

## Bishop Graham calls US Lutherans to act on Palestine

Americans have a duty to take action in helping bring peace to the Holy Land, according to Bishop Richard H. Graham “Most of us here are spared the hardest decisions and the greatest sacrifices related to Israel and Palestine,” he told a faith based gathering of Metro Washington, DC residents. “But what we can do here, we must do.”

Bishop Graham shared his impressions about the Bishops’ Academy held this past January in the Middle East in which 44 ELCA bishops and six Canadian Lutheran bishops took part. Describing Jewish settlements in the Palestinian countryside, he said he had pictured them as being a series of ragged little trailer parks scattered here and there. “Seeing them for the first time, the settlements looked very permanent,” he said. “A few are placed so as to be intentionally confrontational.”

One of the primary goals of the symposium, titled “Lutheran Witness in Palestine: Grace Under Pressure,” was to present the work of Palestinian Christians in the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem. About 90 people participated on March 29 at the Lutheran Church of the Reformation in WDC. Three-fourths came from Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) congregations. The rest cited 20 different affiliations, including other denominations and Muslim, ecumenical, interfaith and secular organizations.

Through the speakers, the participants learned how Lutherans provide service, schooling and advocacy through the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL), the Augusta Victoria Hospital and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in Jerusalem. Lutherans also lend support through ELCA statements and strategy relative to the Middle East.

The three speakers were Rev. Susan Wilder, director for Middle East policy in the ELCA Washington Office, Rev. Mark Brown, Lutheran World Federation representative in Geneva, and Rev. Richard Graham, Bishop of the Metropolitan Washington, DC Synod, ELCA. Dr. Peter Weinberger of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) was the respondent.

According to Bishop Graham, one of the more memorable encounters for the delegation occurred as they traveled by bus to a site east of Jerusalem to plant seedlings. When their vehicle passed a group of young boys, one of them hurled a shoe at it. The bus stopped and everyone got off, while the boys fled and hid. No one was hurt, but since it was the only meeting marked by hostility, the bishops and other participants talked about it as they prepared to dig holes in the hill.

At the same time, an Episcopal priest and spouse of one of the bishops quietly made his way to the boys with whom he managed to communicate despite the language barrier. When the priest returned, the youths were accompanying him. They helped pull the seedlings off the back of the truck for the bishops to plant on the nearby hill.



**Bishop Graham shows a photo of one of the young boys holding the seedling of an olive tree near Jerusalem.**

Later a dark-eyed, smiling boy, proud of his contributions to the tree planting project of the North Americans, held the small shoots of an olive tree in his hand.

Bishop Graham also recalled what he viewed as “the most enlightened commentary on the Palestinian situation” made by Pastor Mitri Raheb of Bethlehem, whom he called one of the great leaders of the Lutheran community in Palestine.

According to Bishop Graham, Pastor Raheb does not believe the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians will end soon, but for the sake of the future, Pastor Raheb said both sides of the conflict need to make the move “from being victims to being visionaries.”