

Middle East Peacemaking: From Accompaniment to Advocacy

What is advocacy? To advocate is to plead the cause of another together with them and on their behalf. When the prophets addressed kings and priests on behalf of those suffering injustice, they were advocating.

Why does the ELCA do advocacy? Advocacy is one way we seek to love our neighbor in response to God's love given us in Jesus Christ. We care for, stand with, and serve our neighbor when we work for public and corporate policies that advance justice, peace, human dignity, and care for the earth.

For citizens of the United States, this often means advocating justice with and for those without power and voice in places where important political and economic decisions are being made. We are asked by our global companions to give voice to their concerns here in our own country, where policies and actions have worldwide consequences.

How does advocacy relate to Lutheran theology and ethics? As Lutheran Christians we believe we must answer God's call, as spoken by the Hebrew prophets and as embodied by Jesus Christ, to serve the needs of the poor and oppressed and to care for God's creation. We undertake this mission as part of our baptismal relationship with Christ.

How does the call to advocacy relate to the Israeli-Palestinian situation? Aware of continuing discord and suffering in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we as ELCA members "share with the Church of Jesus Christ in all times and places the calling to be peacemakers" (1995 ELCA social statement *For Peace in God's World*). Two aspects of this calling, proclaiming "the Gospel of God's final peace" and working for "earthly peace," are central to our efforts to educate ourselves and others and to urge a just earthly peace for both Israelis and Palestinians.

How does the ELCA's accompaniment of others around the world lead to advocacy? Both the Gospel and the teachings of Martin Luther impel us to treat all people of the world as neighbors to be known, loved, and served. The ELCA's commitment to global mission is an extension of this biblical and theological legacy. As we do ministry with and among our companions such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL), we strive also to understand their realities so that we can faithfully be their voices here in the United States. In addition, listening to our Palestinian Christian partners moves us to be in solidarity with all the people of the region as they strive for reconciliation—and to tell their stories to the church, the public, the government, and the world.

How do people in this church advocate for Middle East peace? The ELCA's advocacy in public policy is led by the Advocacy Department in the Church in Society program unit. The ELCA's advocacy with the federal government is coordinated by the ELCA Washington Office. In the Middle East peace-making arena, inter-unit cooperation equips churchwide and synod staff and congregation members to advocate for policies and positions advanced by the *Churchwide Strategy for Engagement in Israel and Palestine*, adopted by the 2005 Churchwide Assembly and reaffirmed by the 2007 Assembly.

Briefly, this strategy advocates a negotiated final status agreement that includes an independent and viable Palestinian state, recognition of Israel, normalized relations with neighboring Arab states, and a shared Jerusalem. Often such ELCA advocacy is conducted jointly with ecumenical and inter-religious partners, both at the national level and in grassroots action groups around the country.

How does advocacy work? Advocacy in the form of writing and speaking with government officials has contributed to such promising developments as the Ackerman-Boustany letter sent to Secretary of State Rice in November 2007. At least 135 representatives from both U. S. political parties signed this letter supporting the anticipated Annapolis peace conference and urging robust U.S. diplomacy both before and after the conference.

According to Churches for Middle East Peace, the letter “represents the first Jewish-Arab-led Congressional initiative on Israeli-Palestinian peace in years, if ever, and the significant number of signers exceeds all previous pro-peace efforts in the House.” In addition, ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson participates in the National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East, a group of faith leaders from the three Abrahamic traditions in the U.S. which seeks to “mobilize broad public support for active, fair and firm U.S. leadership in pursuit of Arab-Israeli-Palestinian peace” (*nili-mideastpeace.org*).

In the Holy Land, advocacy has taken on several forms. In recent years the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land has joined with Jewish, Muslim and other Christian leaders in the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, to “respect the life and dignity of all human beings, ... prevent religion from being used as a source of conflict, and instead serve the goals of just and comprehensive peace and reconciliation.” Another form of witness has been the nonviolent presence of World Council of Churches volunteer ecumenical companions, including ELCA members, who have protected Palestinian farmers from harassment and have calmed tensions between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians at border crossings.

What is distinctive about the ELCA’s advocacy for Israeli-Palestinian peace? Lutheran public advocacy is informed by our biblical and theological heritage of loving and serving the neighbor and of seeking justice and harmony among all of God’s creation. The Lutheran understanding of the theological paradox – that we are at the same time saved by God’s grace and yet still sinful – helps us to reach out to all involved in the Holy Land conflict. We can embrace a fair and lasting solution for both the Israelis who suffer violence and fear and the Palestinians who have lost land, had their economic livelihoods impeded, and their human rights violated.

More concretely, ELCA members report that members of Congress and State Department officials with whom they meet express gratitude for the unique insights we are able to convey by virtue of our close ties with Palestinian Christians - Christians who in turn serve as links to the Israeli Jewish and Palestinian Muslim communities and to the rest of the world.

How can I help?

Learn...

- Plan a weekend seminar about Palestinian Christians, including teleconferencing with an ELCJHL leader and an Israeli peace activist in the Holy Land
- Invite a speaker on ways Lutheran theology addresses connections between “end of the world” themes and the Holy Land

Pray...

- Use ELCA prayer and worship resources at elca.org/peacenotwalls/pray/
- Use Holy Land prayer and worship resources at elcjbh.org/resources/worship/

Act...

- Call or write your congressional representatives with information at elca.org/advocacy/
- Donate to the Holy Land Lutheran schools or Mount of Olives Housing Project at elca.org/giving

Accompany...

- Engage Muslims and Jews in your area by having a shared prayer service, speaker, or discussion
- Ask the Peace Not Walls team about how to meet Palestinian Christians here in the U.S.

For information and resources

Advocacy: elca.org/advocacy or contact washingtonoffice@elca.org; 202-783-7507

Peace Not Walls: elca.org/peacenotwalls/ or contact peacenotwalls@elca.org; 800-638-3522, ext. 6466

Inter-religious relations: elca.org/ecumenical/interreligious or contact erinfo@elca.org; 800/638-3522, ext. 2612

