conduct review of “Strategy for Engagement in Israel and Palestine” (as outlined above).
  - Build, communicate and collaborate with new and existing networks.
  - Develop and/or disseminate theological and educational resources.

## 7. Required Resources

Recognizing that the above recommendations will require financial and staffing resources to implement, ELCA Service and Justice will commit to making SUMUD a funding priority and to working with various applicable funding sources for this work.

# Conclusion: A Kairos Moment

*As churches that seek justice and righteousness in obedience to the commandment of Christ, we must deal with the facts on the ground. ... [B]ased on the foregoing, we must no longer speak in our churches of “peace,” or even of the resolution of conflict. We must speak instead of an end to tyranny and injustice. Vocabulary is important. The words we use are important. We are not talking about a struggle between equal forces. ... The way in which the churches of the world deal with injustice in our land will reveal a great deal about these churches. We do not exaggerate to say that the credibility of the churches and our Christian witness is at stake.*

—Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac, from a speech at the International Conference of Kairos Palestine in Beit Sahour, Palestine, November 2022

Peace Not Walls and “Strategy of Engagement in Israel and Palestine” were conceived and born in a “sense of urgency” that called the church to action. Today that call has not lessened, but the ELCA has been called to listen anew. Over the past 18 months this review team has set aside significant time and effort to do just that: to listen to our partners and members most deeply involved in this work, both in the Holy Land and in the U.S.; to center the voices and perspectives of the Palestinians who are most familiar with, and most affected by, the current realities, needs and opportunities on the ground; and to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit through the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is at all times the heart of our identity and our guidepost for engagement as a church in the world.

This review team urges the MENA desk, ELCA Service and Justice, and the ELCA as a whole to take up once again the calling, placed upon us by God, to hear and respond to the cries of the Palestinian church and to consider “the credibility of our witness” as we move toward the future: for the sake of our Christian siblings in Palestine and Israel, their Muslim and Jewish neighbors, and indeed all who call the Holy Land not just holy but home.