



# THE BISHOP'S REPORT

**BISHOP'S REPORT OF THE ELCJHL**

*Bishop Sani Ibrahim Azar*

# THE BISHOP'S REPORT FOR COCOP 2020

*Bishop Sani Ibrahim Azar*

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**“I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”**

## **Philippians 1:3-6**

Dear COCOP partners, local and international partners, coworkers in God's mission:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

It is sad that we cannot gather for our COCOP meetings in person this year. It is truly a highlight of the year when we all come together in Palestine to pray, to learn from each other, and to plan. This year is different from any other, as each of us in our own communities is striving to adapt to the new challenges posed by a global pandemic. So much has changed and is still changing. Two things have not changed, however: The love God has for us in Christ Jesus and the love we have for God and for our neighbors. Our mutual accompaniment of one another remains as strong as ever. We are holding you, our friends, in prayer here in the Holy Land, and we thank you for the prayers and support we continue to receive from you.

In this report I will summarize the state of our church, with special attention to the effect the COVID-19 virus has had on our communities.

## **CONGREGATIONAL LIFE**

Our congregations have been holding Sunday worship services online since early March. This has been a big change, but our pastors are rising to the challenge. Unfortunately, some of our older members do not have computer access and many households do not have reliable internet. Although visitation is not possible at this time, the pastors have been checking in on church members by telephone, especially those who cannot participate in online worship.

Largely because of the generosity of COCOP partners, we have been able to help some of our neediest families with financial assistance for housing and food. This need is

likely to increase, as tourism has completely stopped, leaving the West Bank in a severe economic crisis. Although the church faces severe economic challenges, we hope to continue to minister to our church families not only through sermons and prayers, but also by attending to their immediate physical needs.

The ongoing pandemic has of course halted many of our other congregational activities. Over the past year, Rev. Saliba Rishmawi has been organizing congregational trips to see many of the holy sites in this land. This has been enriching and very much appreciated by those who have participated. Although they have lived here their whole lives, the measures of occupation have kept many Christians from visiting these holy places. Unfortunately, the outings planned for this spring have been postponed due to the virus, but we hope they will continue in future months.

Other planned events which have been postponed, cancelled, or are uncertain due to the virus include: a Pentecost service in Jerusalem, gathering all of our congregations in one place; a whole church retreat in Jordan in July; and a pastors' retreat in Germany in August, by invitation of the Nordkirche.

## **CONGREGATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

There have been several changes in congregational leadership in the past year.

Samer Azar has been removed as a pastor of the ELCJHL. This was a decision of the ELCJHL Church Council after a long period of mediation between the congregation in Amman and Pastor Azar. After many attempts to come to an agreement, it was determined that it was no longer possible to work together. This was a very difficult decision, and one that is felt deeply by all of our pastors and congregations. Please hold Samer, his family, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in your prayers during this time of transition.

The Rev. Imad Haddad and his family have relocated to Amman, and Pastor Haddad now serves as pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd. He currently also serves the church in Ramallah, providing his online sermons for them as well.

The Rev. Fursan Zu'mot remains in Jerusalem at Redeemer Church. The Rev. Munther Isaac is serving both Bethlehem and Beit Sahour. Rev. Ashraf Tannous serves the church in Beit Jala. The Rev. Carrie Ballenger continues to serve the English-speaking congregation in Jerusalem.

The Rev. Dr. Victor Makari, who has worked with us by joint appointment from the PCUSA and the United Church of Christ for seven years already, has this year taken on a new role. The Rev. Makari is now formally recognized as “Special Advisor to the ELCJHL Administrative Office.” We are grateful for his ongoing service and for the mutual mission we share.

The Rev. Saïd Ailabouni, who serves as the ELCA Area Program Director for the Middle East and North Africa, has been transitioning his work from being Chicago-based to Jerusalem-based. His presence on the ground here among us has been greatly appreciated, and we look forward to having Saïd and Helen join us full-time in Jerusalem when the COVID-19 crisis is over.

## **ORDINATIONS**

In September 2019, Bishop Azar ordained Maria Leppakari at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem. The Rev. Dr. Leppakari serves as director of the Swedish Theological Institute in Jerusalem. She is the first woman ordained into Word and Sacrament ministry in the ELCJHL. (Deacon Adrainne Gray was ordained to Word and Service in September 2017.)

Pastoral Intern Rodny Said is assisting Pastor Isaac in Beit Sahour. We are very hopeful that Rodny’s ordination can go on as scheduled, on 29 June 2020 in Jerusalem.

Sally Azar will complete her master’s degree in theology in Summer 2020, and after that she will begin a 1.5-year pastoral internship with a congregation in Germany. We hope her ordination will take place sometime in 2022.

## **SPECIALIZED MINISTRIES**

The ELCJHL maintains several active ministries to underserved communities. You can read more details in the individual reports.

### **Women’s Desk**

Ms. Ranan Issa continues her excellent work with the Women’s Desk, coordinating various activities for women of all ages. Projects have included retreats, the Women’s Day of Prayer, a Christmas dinner, and events promoting women’s rights.

## **Deaf Ministry**

Pastor Fursan Zu'mot continues his work with the Deaf Christian community in Palestine, holding meetings, conferences, worship and Bible studies on a regular basis. The annual Christmas party is a favorite activity. Many other activities were planned but had to be postponed until after the COVID crisis. One such activity is a much-anticipated trip to Berlin to meet with a Deaf community there, sponsored by the Jerusalemsverein.

## **Youth Desk**

Pastor Ashraf Tannous continues his work with the youth of the various congregations. Unfortunately, many of the planned activities and travels this year were postponed due to Coronavirus.

## **DIACONAL MINISTRIES**

We are excited that our plans to expand our diaconal work continue. The Boarding Section at the church in Beit Jala will be the future home of a Diaconal Center, providing services for children, the elderly, women, and the hearing impaired. It is good to remember that our vulnerable populations continue to have needs, even as our attention is focused on the current pandemic.

Marc Falconer, a theology student from Scotland who is currently working with Sabeel Liberation Theology Center, has reached out to the ELCJHL to inquire about ordination as a deacon. He and the church are in a period of discernment about how this might fit into our plans to expand our diaconal work.

## **THE BAPTISMAL SITE AT BETHANY BEYOND THE JORDAN**

We are still looking for a long-term solution for staffing the church at the Baptismal Site in Jordan. We have had a series of short-term pastors serving with us over the past year. The Rev. Hans Kasch from Germany (EKD), Deacon Angleena Keizer of the Methodist Church in the UK, and the Rev. Knut Kittelsaa have all stepped in to fill this role. The Rev. Kittelsaa was forced to return home because of COVID-19 and will hopefully return when travel is again permitted. While we appreciate their service, we need to find a more stable solution for staffing the site.

We are grateful for the work of the Baptismal Site Task Force, which was formed in April 2019: Deacon Adrainne Gray (chairperson), the Rev. Victor Makari, Bassem Thabet, Jessica Lindberg Dik, Deacon Jonas Bodin, and the Rev. Hans Kasch.

## **THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SCHOOLS**

Our schools have been engaged in online learning since early March, when the West Bank went into isolation and the checkpoints were closed. We are thankful for our teachers, who have adapted quickly to this new way of teaching. Dr. Charlie Haddad will give a full picture of the state of the schools in his report.

One important change to note is that Principal Naseef Muallem has left his post at the Lutheran School of Hope in Ramallah. A committee led by the Rev. Imad Haddad is currently working on finding suitable candidates to fill this position

## **YAGM PROGRAM (ELCA)**

This past year we bade farewell to the Revs. Jeni and Colin Grangaard, who completed four years of service as coordinators of the ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) program. We are grateful for their faithful service, and for the many YAGM volunteers who came to serve in our schools and ministries under their guidance.

In August 2019, the Revs. Meghan and Gabi Aelabouni arrived to serve as the new YAGM program coordinators. They are joined by their children Ethan, Natalie, and Luke.

Sadly, because of COVID-19, this year's YAGM volunteers were called back to the US in March. We are thankful for our time working with Maddi Froiland, Sarah Gaiser, Megan Mong, Lyndsay Monsen, Olivia Slagle, and Anna Skare and are sorry they had to leave so suddenly.

The ELCA also has made the difficult decision not to send YAGM volunteers to any country for the 2020/2021 cycle. This means we will not have YAGM volunteers to help in our schools until Autumn 2021.

## **ELCJHL OFFICE STAFF**

In the Jerusalem office, we have seen a change in international staff. Deacon Adrainne Gray has taken a position with the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva as a

Communication Officer for Communion Relations. We thank Adrainne and Ben for their 4 years of service as communications coordinator and photographer for the ELCJHL.

The ELCA has appointed Hannah Johnsrud (who served as a YAGM with us in 2018-2019) as the new communications coordinator. Because of COVID-19, she is currently doing this role from the US. She will join us here in Jerusalem as soon as possible.

Also, due to the COVID-19 crisis, our German young adult volunteers returned home in March. We miss them, and again are very sorry they had to end their year of service early. We hope to welcome a new group in the fall.

## **OTHER ONGOING PROJECTS**

### **Bethlehem Building Project**

Mr. Garo Demergian has been appointed by Bishop Azar to develop a building project in Bethlehem. The ELCJHL holds a plot of land situated in a primary location in the city of Bethlehem, where pedestrian and commercial traffic is among the highest in the region. Current plans include constructing a commercial building that would be of service to both the community and the church and would secure a regular income. This construction plan is expected to be implemented in two phases:

Phase 1: Build underground parking with street level shops and a one floor multipurpose use space. This would require a minimum of USD 1,500,000. This phase will be completed within 18 months.

Phase 2: Raise another three floors of multipurpose use areas. This is estimated to cost another 1,500,000 USD.

### **Al Ma'mal Foundation**

In September 2019, the Al Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art signed a partnership agreement with the ELCJHL. Al Ma'mal will use the former Martin Luther School property to host a diversity of cultural events showcasing and celebrating the culture, history, and art of Palestine and other nations. This may include exhibitions, film screenings, talks, workshops, and artist residencies, among other possibilities.

## **Lutheran World Federation in Ramallah**

The Lutheran World Federation has signed an agreement to rent the old School of Hope in Ramallah. This space will be used as a school for vocational training. We are pleased that the building will continue to be a place for learning, and that we can work together with the LWF in this way.

## **Affordable Housing Project**

After many years in a holding pattern due to lack of Israeli building permits, the housing project that was planned for the Mount of Olives has been revamped and will now be an Affordable Housing Project. It will be built in Beit Hanina on land that is owned by the Lutheran World Federation. At the writing of this report, the committee for this project was expecting final approval to move ahead with construction.

## **ECUMENICAL RELATIONSHIPS**

### **Heads of Churches in Jerusalem**

The bishops and patriarchs in Jerusalem have been meeting regularly, about once every 6 weeks. This has been an important revival of local ecumenical relations. Through these regular meetings, we are improving our understanding of the issues faced by our respective churches. We also have released joint Christmas and Easter statements, as well as a statement on the US decision to no longer abide by the international law declaring settlements illegal. During the current health crisis, it has been a blessing that our ecumenical relationships are strong.

### **Anglican Church**

We continue to improve relations with the Anglican Church and seek to do more work cooperatively with the Anglican Diocese in Jerusalem. We congratulate the Diocese for the recent election of the Rev. Hosam Naoum as archbishop. The Rev. Naoum will succeed Archbishop Dawani in 2021.

### **BMW**

The ELCJHL is in active negotiations with the Berlin Missionswerk (BMW) for a solution to the issue of land ownership. We are grateful for this ongoing cooperation and partnership and hope to have a resolution in the near future.

## EAPPI

The most recent group of Ecumenical Accompaniers was forced to return to their home countries in March because of the COVID-19 virus. At this time, it is not known when a new group can begin. We continue to support the work of the EAPPI Programme and welcome their ongoing presence with us.

## ACT ALLIANCE / APF

### Membership

The membership of the ACT Palestine Forum consists of three national and 15 international members:

<b>National Members</b>	<b>International Members (with offices in Palestine)</b>	<b>International Members (without offices in Palestine)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land</li> <li>- Department of Service for Palestinian Refugees / Middle East Council of Churches (DSPR / MECC)</li> <li>- The East Jerusalem – Young Men Christian Association (EJ-YMCA)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Christian Aid (CA)</li> <li>- Dan Church Aid (DCA)</li> <li>- International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC)</li> <li>- Lutheran World Federation (LWF)</li> <li>- Norwegian Church Aid (NCA)</li> <li>- Church of Sweden (CoS)</li> <li>- Finn Church Aid (FCA)</li> <li>- Diakonia Sweden</li> <li>- ICCO-Cooperation</li> <li>- HEKS</li> <li>- Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Christian World Service – NZ</li> <li>- Act for Peace</li> <li>- Church World Service</li> <li>- Bread for the World</li> </ul>
		<p><b>Guests (ACT Non-Members)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (FELM)</li> <li>- Embrace the Middle East</li> <li>- Jerusalem Interchurch Center</li> <li>- Mennonite Central Committee</li> </ul>

The ELCJHL sees that it is important to increase the national membership in the APF-- particularly churches--as the ELCJHL is the only national church represented in the APF.

## **ACT Palestine Forum (APF) Convener**

The APF convener of last year was the Church of Sweden, and the IOCC was scheduled to be convener for this year. However, IOCC has decided to drop its membership in ACT Alliance and thus withdrew from the APF. As such, the ELCJHL has been elected as the convener for the APF while the YMCA will be the convener for next year.

## **Gender Justice Reference Group in the ACT Alliance**

Ms. Ranan Issa, the ELCJHL Women Desk Coordinator, was nominated to be a member of the ACT Global Reference Group on Gender Justice.

## **MENA Regional Forum**

As it was recently decided to form an ACT-MENA Regional Forum, ELCJHL has applied to be a full member in the MENA Regional Forum and in the Steering Committee. Because each forum must nominate a representative to the forum, the APF has decided to nominate the coordinator of the APF, Mr. George Stephan from DSPR.

# **CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION**

## **The Israeli Elections**

As of this writing (May 2020), Israel's leading opposition candidate, Benny Gantz, has agreed to form a unity government with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, ending a political deadlock that forced three elections in less than a year. Under this agreement, Netanyahu will lead the country for 18 months, and then allow Gantz to take over as prime minister. Gantz's Blue and White party won 33 seats while Netanyahu's Likud party won 36 seats, but neither party could form a majority coalition. Both parties refused to form a coalition with the Arab Unified List, which won 15 seats. This is a clear indication that both parties are adopting a discriminatory policy against Arabs in Israel and that peace plans are not part of their agenda. The Israeli left peace camp has completely vanished from the Israeli political arena.

This power-sharing deal will see Gantz take over from Netanyahu in September 2021. However, the Israeli Supreme Court is examining now if Netanyahu is able to lead the government, considering the corruption charges against him. A decision of the Supreme Court may lead to a fourth election.

## **Jerusalem under COVID-19**

During the COVID-19 crisis, discrimination against Palestinians living in East Jerusalem has been blatantly evident. The Jerusalem Municipality has not conducted any COVID-19 tests in East Jerusalem and has not enforced the lockdown in East Jerusalem neighborhoods, leading to increasing numbers of virus cases among Palestinians. The Palestinian Authority opened testing clinics to help stop the spread of the virus, but the Israeli government closed them. This has left the Palestinian Jerusalemites isolated and unprepared.

The most problematic and serious issue is with Palestinian Jerusalemites who hold Israeli travel documents (*laissez passer*) and who are attempting to come home from abroad. These are mostly students who want to return home because their universities have closed due to the COVID-19 virus. However, because they only possess travel documents and not passports, the Israeli government is refusing to allow them to return. Palestinian residents of Jerusalem are not considered Israeli, Palestinian, or Jordanian. They are considered stateless and are thus refused re-entry to their own country. Some from our congregation in Jerusalem are in this situation. The ELCJHL has been making every effort to get these young people special permits to allow them back to their families during these difficult times.

Furthermore, it seems Israel has taken advantage of this global crisis, with all media attention focused on COVID-19, to unilaterally implement the so-called "Deal of the Century." Plans have been put forward to annex the West Bank land, with strong support from right-wing factions. The annexation of West Bank lands would end any possibility of a peaceful agreement between Israel and Palestine. Annexation certainly means the end of the two-state solution, which we have actively promoted and worked for over several decades.

## **FUTURE OF COCOP PARTNERSHIPS**

At our last COCOP meeting in 2019, I invited the bishops of our partner churches to attend the next COCOP gathering. At that time, there was some conversation about whether this invitation was a strategy to receive greater financial assistance. I assured the group that this was not a strategic invitation, but rather comes from a desire to deepen our relationships. We want to increase awareness of our political situation, which we feel happens best when church leaders see it firsthand. I also feel it is time for us to reevaluate and renew our COCOP commitments.

From the perspective of the ELCJHL, our relationships with COCOP partners have developed to be more donor-driven than needs-driven. Church institutions are placing increasing demands on how funds should be used and on reporting and proposal requirements. This means we must spend more time focusing on special projects when we cannot sustain the daily workings of the church and the basic needs of our communities.

A meeting including church leadership would also be an opportunity to discuss the new challenges faced by the ELCJHL and other Palestinian NGOs, especially with regard to conditional funding and the newly required anti-terrorism clause. Moreover, it's important to establish clear and transparent communication and funding mechanisms, especially during emergency situations such as those we have recently faced.

For this reason, we wish to reconnect and renew our relationships by bringing bishops and other church leaders to widen the circle of discussion and see firsthand our political, economic, cultural, and spiritual needs.

Obviously, this meeting cannot happen this year. However, I would like to once again extend an invitation to the bishops of our partner churches to please consider coming to the next COCOP gathering. We would welcome them warmly and treasure the opportunity to introduce them to our churches, schools, ministries, and people.

On behalf of your sisters and brothers in Christ of the ELCJHL, I thank each of you for your prayers, advocacy, financial support, and mutual accompaniment.

This report respectfully submitted by your brother in Christ,

**BISHOP SANI IBRAHIM AZAR**