

2009 Churchwide Assembly

Background for Memorial concerning "Peace Not Walls" Campaign¹

A "Churchwide Strategy for Engagement in Israel and Palestine" was adopted by the ELCA Church Council in April 2005. The ninth ELCA Churchwide Assembly, meeting subsequently in August 2005, urged "members, congregations, synods, the churchwide organization, and church-related agencies and institutions....to participate in the churchwide campaign for peace—Peace Not Walls: Stand for Justice in the Holy Land—by engaging in awareness-building, accompaniment, and advocacy activities..." The tenth ELCA Churchwide Assembly in 2007:

4. [called] upon the ELCA, in all of its expressions, to recommit itself to the Churchwide Strategy for Engagement in Israel and Palestine through awareness-building, accompaniment, and advocacy activities, including pilgrimage visits, sustained financial support, and other forms of economic stewardship; and
5. [called] upon the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to underscore the call for economic initiatives by this church and its members in the "Peace, Not Walls" campaign. Such initiatives, in consultation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, could include:
 - purchasing of products from Palestinian providers and
 - exploration of the feasibility of refusing to buy products produced in Israeli settlements. Also to be explored is the entire investment activity by this church. Examination of investments would exclude the option of divestiture.

The strategy is now in its fourth year of implementation through the Peace Not Walls (PNW) campaign. While there has been little overall political progress toward solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and thus much disappointment, the strategy has been the basis for realizing a number of notable accomplishments since the 2007 Churchwide Assembly, which can provide the basis for more activities in the coming months. Perhaps the most widely known event was the ELCA Conference of Bishops' academy held in the Holy Land in January 2009. Forty-five bishops from the ELCA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada participated in a week-long visit that included worship experiences and meetings in Jordan (for a portion of the group), Jerusalem, Israel, and the West Bank. The bishops initially shared their experiences via a blog and then prepared a statement at the end of the visit. Many of them have prepared separate reports and have shared with their synods and local communities what they saw and heard. A number of bishops who were unable to travel in January are planning a visit in late November.

In the area of awareness-building, Peace Not Walls has distributed more than 5,000 map cards, which outline the loss of Palestinian lands since 1948; has established Web pages with a variety of resources, such as handouts, videos, presentations, worship materials, and statements; has planned for a presence at the 2009 Lutheran Youth Gathering and Lutheran Youth Organization convention; and supported the development of a feature article on Christian Zionism in *The Lutheran* magazine. The 2008 video, "Peace Not Walls: Making a Difference in the Holy Land," has been distributed widely to synods and congregations.

In the area of accompaniment, regular visits have been made to the region to be with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) as well as to assist their leaders, members, and youth in visits to various locations and meetings in the United States. Six ELCA members have been selected for service with the ELCJHL as part of the Young Adults in Global Mission program. Three ELCA members have served with the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel and another is serving as its U.S. coordinator. To enhance our companions' economic well-being, the Peace Not Walls Web site facilitates the purchase of Palestinian products from Lutheran and other Christian ministries.

With respect to advocacy, the ELCA continues to be active in extensive ecumenical and interfaith work through organizations such as Churches for Middle East Peace, the National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East (NILI), and a Christian-Jewish dialogue group coordinated by the National Council of Churches and the American Jewish Committee. Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson has become more widely recognized for his leadership on Middle East issues through his involvement in NILI,

¹ From *2009 Pre-Assembly Report: Report of the Memorials Committee*, 23-24.

hosting a Christian-Muslim conversation with King Abdullah II of Jordan in April 2009, joining a meeting of Christian leaders with former President Jimmy Carter to encourage President Obama's efforts for a two-state solution, being appointed to the White House Task Force on inter-religious dialogue and cooperation, and being an organizer of an ecumenical letter to the president in June 2009 on the importance of Israeli-Palestinian peace following the President's address in Cairo, Egypt. At the synodical and local levels, a national database of ELCA members active in promoting Middle East peace is helping to raise awareness and is leading ecumenical and interreligious advocacy efforts.

The churchwide strategy calls for accompaniment of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL), The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and ecumenical and other partners as well as accompaniment of "Palestinians and Israelis in nonviolent efforts to end the occupation." It calls for "peace with justice in Israel and Palestine" as well as "for a viable, contiguous, independent Palestinian state and a secure Israel." The strategy encourages solidarity with both Israelis and Palestinians who share the strategy's goals.

Throughout its history, the ELCA has expressed solidarity with various peoples, but never with a nation state or government; hence, in this strategy, it does not express solidarity with either the State of Israel or the Palestinian Authority. Throughout its history, the ELCA has not aligned itself with specific national political movements and has raised serious questions about the legitimacy of some, especially those which foment hatred, exclusivity, and ethnic cleansing. The ELCA has not commented on the value of any political self-expression but has committed itself to confronting religious extremism in all its forms, including exclusivist religious claims that are ethnic in scope.

The ELCA strategy stresses the importance of working with those who seek nonviolent means to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as with those who share the goals of peace with justice and a commitment to peace as outlined in the strategy. The strategy has undertaken a number of efforts to create greater awareness of the dire situation of the neighbor or "other" in the conflict. Furthermore, this church has encouraged those in conflict to seek peaceful means that respect the dignity of all people and the integrity of all parties. To these ends, dialogue between Lutherans and Jews as well as Lutherans and Muslims are encouraged in order to engender awareness, mutual respect, and relationships of integrity. In addition, this church has addressed how Christian faith and love are central to relationships with the Jewish and Muslim communities.

As noted earlier, the strategy has both called for mutual understanding between Israelis and Palestinians and lauded efforts that seek to promote such understanding. Some examples of those efforts lifted up in various media include the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land (a collaborative effort of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders in the area) and the Parents Circle—Families Forum, which brings together the bereaved relatives of both Israelis and Palestinians killed in the conflict to move toward reconciliation rather than hatred or revenge.