

The road to hope

Part 2: Lutheran presence in the Holy Land

by Ian Adnams

Three major Christian churches dominate the religious landscape and Christian population in Israel and Palestine: The Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Armenian Church. Scattered among these ancient expressions of Christianity are the relative newcomers: Anglicans, Presbyterians and Lutherans, along with more recent evangelicals.

Although a Christian presence is obvious in churches, retreat centres, schools and other religious buildings, the actual number of Christians is small compared with the Jewish and Muslim populations. The largest Christian population is in Nazareth, where one-third of the population, mostly Arabs, are followers of Christ. In Jerusalem, Christians number around 10,000 souls. Recent estimates say the Christian population in Bethlehem is less than 7,000, most of them relying on the tourist industry for income.

Yet despite this small population, the Church makes an impact on the religious, political and social challenges that plague the area.

In the old city

In Old Jerusalem we visited Lutheran Church of the Redeemer where three congregations meet to worship Arab, German and English.

Next door to the church are the offices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL). This church body, a member of the Lutheran World Federation, has six congregations in Israel/Palestine and Jordan. There we met Bishop Munib Younan who spoke eloquently about the role of the Church in the Middle East, especially in Israel and the West Bank.

He noted that Christians make up about eight percent of the area's population yet its influence in the past and present is strong. Of the Church in the city of Jerusalem, he said, "Christianity in Jerusalem is not a Christianity of numbers, but a Christianity of witness." He said that Lutherans take this witness seriously both in ecclesiastical and society issues.

He gave the example of Lutheran schools where in a student population of 3000, about 45 percent are Muslims.

A key objective is to teach and model acceptance of "the other" which the bishop believes will produce 'moderate' adults who can help build a more peaceful society. This is one of the projects funded by Canadian Lutheran World Relief.

Another major CLWR project supported by the Canadian International Development Agency is Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem. Ninety-nine percent of the patients are Muslim at this Lutheran hospital. Bishop Younan called it a "living witness."

The political instability has caused a number of Palestinian Christians to emigrate, leaving behind a leadership vacuum in local congregations. Programs of the ELCJHL try to address the problem. Teenagers are enrolled in leadership classes that include Bible education and basic theology that helps prepare them for ministry and provide an answer the question "why are you a Christian in this part of the world?" Similar classes are offered to equip teachers from the school for leadership positions.

The churches in Jerusalem are also very active in promoting dialogue between leaders of the three major faith groups that have to share the city: Jews, Christians and Muslims. Again the goal is to build respect for each other's history, culture and religion thereby trying to ease tensions at the highest levels.



Traditional Palestinian folk dancers from a Lutheran school near Bethlehem have earned a national reputation.

Bishop Younan warned that “without dialogue, extremists take over.” He believes the voice of the moderates—most of the population—must be louder. After speaking about possible resolutions to the many areas of conflict, the bishop said that the role of the Church is “to give hope in a hopeless situation.”

In the “little town”

The positive voice and actions of hope are evident in Bethlehem at Christmas Lutheran Church and its International Centre where the motto is “that we may have life and have it more abundantly.”

The pastor who established the centre in 1995, Rev. Mitri Reheb wanted to engage the community around his church with a message of hope to counteract what he calls “a mentality of whining.” With less than \$350, a sparsely furnished office and a few volunteers, the pastor began the centre which is now the third largest private employer in the West Bank. “God has blessed us beyond belief,” he says.

The centre addresses the issues of Palestine three ways:

1. civic engagement by
 - a. teaching classes to 120 school teachers on subjects like democracy and elections
 - b. supporting the Christian community through research and leadership training
 - c. promoting Palestinian culture
 - d. producing television programs for local TV and satellite broadcast
2. Health and Wellness focusing on preventative medicine especially diabetes, post traumatic stress disorder, and depression with activities such as yoga classes, swimming and dance. The centre has also established a 500-plus member seniors program; young families group and young adults group. The centre started the first sports program for women and the soccer team is scheduled to play in the Palestine championship game.
3. Dar al-Kalima College grants a two-year associates degrees in documentary film making; arts and music. The current program includes continuing education for more than 1000 students, aged 17 to 87 years old and leadership courses to 1000 students.

The college recently signed an agreement with representatives from five LCMS Concordia universities and one seminary which laid groundwork for partnerships. By signing “Memorandums of Understanding” on behalf of their institutions, the LCMS educators initiated partnerships that will involve exchanging students and faculty, online courses, master’s degree programs, and other activities.

Pastor Raheb says the Palestinian Christian community has to “carve its place in the community.” He dreams of the day when the International Centre will offer its message of hope throughout all the Palestinian communities. He also noted that the centre has done all this without funding from Lutheran development agencies.

Visiting the centre, you catch the message of hope present in the staff, many of whom are members of the



Young Palestinian men and women learn trades and work skills at a Lutheran vocational training centre.

Lutheran congregation. Fifty percent of the students are youth or young adults, a demographic where the unemployment rate is 67 percent. The pastor says, “We have to be bold in what we do in order for Christianity to survive in a difficult situation.”

In the lives of young people

In the northern part of East Jerusalem is another program that brings hope. Tucked away off the main road in Beit Hanina is the Vocational Training Centre operated by the Lutheran World Federation with support from CLWR. The goal is to give young Palestinian men and women marketable skills. The 150 students learn auto mechanics, carpentry, metal work, IT skills and plumbing and heating in a two-year course. Since the school is in Jerusalem, students from the West Bank must travel through Israeli checkpoints to attend. This could make what would be a five-minute direct walk—were it not for a tall concrete wall—into a one hour trip, both ways. To accommodate this, the school also offers boarding.

Each area is supervised by an experienced tradesman. In another location the school incorporates a strong apprenticeship program.

With the troubled history of the area experienced by so many of the students, the school also offers counselling and classes on social skills. The director noted that the students come from cities, small towns; follow differing political parties; have varying attitudes toward the opposite sex. Working with these multiple dynamics makes the school’s impact even more important.

The students are eager to learn and happy to have the opportunity to spend two years learning a skill that will last a lifetime and provide support for them and their families. With unemployment running at about 16 percent for Palestinians, the programs at the Vocational Training Centre are important to building toward peace.

For children, Lutheran schools provide a similar hope. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land operates five elementary and high schools

in Palestine reaching more than 2400 students and their families. Depending on the location, the majority of students could be Christian or Muslim. The point is that they are taught together and learn to understand each other. These classrooms become a beacon for hope for the future since so much of the tension here is based on ignorance of ‘the other.’ Unfortunately, this does not extend to Palestinians knowing Israelis, the source of greatest tension. However, it does bring about a unity among Palestinians.

In the schools we visited, the principals told us of the high value Palestinians place on education. The vast majority of graduates from the Lutheran schools continue to university. Some return to the schools as teachers. The downside of this excellence in academics comes as young people take their pursuit of education out of the country where they can study and eventually make a new life. More than once we heard of the impact this has on the Palestinian Christian community. Education is often a passport out of the reality of life in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

In times of need

On top of the historic Mount of Olives is another symbol



Dr. Tawfiq Nasser

of Christian caring in action, the Augusta Victoria Hospital (AVH), a social ministry project of the Lutheran World Federation supported by Canadian Lutheran World Relief, the government of Canada through

Canadian International Development Agency and members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. The hospital building originally constructed by Kaiser Wilhelm in 1907 as a retreat centre for German pilgrims to the Holy Land, serves the Palestinian community. It provides the only dialysis, paediatric cancer care, cancer treatment and long term elder care in the West Bank. It sees more than 3000 patients per month, most of them travelling through Israeli checkpoints to receive the specialized treatments.

The chief executive officer, Dr. Tawfiq Nasser is an engaging, creative and determined administrator. When Israeli government red-tape threatened to slow the construction of a new area to house a second linear accelerator due to building-height restrictions, Dr. Nasser found a way to build underground. A highly-respected figure in the Palestinian community, he is a devout Christian and sees his vocation as an opportunity to bring hope to his fellow Palestinians because of the hope he has experienced in the love of God in Jesus Christ.



In the paediatric dialysis ward, blankets and quilts donated to CLWR keep young patients warm.

An elder care unit, opened in 2009, was of special interest because it was funded by CLWR and the Canadian government.

The AVH is a strong Christian presence for both Palestinians and the Israeli government as it effectively and successfully serves those most in need. It operates on five “P” values: philanthropy, caring and giving; professionalism and competency; passion and respect; partnership and cooperation; personal satisfaction. Robert Granke, executive director of Canadian Lutheran World Relief is a member of the hospital board.

Always seeking new ways to meet the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of Palestinians, the hospital is now planning to build a senior citizens residence when funds become available.

The light of the world

While none of these social ministry projects could be classified as “evangelism” as we would understand it, you have to appreciate the context in which the Christian community serves. First, Christians are a minority religion which, in Palestinian areas, lives among Muslims. In other areas, if there are Palestinian or European Christians, they live among a Jewish majority. Overt evangelism would build more walls rather than bridges. Yet, in the areas where the Lutheran church is at work, Christianity has hands reaching out in love to help.

In some ways, the Christian church as expressed in these Lutheran ministries has higher visibility and practical engagement in their community than many churches in Canada where we are free to evangelize as much as we dare!

The political challenges of the Middle East, Israel and Palestine directly affect brothers and sisters in Christ who live in the midst of the conflict. We need to keep remembering them in our prayers. Their concern for diminishing numbers is deep as they fear the loss of an active Christian presence that goes beyond maintaining historic sites for Western visitors. The church’s involvement in helping bring an earthly hope to those living in a troubled land can provide an opportunity to share the eternal hope all Christians have in Jesus Christ.

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