

— ECLJHL December 2024 —

NEWSLETTER

Christmas in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land



Christ in the Rubble Nativity at Christmas Lutheran Church, Bethlehem

As 2024 draws to a close, the ELCJHL is reflecting on one of the most difficult years in our 170-year history as a church. Last year the Palestinian Christian community faced a Christmas unlike any that had come before. A year later, the Holy Land marks another Christmas in mourning. After 15 months of devastating war, we are still praying for a ceasefire. We are still praying for justice and peace.

In the following pages you will read about how our congregations and schools are once again commemorating the birth of our Savior in this land without the joyful celebrations that Bethlehem and Jerusalem are known for. You will hear the stories of how our ministries are sharing reports from Gaza in their year-end conferences, and how our Diaconal Ministry is reaching out to the community in these dark days. On the final pages of this newsletter you will find this year's Christmas Message from Bishop Azar. As the world celebrates a child born in Bethlehem, we ask that you keep the Palestinian community in your prayers and in your actions toward a more just and peaceful world in the coming year.



Church of the Reformation, Beit Jala



Dar al Kalima Lutheran School Kindergarten, Bethlehem

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CONGREGATIONS



Advent

Our congregations marked the season of Advent with special worships, bible studies, and prayers. In Bethlehem, Christmas Lutheran hosted the annual Simulcast Service and a special Christ in the Rubble service. In Jerusalem, Pastors Sally and Ashraf led a joint Bible Study with the congregation from St. George's Cathedral. In Beit Jala, Beit Sahour, and Ramallah, regular Advent Worship continued each Sunday. In Amman, children from the congregation prepared a special Christmas Pageant and congregation members met for a carol service.

Ordination of Tony Nassar

The Reverend Anton Nassar was ordained as a pastor in the Church of Christ on December 29, 2024. The ELCJHL is proud to announce this ordination and looks forward to Rev. Tony's faithful ministry.



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CONGREGATIONS

Christmas

Our Congregations met Christmas Eve and Christmas Day to welcome the light Christ brings into our world and to pray for peace. Though the Palestinian community is facing a time of great uncertainty and fear, we look to the message of great joy the angels bring:

“Tonight is born to you in the City of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.”

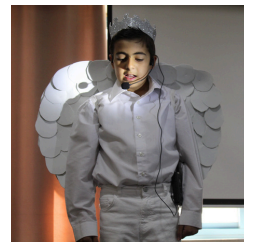


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EDUCATION

Lutheran Schools Mark Christmas

This year our ELCJHL schools did not hold typical Christmas celebrations, but marked this special occasion with sacred music, acts of service, and prayers for peace attended by Bishop Azar and ELCJHL Education Office Staff. At Dar al-Kalima, the youth choir performed “We Shall Overcome” and the traditional Arabic carol “Laylat al Milad.” Students also reenacted the Christmas Story as told in the gospel of Luke. At the School of Hope in Ramallah, leadership students packed care packages of food and delivered them to needy families in the community with Pastor Rodney. They also held a special prayer for peace with all students and staff. And at ELS Beit Sahour, students performed songs and shared prayers for Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria.



Palestinian Teacher's Day

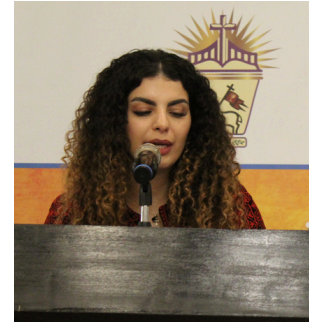


The Education Office organized special activities this month for Palestinian Teacher's Day, hosted by Talitha Kumi. The afternoon included the annual teacher's volleyball tournament, special games, and lunch. Teachers here in Palestine have been working extra hard in the past year to support students and each other through very difficult times and to make sure education continues. We pray this year for the teachers in Gaza who have died or are separated from their classrooms and students.

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GENDER JUSTICE

5th Annual Gender Justice Conference



In December the Gender Justice Ministry held their 5th Annual Conference on Gender Justice from a National and Religious Perspective. The 5th Anniversary of this important event fell during an extremely difficult time for women in Palestine. The conference gave special attention to the situation of women and girls in Gaza and to the role religious communities, government agencies, and aid groups can play in addressing the impacts of the current war, which currently represents the biggest threat to safety and justice for all. The conference outlined the findings of recent research into the deteriorating rights of women in children in Gaza due to the war and how we can be part of the solutions that create a more equal society and world.



Christmas Activities



The Gender Justice Ministry hosted a Christmas gathering for women from the five Palestinian congregations in Bethlehem. They also held a special evening for the congregation in Jordan. Coming together for fellowship and spiritual renewal in the midst of difficult times is a gift of the season.

Psychosocial Series



The Gender Justice Ministry's series of psychosocial activities continued this month with a lecture and activities in Ramallah led by Psychologist Louy Fawadleh. These activities for each congregation are intended to provide time for self-care and mental health support.



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ENVIRONMENTAL

International Conference for Environmental Justice in Palestine



This month the Environmental Education Center held their Annual Extraordinary International Conference for Environmental Justice in Palestine in Jericho. This conference brought together religious leaders, government officials, and environmental activists at a critical time for climate and environmental justice efforts in Palestine. The conference focused on the devastating impact war and occupation has had on nature, biodiversity, and other ecological considerations in Gaza, the West Bank, and Jerusalem, such as air and water pollution, destruction of trees and natural areas. The conference also included discussions about how to move forward with more environmental protections and solutions.



Meeting of Religious Leaders in Beit Jala



This month Bishop Azar, ELCJHL Pastors, and the EEC led a meeting on the role of churches and the Christian community in caring for creation, environmental and climate justice, and mechanisms for working together in the Holy Land in order to prioritize this work. The ecumenical meeting, held at Abraham's Herberge in Beit Jala, was attended by representatives for many local churches and was a great step toward focusing on our Christian responsibility toward environmental justice.

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DIAKONIA

Deaf Ministry Christmas Lunch

Members of the Deaf Ministry gathered this month for their Annual Christmas Lunch. Although it was not the typical celebratory event, it was still an important moment for fellowship and spiritual renewal among this special community. The Deaf Ministry has also been preparing candles and other items to sell as Christmas gifts in the area.



SOS Children's Village Visit



Youth Advent Worship



The Diaconal and Youth Ministries organized and hosted a special Advent Youth Worship at the Church of the Reformation. With current travel restrictions and roadblocks throughout the country, it is not easy for our youth to have frequent gatherings. It was a joy to have a full chapel of youth praying and worshipping together after many months apart.



The Diaconal and Education Ministries organized a day of activities for children from the SOS Children's Village in Bethlehem. Leadership students from the Lutheran Schools led activity stations for the children at the Diaconal Center in Beit Jala. We are grateful for the chance to spend time with these special children and provide a joyful afternoon amidst difficult times.



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BISHOP'S CORNER

Visits to Norway and Amman

Bishop Azar traveled to Norway for a service and reception marking the end of Bishop Kari Veiteberg's service as Bishop of the Oslo Diocese of the Church of Norway. While he was there he met with Presiding Bishop Olav Fyske Tveit and several other leaders in the Church of Norway. We are thankful for this fruitful weekend with our Norwegian siblings and for their partnership and prayers. The Bishop also met with King Abdullah II bin al-Hussein of Jordan and other Jordanian religious leaders to mark Christmas.



Christmas Greetings with the Latin Patriarch



Bishop Azar and Pastors Sally and Ashraf from Redeemer Lutheran Church in Jerusalem visited the Latin Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa on the occasion of Christmas to offer ecumenical greetings.

Solidarity Visits from ELCA and Hanover

Bishop Azar met with Rev. Gabi Aelabouni, ELCA Global Mission Desk Director for the MENA region during the ECLA solidarity visit to the Holy Land this month. Rev. Gabi also visited some of our ELCJHL schools and congregations. Bishop Ralf Meister of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hannover visited for the 4th Sunday of Advent. Bishop Meister met with Bishop Azar and the ELCJHL Pastors and worshiped with the congregation at Redeemer Lutheran in Jerusalem.



*The Evangelical Lutheran Church
in Jordan and the Holy Land*



الكنيسة الإنجيلية اللوثرية
في الأردن والأراضي المقدسة

Christmas Message 2024

Bishop Dr. Sani Ibrahim Azar

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land

Salaam, and peace to you in the name of our savior, Jesus Christ. I bring you solemn greetings from Jerusalem and the Holy Land of Jesus's birth, death, and resurrection. On behalf of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land and the Palestinian Christian community, I send you this message as we prepare for the birth of the Messiah in our little town of Bethlehem.

We are approaching another Christmas without peace in our land. Like God's people in the time of Jesus, we are suffering under the weight of state violence and control. With tens of thousands dead and millions displaced, Christmas in Bethlehem will once again pass without the typical tree lightings, scout marches, and other festivities. As the world prepares to celebrate, our hearts are with our people in Gaza, the West Bank, and Jerusalem. We feel the darkness that surrounded the first Christmas. Not a night of parades, celebrations, and Santa Claus, but of the holy family searching for refuge far from home.

Yet even in these dark days as we wait for the light to come, we find hope in the words of Paul in Hebrews, Chapter 13 Verse 8: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

As Palestinians, we have been facing violence and suffering for decades, and we do not know what will come next. The world will change, and our situation may become even more difficult. But Jesus Christ remains the same now and forever. This has been the message of our church for 170 years. Despite all the challenges we have faced, our mission through our congregations, our schools, and our ministries is to share this message with our people. As Palestinian Christians, this is what gives us sumud, steadfastness, in our lives and in our faith. Our faith is that Jesus, born in Bethlehem, will remain with us here forever.

The birth of Jesus changed the world. Jesus didn't wait for people to come to him. Rather, he came to them. With his birth into the world, with his ministry to his people, with his teachings and his miracles, he went to people where they were. Our mission as the Church is to go to the people where they are. In our schools, we bring the hope of education to the next generation. In our congregations, we share the promise of the gospel together. Through our Environmental Ministry, we strengthen our connection to our land and to God's creation. Through our Diaconal Ministry, we help provide food, housing, and medical care to our neighbors. Through our Gender Justice Ministry, we commit to a more equitable future.

*The Evangelical Lutheran Church
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**الكنيسة الإنجيلية اللوثرية
في الأردن والأراضي المقدسة**

For another year, Bethlehem faces Christmas without pilgrims. In the past, thousands have flocked to the city of Jesus's birth to witness the coming of the Christ child, as shepherds and wisemen once did. This year, like last year, the war has left Bethlehem empty of those who would come to seek him. But we, Palestinian Christians, remain. Though it becomes more difficult with every passing month, we hold tight to sumud as we continue our mission here. As Jesus came to his people here on Earth, we are going to our people through our ministry. In their faces, we see God's face, and in going to them we are seeking the Christ Child in Bethlehem again and again.

Despite everything, we have faith in what Paul tells us: that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Jesus was born here in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, and he is born again in our lives today, and he will remain with us forever. We believe that he who chose to be born in a humble cave to a people living in the shadow of empire will not forsake us. Jesus, who overcame death and the grave, gives us the hope of Christmas once again.

Amen.

Bishop Doctor Sani Ibrahim Azar

+Azar

