



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
God's work. Our hands.



## Major Issues: Christian Presence in the Holy Land



**Being church in the Holy Land:** (left) Christmas Eve service at Bethlehem Lutheran Church; (middle) Science fair at Dar al Kalima School, one of the schools of The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. (ELCJHL); (right) dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians co-sponsored by Redeemer Lutheran Church in Jerusalem.

### The Rt. Rev. Munib Younan, ELCJHL Bishop and LWF President on Palestinian Christian Presence in the Holy Land



**Video:** [Do Not Forget Us](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-BhePYhOCs&feature=player_embedded)  
([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-BhePYhOCs&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-BhePYhOCs&feature=player_embedded))

*"The future of Palestinian Christianity is not in occupation, violence, war or extremism. It is in a just peace, for we believe that Christ has come to give us life, and life abundantly. More and more Muslim leaders from the Gulf to Tunisia are agreeing that the Arab world is not complete without the Christian presence. King Abdullah II of Jordan told a group of 170 Muftis and Muslim scholars in July of 2005 in Amman that Arab Christians are the 'glue' that holds Arab society together and that we guarantee the presence of civil, democratic society here."*

- The Rt. Rev. Munib Younan, ELCJHL Bishop and LWF President  
The Future of Palestinian Christianity, May, 2007

## International Law

***"Protected persons are entitled, in all circumstances, to respect for their persons, their honor, their family rights, their religious convictions and practices, and their manners and customs. They shall at all times be humanely treated, and shall be protected especially against all acts of violence or threats thereof and against insults and public curiosity."***

- Fourth Geneva Convention, Art. 27 (12 August 1949)

## What's at Stake

Palestinian Christians have been part of the church since the first Pentecost, though many people do not even know they exist. Their presence, however, has dwindled from 15-20% of the area's population to now less than 2%. The major reason cited for emigration is the political and economic instability of the region due largely to the Israeli occupation. Though many think Muslim persecution is driving Christians out of the Holy Land, most leaders and people say those incidents are limited to individual, isolated events and are not a major cause of Palestinian Christian emigration.

A key challenge for Palestinian Christians is the influence of "occupation theologies" that deny their right as Christians to the land, based on the Genesis account of God giving the land to Abraham and the Jewish people. These kinds of theologies, especially "Christian Zionism," are especially hurtful since they use Christians' own beloved scriptures against them.

Palestinian Christians are an integral part of Palestinian society and of the fabric of Jerusalem, a city holy to Christians, Muslims and Jews. In addition, they play a key role in promoting interfaith dialogue, reconciliation, and peace-building. The global church is called to support its Palestinian sisters and brothers in Christ.

## Stories: The Human Face of the Conflict

### ***From brokenness to hope: Creating facts on the ground of hope***

In 1995, a new ministry of the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem was born: the International Center in Bethlehem. Pastor Mitri Raheb and others in Bethlehem had a dream of a place where Palestinian culture, arts and empowerment would develop new leaders. In the wake of the Oslo accords, Pastor Raheb was able to rally support to build a new complex of a school (to eventually also house a Health and Wellness Center and a college) and a conference and cultural center. The ICB was still being finished when the 2nd intifada deteriorated into a reoccupation of most Palestinian cities in 2002. During the siege of the Church of the Nativity and this reoccupation, the ICB was heavily damaged and Pastor Raheb and his family, as well as all of the people in Bethlehem, lived under siege for a long time. After this, a new focus on bringing hope and healing emerged, with a new slogan: ***"Destruction may be: creativity and continuity shall be."***



As a symbol of this, the ICB gathered the shattered glass that filled the streets of Bethlehem and created Angels of Hope, glass ornaments that symbolized the new life that can come out of brokenness. These are still available at their gift shop and website.

Since then, the facilities and ministries have expanded and [DIYAR Consortium](http://www.diyar.ps/) (http://www.diyar.ps/) was created, which consists of the International Center in Bethlehem, a Health and Wellness Center and the Dar al Kalima College. The college offers courses in tour-guiding, music, glass and ceramics, contemporary fine art, jewelry and documentary film-making. These ministries not only bring employment and empowerment, but are helping raise a new generation of leaders through youth leadership programs and cultural exchanges. DIYAR's outreach and cultural ministries have expanded tremendously, from Bethlehem, to the whole Bethlehem region and then the whole West Bank. International outreach and partnerships have blossomed.



***“I have a dream that I will one day wake up and see two equal peoples living next to each other, coexisting in the land of Palestine, stretching from the Mediterranean to the Jordan....I have a dream of two peoples who are not separated by a wall. The security of both peoples can only be guaranteed by a just peace. Without peace there is no security and no survival.”***

Pastor Mitri Raheb

### **Act Now**

Palestinian Christians are suffering hardships and in some cases are choosing to leave the Holy Land as they experience the Israeli occupation of Palestinian Land. You can help by:

- raising awareness about this important community and their desire to remain a vital part of the “living stones” of the Holy Land;
- advocating for free expression of religion in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories;
- advocating for freedom of movement and access for Palestinian and expatriate clergy and lay persons serving the diverse Christian ministries in the region;
- advocating for free access to Christian holy sites for all Palestinian Christians, regardless of their current residency status.

# The Church's Voice

## **Bishop Munib Younan**

"Likewise, we in the ELCHJL feel we have an important mission in our society. Like Mary, we stay in this land dying for peace and justice. As Jesus called Mary as his apostle of the resurrection, so we Palestinian Christians are called as apostles of hope despite our struggle, despite our hopelessness. Our congregations, schools and centers play an important role in providing hope and developing Palestinian society. Our parishioners' daily struggle to maintain a Palestinian Christian witness in this land is an encouragement to our many partners and friends all over the world. Our efforts at building bridges between Palestinians and Israelis prepare us to live together peacefully after a political settlement is reached. Our dialogue with Muslims and Jews inspires other Christians to cross borders to build peace in this broken world. As St. Paul says of Jesus, "In his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (Ephesians 2:14b)." - Easter message 2010

## **Kairos Palestine**

In 2009, Palestinian Christians gathered and issued the [Kairos Palestine document: Moment of Truth: A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian Suffering](http://www.kairospalestine.ps/sites/default/Documents/English.pdf). (http://www.kairospalestine.ps/sites/default/Documents/English.pdf). The [Kairos initiative](http://www.kairospalestine.ps/) (http://www.kairospalestine.ps/), which was based on the Kairos movement among South African churches opposing apartheid, encourages Christians, Palestinians, Israelis and the international community to seek peace with justice, a non-violent end to the Israeli occupation and a just resolution to the situation:

*"1.3 Emigration is another element in our reality. The absence of any vision or spark of hope for peace and freedom pushes young people, both Muslim and Christian, to emigrate. Thus the land is deprived of its most important and richest resource – educated youth. The shrinking number of Christians, particularly in Palestine, is one of the dangerous consequences, both of this conflict, and of the local and international paralysis and failure to find a comprehensive solution to the problem.*

*3.3 The Church in our land, her leaders and her faithful, despite her weakness and her divisions, does show certain signs of hope. Our parish communities are vibrant and most of our young people are active apostles for justice and peace. In addition to the individual commitment, our various Church institutions make our faith active and present in service, love and prayer."*



## Background



Although our church shares in the body of Christ with all Middle Eastern Christians, the ELCA is in a formal accompaniment relationship with the [ELCJHL](http://www.elcjhl.org) ([www.elcjhl.org](http://www.elcjhl.org)). The ELCJHL is led by Bishop Munib Younan, and its congregations are located in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour, and Ramallah, and in Amman, Jordan.

The ELCJHL's five schools teach Muslims and Christians together, preparing future Palestinian leaders committed to responsible citizenship, peace, and reconciliation. Muslims make up one-third to one-half of the students depending on the school, and the schools work hard to foster mutual understanding and tolerance as well. Related to the ELCJHL's Christmas Lutheran Church in

Bethlehem is the DIYAR consortium, a group of Lutheran-based, ecumenically-oriented institutions serving the whole Palestinian community 'from the womb to the tomb,' with an emphasis on children, youth, women & elders.

DIYAR's 2008 study, [Palestinian Christians: Facts, Figures and Trends](http://www.diyar.ps/media/documents/pal_christians_facts_figures_trends.pdf) ([http://www.diyar.ps/media/documents/pal\\_christians\\_facts\\_figures\\_trends.pdf](http://www.diyar.ps/media/documents/pal_christians_facts_figures_trends.pdf)) estimated the number of Palestinian Christians in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Jerusalem is 1.37% (pop. 51,710) of the Palestinian population. That represents a dramatic decline from 7-10% in the 1950s. Christian emigration is a central concern for our Lutheran companions in the Holy Land and thus for the ELCA. Christians cite as reasons for leaving the region the pressures of the occupation, lack of freedom and security, and bad economic conditions (p. 35).

The seeds for this Lutheran Christian presence in the Holy Land extend back to the mid First Century, when the followers of Jesus Christ led the First Century Jewish movement that spread to become worldwide Christianity. Acts 2 reports that the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was witnessed by Arabs and Middle Easterners along with others living in the multi-ethnic Roman province of Palestine. "Three thousand people" were added to the body of Christ that day, in a sense initiating the story of Christianity in today's Middle East (Acts 2:41).

By the 4th C. Bethlehem was almost exclusively Christian, and numerous monastic communities dotted the Holy Land. The 1054 schism of the Eastern and Western churches was followed by the 16th C. Protestant Reformation. In the 1800s Eastern Orthodoxy was still the largest single Christian presence, accounting for about 90% of Christians in the Holy Land. The mid-1800s arrival of Anglican and Lutheran missionaries and building of schools and hospitals encouraged the creation of indigenous Protestant churches, and now the Holy Land also has Nazarene, Presbyterian, Baptist and evangelical churches. Arab Christians in Palestine became Lutherans in part because of their education in the German-run schools. First a mission church, in 1959 these Lutherans became an officially recognized and autonomous body, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan. In 2005 the name was expanded by the words "and the Holy Land."

The “ministry of reconciliation” is entrusted to all Christians in 2 Corinthians. And so we North American Christians are called to be peacemakers who are, in the words of Bishop Younan, neither pro-Israeli nor pro-Palestinian, but pro-justice. In our empathetic identification with Lutherans in the Holy Land we remember especially 1 Corinthians 12:26—“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”




### See these links for more information about the Christian Presence in the Holy Land:

- [The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan & the Holy Land \(ELCJHL\)](http://www.elcjh.org/) (<http://www.elcjh.org/>)
- [Lutheran World Federation Department for World Services, Jerusalem](http://lwfjerusalem.org/wp/) (<http://lwfjerusalem.org/wp/>)
- [Churches for Middle East Peace](http://www.cmep.org) (<http://www.cmep.org>)
- [Middle East Council of Churches \(MECC\)](http://www.mec-churches.org/) (<http://www.mec-churches.org/>)
- [The Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation \(HCEF\)](http://www.hcef.org/) (<http://www.hcef.org/>)
- [Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center](http://www.sabeel.org) (<http://www.sabeel.org>)

Redeemer Lutheran Church was built by Prussian Kaiser Wilhelm, who attended the dedication in 1898. He was the first western ruler of modern times to come to Jerusalem and he personally dedicated the new church. Now, Redeemer is home to the congregations that speak Arabic, German and English.

## Resources

- [The Kairos Palestine Document: A moment of truth](http://www.kairospalestine.ps/?q=node/2) (<http://www.kairospalestine.ps/?q=node/2>) A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering. The document is a word of hope to Palestinian Christians and a challenge for churches to work toward an end to Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands as well as to re-examine theologies that support the Israeli occupation.
- [The Forgotten Faithful](http://www.sabeel.org/pdfs/Cornerstone%2040final,%20Spring%202006.pdf) (<http://www.sabeel.org/pdfs/Cornerstone%2040final,%20Spring%202006.pdf>) (Spring 2006) & [Have No Fear Little Flock](http://www.sabeel.org/pdfs/Corner42C.pdf) (<http://www.sabeel.org/pdfs/Corner42C.pdf>) (Autumn 2006), two issues of Sabeel's newsletter, Cornerstone, that look at Christians and the Church in the Holy Land. 

### Relevant International Law

***Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.***

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 18 (adopted by UN General Assembly 10 December 1948)

***Family honor and rights, the lives of persons and private property, as well as religious convictions and practice, must be respected.***

- The Hague Convention, Section IV, Annex, Art. 46 (18 October 1907)