



Office of the Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

January 23, 2009

Dear Friends,

As Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), I am writing to you – U.S. Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders – having recently returned from Israel-Palestine with bishops of the ELCA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. In order to strengthen relationships these bishops meet annually to engage in theological reflection and study. This January, the bishops met for their annual academy at the ministries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) and The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in Israel-Palestine. After two years of planning, and in spite of the escalation of violence in Gaza, we continued the trip as a sign of witness and as an expression of accompaniment with the ELCJHL, The LWF, and their ministries during this very difficult time.

The bishops and I witnessed ministry at holy sites and in sacred spaces that provided hope even as these were burdened by tensions in this anguished land. I met with religious and political leaders in Jordan, Israel, and the occupied Palestinian territories. Although meetings with Kadima party leader, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, and Likud party leader Benjamin Netanyahu were cancelled by government officials, we were able to meet with Israel's minister of interior, minister of tourism, deputy foreign minister, as well as the deputy mayor of Jerusalem. The bishops and I visited Yad Vashem, Israel's principal Holocaust memorial. I paused in prayer before the eternal flame of memory, and laid a wreath in the Hall of Remembrance. I was able to meet with the chief of staff for Palestinian Authority President, Mahmoud Abbas, Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, as well as the minister of tourism and the mayors of Bethlehem and Beit Sahour. I was inspired by meetings with Sheikh Tayseer Tamimi, Chief Justice of the Islamic Supreme Court, as well as with the Sephardic and Ashkenazi Chief Rabbis of the State of Israel, Schlomo Amar and Yona Metzger. I visited with other leaders who also participate in the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, where I was moved by their sense of urgency and commitment to build communities of peace.

The visit and experiences were framed by prayer and worship in Hebrew, Arabic, Greek and English and in such places as the site of Jesus' birth at the Church of the Nativity, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the six congregations of the ELCJHL. In all these places and so many more, I encountered the people and their living stories in this land. Daily my heart felt both heavy with the injustices we witnessed, and uplifted by the faithfulness and resilience of the people.

Part of the core of our Lutheran theology of the cross calls us as Lutheran-Christians to an authentic witness of human suffering, acts of costly discipleship, and sincere ways to care for our neighbors. The ELCA has a long-standing relationship with our Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters in the ELCJHL. This fidelity between Lutherans in the land dates back over a century, where churches, medical structures, community centers, and schools that serve both Christians and Muslims, signify the deep rootedness of relationships built on witness, discipleship, and care.

In light of these historic relationships with the ELCJHL and a resolve to seek peace with justice for all in the region, the ELCA is committed to raising awareness in our congregations of our Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters, engaging in advocacy on their behalf, accompanying these partners through their difficulties, and

enhancing our ecumenical and interfaith relationships. These four areas of awareness, advocacy, accompaniment and faith relationships, framed our trip. These four areas are so central to our ministry and approaches in the Holy Land, that I want to articulate a few points about them for you now.

First, accompaniment requires that the ELCA walks with its church partners. We walk with the ELCJHL and The LWF through support of humanitarian, community and peace-building efforts exemplified in specific ministries. These ministries include the numerous ELCJHL schools, Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem, the International Center in Bethlehem, as well as Abraham's House in Beit Jala, among many others.

Although it is within the Evangelical minority of the Christian minority within Palestinian society, the witness of the ELCJHL underscores for us the importance of being a politically active and public church engaged in all areas of conversation – ecumenical and interfaith – as well as social and political. The ELCJHL is likewise a central witness for bridge-building leadership in the region.

Second, building awareness is central to ELCA commitments. I personally encouraged all of the ELCA bishops to join me in the Holy Land, knowing that informed perspectives and first-hand experiences of both Israelis and Palestinians concerning the situation on the ground for both Israelis and Palestinians better equip this church to interpret and share this reality for Lutherans in North America. The bishops and I walked the streets of the Old City in Hebron with metal netting above our heads, installed to protect Palestinian residents from refuse thrown down by Israeli settlers living above their market. We passed through two checkpoints by the partitioned Tomb of the Patriarchs, a sacred space that attests to the historic and present violence of the context. One cannot begin to fully comprehend this situation without being in this place.

We were in a place at war. Our travels—although planned for two years—took place during the intensely violent period of Israel's aerial bombardment and ground invasion of Gaza and the continued rocket fire into Israel by Hamas. These events reshaped our experiences—the schedule, the commentaries, the feelings—in ways we could not foresee. While the bishops and I were always more than an hour's drive away from the Gaza Strip, events there dominated the news and were often the subject of our conversations with Palestinians and Israelis as well as amongst ourselves. These experiences produced in all of us a deeper sense of accompaniment with our partners and a greater sense of urgency in working toward peace with justice in the region.

I experienced vivid glimmers of hope in this anguished land. The joint witness of an Israeli and a Palestinian speaking as representatives of the Parents Circle – Families Forum called us to empathize with their sorrow in losing family members and to identify and challenge the cycle of violence engulfing this region; I and the bishops shared Shabbat worship at Kol Haneshema Synagogue, where the congregation prayed for peace in Arabic as well as Hebrew; we saw vibrant streets and markets and the irrepressible smiles of children.

Third, the area of advocacy is a central conviction I lift up to this church. Lutheran-Christians bring a conviction that good government is God's gift to us and God's instrument for pursuing the common good for all people. It is our calling as Christians to recognize this gift, and participate in it by reminding public officials of their role to be peace-builders. Lutherans have a long-standing presence in the region. Our public policy advocacy related to this conflict is rooted in the accompaniment of our partners in this context and the act of speaking on their behalf is itself an act of Christian discipleship. The ELCA continues to call for: Israel's withdrawal from the territories occupied by Israel since 1967, a shared Jerusalem, and full access to all holy sites. I am convinced that regional cooperation and equality between Israelis and Palestinians is the only viable way toward an enduring peace and security for both peoples. This equality must be buttressed by the lifting of restrictions on movement and access for Palestinians and the right to self-determination for all persons in the region.

Fourth, I continue as an ardent supporter of ecumenical and inter-religious relationships in the life of the ELCA. The world cries for peace with guidance and I pray faithfully that we can answer that cry together. The ELCA has long-standing ecumenical and inter-religious dialogues in multiple contexts, from local to international. We work with you to address and resolve conflict, from the stigmatization of our Muslim neighbors, to instances of anti-Semitic rhetoric in public media.

As Lutherans we have struggled with our own anti-Judaic and anti-Muslim heritage, grounded in the violent invectives found in the later writings of Martin Luther. Struggles of this kind are difficult, and I am aware that many Lutherans lived with a form of historical amnesia of this abhorrent part of our past. But this long struggle and deep reflection in Lutheran communities assist us to stand with you as agents of moral deliberation. Where topics of inter-religious concern are difficult, and where we do not agree, we as Lutheran-Christians are called to nurture authentic relationships that reflect the heart of a Christ-centered hope for the healing and restoration of human community. These relationships with you must seek justice and fairness, and never be stymied by an elusive appeal to balance that neutralizes both discourse and action. We are committed to being partners in faith with ecumenical and inter-religious neighbors, and we encourage these neighbors to seek such faithfulness in us as well.

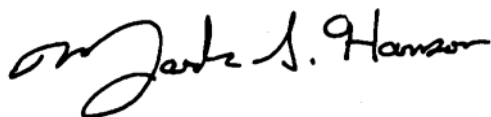
When I consider the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I encourage all ELCA bishops and Lutherans to exemplify a willingness to listen to and speak with our ecumenical and inter-religious partners. We encourage sensitivity with Jewish and Muslim partners that is forthright in seeking ways these communities can contribute to bringing a permanent cessation to violence and promote an end to the human toll that I believe should be abhorrent to all communities of faith.

Finally, in this time after Epiphany, our church celebrates the manifestation of God in the world. In this time, the in-breaking of God in our midst exemplifies the story of divine love for humankind. This is the story of healing and restorative light that compels us to not exist in shadow. I believe that through seeing in this way, we are better equipped to receive God's work through our hands for the sake of the healing of the nations.

On behalf of the bishops of the ELCA, I look forward to continuing our conversations and deepening our relationships with you. My personal hope is that as religious leaders our faithful and heartfelt assessments of the impasse in Israel-Palestine will lead us all to further discernment and collective action to help bring an end to this long-standing conflict.

I will be in contact with you in the coming weeks and months and encourage you to be in contact with me or my staff listed below with your thoughts, comments and questions.

In God's grace,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark S. Hanson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Rev. Mark S. Hanson
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