



Middle East Network Newsletter

May 20, 2009



Christian leaders meet at Carter Center, seeking peace with justice in the Holy Land

A diverse group of Christian leaders, including the Rev. Mark S. Hanson, ELCA presiding bishop and president, Lutheran World Federation, and the Rev. Bruce H. Burnside, bishop ELCA South-Central Synod of Wisconsin, met at the Carter Center May 14-15 under the banner, "Towards a New

Christian Consensus: Peace with Justice in the Holy Land." The ELCA news story on the gathering appears below.

The meeting was an encouraging development, building on the work of organizations such as Churches for Middle East Peace which was represented there, to bring Christians together in pursuit of a just peace for Israelis and Palestinians.

At the conclusion of the conference, participants sent a short letter to President Obama supporting his efforts for a two-state solution and calling for the immediate opening of the Gaza borders.

ELCA NEWS SERVICE

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ELCA Bishops Join Middle East Meeting at Carter Center

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CHICAGO (ELCA) -- Two bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) were part of a diverse group of Christian leaders who pledged to President Barack Obama that they will "build constituencies that will advocate for a just political settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

The Christian leaders met privately May 14-15 at the Carter Center, Atlanta, and were hosted by former President Jimmy Carter, a longtime advocate for Middle East peace. The Christian leaders discussed strategies toward a resolution of the longstanding conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Among them was the Rev. Mark S. Hanson, ELCA presiding bishop, and the Rev. Bruce H. Burnside, bishop, ELCA South-Central Synod of Wisconsin, Madison. Burnside chairs the ELCA Conference of Bishops' Middle East concerns committee.



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In a May 15 letter to Obama -- in advance of his meeting this week with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu -- the Christian leaders said they heard much despair about the situation in the Middle East. But they said they "sense a rising hope."

"That hope is grounded in the growing consensus across the Christian community that supports a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the new leadership that you bring, both of which will make more possible a real, just and lasting two-state solution and an end to conflict in the region that upholds the security and freedom of both Israelis and Palestinians," the Christian leaders said in their letter.

The Christian leaders requested that Obama ask Netanyahu "to embrace the principle of a two-state solution." They expressed concern about Israeli settlements on Palestinian land and said they want the Gaza border to be opened, respecting humanitarian and security concerns. After meeting with Obama May 18, Netanyahu stopped short of embracing a Palestinian state.

Calling the meeting "valuable," Hanson told the ELCA News Service it was "a new experience, a different configuration, that I felt was encouraging." Christians from mainline denominations, evangelical churches, historic African-American churches and advocacy organizations were represented, he said.

Both Hanson and Burnside said an urgent concern for most in the meeting was that the possibility of a two-state solution seems to be fading.

Among topics discussed were human rights, Israeli and Palestinian security, peace and self-determination, concerns about Christian Zionism, a "shared" Jerusalem for all people, the separation barrier and Gaza. Hanson was one of the religious leaders designated to respond to remarks from Carter.

"I talked about what religious leaders can do. We need to organize, mobilize and increase our support for and pressure on the Obama Administration and the U.S. Congress to take an assertive leadership role now for a just peace," he said. Hanson said he emphasized the need for support of Palestinian Christians, discussed the "biblical story" that shapes Christian engagement in the Middle East, and called for renewed commitment to sustained national and international dialogue with Jews and Muslims.

"It was extraordinary to be included in such a diverse group," Burnside said. "President Carter's dynamic Christian faith, steeped in biblical understanding, and formed by his devotion to justice and human dignity, shaped this gathering and gave it momentum."

Burnside and Hanson were among 44 U.S. and Canadian Lutheran bishops who visited the Middle East in January to learn, build and renew partnerships, and advocate for peace. The ELCA has a detailed Middle East strategy for engagement in the region, implemented in its "Peace Not Walls" campaign.

To read the text of the Christian leaders' letter to President Obama, [click here](#).



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To read about the ELCA Peace Not Walls campaign, [click here](#).

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