



Saint Paul Area

# 'It's important to show up'

By Peter Rogness, bishop

Comedian Woody Allen has said that “90 percent of life is just showing up.”

I don't know if I've ever been in a group that has been thanked so often for simply showing up. The 39 bishops who participated in our annual Bishops' Academy in Israel and Palestine in January heard it again and again.

We traveled there because of the long-extended invitation of Munib Younan, bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. This church is small in numbers but deeply rooted in the area, engaging in ministry of vital and strategic importance in the midst of the events that constantly unfold in this region.

The trip was almost canceled as the fighting in Gaza broke out less than two weeks before our departure, but it went on as planned. Some members of the delegation chose to postpone their visit with the hope of forming another delegation at a later time.

Our primary purpose was to “accompany” the ELCJHL—to be with them, support them, learn from them ... in short, to show up.

The visit was more than simply lip service. Younan told a group of ecumenical guests at dinner one evening: “Accompaniment is different from solidarity. You can be in solidarity and still sleep in your own bed!” Our hosts were clearly worried that our own beds would be both tempting and justifiable as war broke out. The fact that we chose to come anyway turned out to be a powerful statement that was not lost on them.

The trip didn't make any of us foreign policy experts. We came as the church, not politicians. We worshiped, prayed, sang and shared bread. And we made a significant pas-

toral visit in deep ways. The leaders—pastors and ministry leaders—were buoyed to know people from North America were interested (five bishops from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada also traveled with us). When we spent time with the people—sharing meals in homes of congregational members or visiting the ELCJHL's schools and ministries—we heard this sobering comment frequently: “We didn't think anyone in America cared about Palestinians.”

The Palestinian Christians feel under siege. Because they are Palestinians, they endure the same restrictions on movement and living options as all Palestinians. If you aren't an Israeli citizen or a Jerusalem resident, movement through the checkpoints is problematic at best and sometimes forbidden.

Jerusalem has lost a substantial portion of its Christian population, and across the entire country Christians comprise only 1.5 percent of the population. This is an alarming drop in what had until recent years been a strong presence of all three Abrahamic faiths in this land. Though alarming, it is also the case that Christians are positioned to play a significant role in



**Bishop Peter Rogness visits with fifth-grade students at Dar Al-Kalima Lutheran School in Bethlehem.**

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## Flood relief volunteers learn valuable lessons

By Kate Olson

Seemingly dissimilar groups recently joined forces to work as a unified body in northeastern Iowa after record-breaking floods hit in June 2008.

The cooperation between the responding disaster-relief organizations was “a picture of what God hopes for the world,” said Bonnie Wilcox, pastor of Gustavus Adolphus Lutheran Church, St. Paul.

### Called to action

Wilcox felt called into action after learning of the record-breaking floods. Originally from Bremer County, Iowa, she felt particularly compassionate for families whose homes were damaged by floodwaters in Waverly and Cedar Falls. More than 26,000 homes were affected between the two cities.

Wilcox called the Northeastern Iowa Synod in Waverly to see how she could help. She learned that a handful of organizations had already begun assessing flood damage and needed volunteers to join cleanup efforts. She organized three weekend trips and gathered 25 volunteers from Gustavus Adolphus and three other congregations to travel to Bremer County to aid flood victims.

A variety of disaster-relief organizations were there to greet the volunteers when they arrived. The Center for Community Enhancement (CCE) at Wartburg College, Waverly, spearheaded local flood relief efforts.

The CCE gathered a group of recent Wartburg alumni and upper-class students to work with NECHAMA, the Jewish community's disaster response organiza-



Pastor Bonnie Wilcox with a group of volunteers near rural Plainfield, Iowa.

tion and 10 AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers. Together the groups canvassed Waverly to determine the extent and kinds of repairs that needed to be addressed.

“They were ready for us,” Wilcox said of CCE, NECHAMA and AmeriCorps.

### Hearing the stories

Not long into the cleanup process, the volunteers realized that their mission went beyond cleaning out basements, tearing down vinyl siding and removing asbestos.

“Our presence [in Bremer County] was important not just for the physical help we provided but also for the comfort that we could bring by listening to their stories and sharing a small part of their burdens,” said Ted Madison, flood relief volunteer and member of Gustavus Adolphus.

One of the families whose home and belongings were destroyed by the floodwaters was facing a particularly difficult set of challenges. The family has two teenage sons living with a debilitating disorder.

The boys require constant care, making it difficult for the family to prepare their home for demolition and to make plans for rebuilding. The family was especially glad to receive help from the volunteers. “They were very gracious,” Madison said.

The volunteers learned that the floods not only left physical damage in their wake but emotional damage as well. Wilcox reflected on the important lessons that her groups took home with them. “What did we discover? That listening to stories is as important as anything we cleaned out, picked up or moved away,” she said.

The flood relief experience was beneficial to victims and volunteers alike. Working together, residents in flood-affected areas and volunteers were able to make valuable connections and grow in faith. Madison said, “I was reminded how the spirit is among us constantly and working in the world.” □

*Olson is the synod's communications specialist.*

## 'Opening ourselves to the presence of the spirit in our neighbor'

By Janet Lunder Hanafin

**P**aul Erickson calls himself "The Connector." A pastor for 19 years, Erickson studied in Mexico and lived with a family who were leaders in the Base Christian Community movement, which, he explained, teaches that God engages with the poor and encourages believers to action. With his Mexican family, Erickson visited neighborhoods in Cuernavaca and participated in Bible study.

"I saw the power of the gospel in transforming people's lives," he said. "I wanted and needed to be part of a church that continued to move out and connect with people who have been disconnected from God."

### The changing mission field

In his new position as assistant to the bishop for evangelical mission, Erickson envisions "a wide variety of ministry opportunities as we seek to understand what God calls the church to be and do in these next generations." Much of his job is to help create strategies to connect congregations, people and organizations as they face what Stephen Bouman, director of Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission, calls the "global, interfaith, often binational" challenges of today's mission field.

Half a century ago, Lutheran missions were directed by national Lutheran church bodies. In the last decade, a changing pattern has emerged that involves established churches and synod leaders

combining forces to "plant" new congregations.

"How ministry takes shape will be different in different communities," Erickson said, adding that ministry involves spiritual, physical, educational and social elements. "It's looking at the whole person."

Partnerships include providing office space, as First Lutheran Church, St. Paul, does for Jennie Lightfoot, lay leader of One in the Spirit. "Her ministry vision is not to just build a Native American church, but to build a ministry presence to nourish the spiritual and social needs" of that community, Erickson said.

He also plans to build relationships with St. Paul's Hmong and Chinese worshipping communities.

Good mission strategy includes

using assets, including businesses, schools, nonprofit organizations, other churches and transit. As congregations and individuals envision mission, Erickson said he can provide connections to resources, "so they don't have to do all the ground-work themselves."

"It takes time to build relationships and trust," he said. "To engage with the lives of people in the community, one needs to go out into the community."

He recalled Peter leaving the boat and walking to Jesus when invited. The boat is an image of the church.

"Many of us are afraid, looking out at the storms around us. But Jesus invites us to get out of the boat, take some risks and try new ways of being the church," he said. "That's where we encounter Jesus in a new way, when we get out of our churches and open ourselves to the presence of the spirit in our neighbor." □

*Hanafin is a member of St. Michael's Lutheran Church, Roseville.*



### Celebrating Las Posadas

Pueblo de Fe Lutheran, a new mission start in the Saint Paul Area Synod, celebrated *Las Posadas*, a traditional Hispanic play depicting the long and difficult journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. Young members of Pueblo de Fe dressed in costume, sang Christmas carols and told the birth story.

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events as they unfold because of their international connections. As one Palestinian official said, “If all Christians leave, Europeans and Americans will simply forget about us.”

Perhaps this connection of Palestinian Christians with other Christian people around the world could be a significant factor in changing the current course of events. In that land, there are signs that Christians have facilitated such bridges. Younan is respected by Jewish, Muslim and Christian leaders alike. And locally, the Lutheran schools we visited are a mix of Christian and Muslim young people who have learned to live together well.

They respect one another’s different traditions and share a love of this land. They watch with both alarm and hope. In one discussion, after a student made a strong statement hostile to Israel, another student—a Muslim—was quick to respond, “No! They’re people too, just like us.” But the tension is real, and the life experiences are distant between Palestinian and Jew.

## **Raising awareness of the issues**

Though we went to visit the Palestinian Lutheran church, we didn’t spend time only among Palestinians. We also went for the purpose of raising our own awareness of the issues and positioning ourselves to better advocate for peace in that land. To those ends we had arranged a broad, balanced agenda.

We were hosted by an Israeli cabinet minister and the whole group—or parts of it—spent time with the ministries of foreign affairs, tourism and interior (which there means security, a huge issue). We met with the Chief Rabbinate of Jerusalem, overseen by two rabbis. We toured with Israeli

guides who educated us about settlements, large areas of housing the Israelis have established on the West Bank in areas designated for the Palestinians. Most of our group attended a Shabbat service at one of two local synagogues.

In addition to time with Palestinian congregations and schools, there were meetings with the prime minister of the Palestinian Authority and the chief of staff to President Mahmoud Abbas and another cabinet minister of the Palestinian Authority. We spoke with several mayors and city councils, and we traveled throughout the West Bank experiencing the power of the military checkpoints established even in Palestinian areas.

We were inspired by the group of Palestinians and Israelis who have lost family members to the violence and have committed themselves to working together to turn the land from violence and vengeance. And wreaths were laid at the graves of Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat, the two liberation fighters-turned-peacemakers who made one attempt at peace.

## **What did I bring home from the trip?**

First, we were told we strengthened the ministry of the church there, now and in the future. We came away deeply committed to the necessity of using our voice to insist on a political solution that gives respect and dignity to both peoples—two states, a shared Jerusalem, and an end to the occupation of all designated Palestinian areas, which include the West Bank and Gaza.

The U.S. has substantial influence in the area, and I choose to believe ours is a democracy that works well

and the voices of people of conscience and conviction can be heard by those who make our nation’s policy decisions on our behalf.

## **A holy land**

Finally, I came away convinced that this area is a holy land and reminded that God hears the prayers of people’s pain and people’s yearning for peace and justice. This is the land to which the Prince of Peace chose to come. It may be that it continues to be holy not only because it’s where world-changing events happened 2,000 years ago, but also because it continues to exist in the midst of crossfire and conflict.

Mitri Raheb, pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, reminded us that this land of Palestine has always been crisscrossed by superpowers—the Egyptians, Hittites (Turks), Assyrians, Persians and Europeans. In the eyes of Palestinians, the Jews who began streaming from around the world to establish Israel in 1948 are occupiers of their land, particularly in the West Bank, which was to have been Palestinian. Jewish people believe theirs is an equally historic claim to the land. Therein lies much of the depth of the conflict.

And God chose this peripheral land to be a holy place, just as God has always asserted divine presence with people on the margins.

Today the challenge of making human community whole is nowhere greater. This land is not simply a tourist destination—it’s the locale for divine drama. And in ways I still don’t fully understand, I think it’s important for us to show up. □

*Editor’s note:* Hard copies of this article are available. Contact Beth Helgen at [beth.helgen@spas-elca.org](mailto:beth.helgen@spas-elca.org) or call 651-224-4313.