

Excerpts from News Reports Conference of Bishops Academy

"Midwest reality jolts Lutheran bishop," Star-Tribune, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Jeff Strickler, Jan. 12

Excerpt with Bishop Peter Rogness

The situation is "even more foreboding than it appears in pictures," (Rogness) wrote in an e-mail over the weekend. "Most [of the residents] agree that the extremes are growing and the voices of moderation are diminishing."

After encouraging talks with officials, Rogness' change of heart came from talking to citizens.

"When you start to talk to the people who have lived with this tension for such a long time, you can see them edging toward despair," he said. "The more you talk to them, the harder it is to remain hopeful."

He expounded in an e-mail sent from Bethlehem in the West Bank. "Life here is hard, not because of grinding poverty as I've encountered in other parts of the world, but because of grinding authority. Movement is increasingly difficult; there are more than 600 Israeli checkpoints in the West Bank."

"Lutherans trace Jesus' steps and find violence", Religion News Service, Michele Chabin, Jan. 16

Excerpts with Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson and National Bishop Susan Johnson

Johnson said she was particularly touched by the students at the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hope in Ramallah, on the West Bank.

"I listened to the stories of the children and was totally amazed by the articulate way they spoke and the depth of their knowledge and convictions."

The children, Johnson said, described their lives under Israeli rule, separated from Jerusalem and even some parts of the West Bank by the security barrier. Some expressed a desire to immigrate to a safer, quieter country, a growing trend among the Christian minority that make up less than 2 percent of the Israeli and Palestinian population.

"We have a deep commitment to the presence of Arab Christians in the Holy Land," Johnson said. "With every escalation of violence, those who can leave the country see this as an option. Our hope is that a just peace will halt this trend."

Hanson, who's also the president of the Lutheran World Federation, said his spiritual high point came during worship with Palestinian Lutheran Christians, "listening to the witness of their faith. As one Palestinian Christian said, 'the presence of the wall cannot finally

diminish my hope because the source of my hope is in Christ who has risen. That gives me power to confront the realities of occupation."

Another hopeful moment was seeing Christian and Muslim students from the Church of Hope School performing traditional Palestinian dances together.

"I only wish I could have seen Jewish students join them. If young people who are Jewish, Christian and Muslim can find a spirit of dance that does not deny the pain of suffering in war, but instead defies it, that becomes a witness of hope," Hanson said wistfully.

"Madison Lutheran bishop gets close-up view of Israel-Gaza," Wisconsin State Journal, Doug Erickson, Jan. 14
Excerpts with Bishop Bruce Burnside

Burnside said the ELCA considered canceling the trip or sending a smaller delegation but decided it was important to follow through with its original plans.

"We really believe that if ever there was a time the church should be here and stand up and be counted and make its position clear, this was the time," he said.

The ELCA has taken a very public stand against Israel's bombing of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

"Burnside called the church's position "not pro-Palestinian or anti-Israeli but pro-justice," adding "we stand on the side of the oppressed, which the Palestinian side in this conflict."

"No peace without justice," e-mail to Northern Illinois Synod, written by Bishop Gary Wollersheim

I believe that there will be continuing tension, hatred, conflict, and death in the Holy Land until there is justice for the Palestinian people. The conflict in Gaza is a stark example of the great disparity: 13 Israelis killed including 3 civilians and over 1200 Palestinians killed including around 400 children and 100 women.

But it is not only in Gaza that one sees the suffering of the Palestinian people, there is the omnipresent 400-mile and in some places 25-foot high Separation Wall. I just returned from the Holy Land and have seen the pain caused by the Wall: division of families, farmers robbed of their land, businesses destroyed, interference with one's ability to get medical care, and more. This wall has resulted in the loss of freedom, growth in unemployment, reduction in health and educational services, and the growing despair and anger of an increasingly oppressed people.

I am not advocating that we abandon our historical friendship with Israel. Nor do I suggest that the Israeli government does not have the right to provide for the safety and

security of its citizens. I only plead for justice for all people of the Holy Land which I believe is the only way to a lasting peace.

"Lutheran bishop reflects on Mideast tension," Rochester (Minn.) Post-Bulletin, Matt Russell, Jan. 23
Excerpts with Bishop Huck Usgaard

Question: In your blog, you mentioned a Palestinian high school student who said he hoped he'd still be alive in 10 years. You added that you thought there were probably many Israeli students who felt the same way. What effect do you think it has on those students to grow up with that mindset?

Answer: In one way, they are more mature than I certainly was at that age because of what they've lived through.

But what they have seen during a couple of the intifadas tanks coming into their town, houses being demolished, that type of thing they talk about some of the Israeli children and the fears of the rockets that were being fired out of Gaza. I think there are plenty of fears on both sides out of those children.

Question: With the history and geography being so complicated in the area, and with so many groups, why do you think it is important for people to better understand those intricacies?

What is happening over there is happening around the world. There is a growing diversity around the world and we need to make sure that we know how to know these people, to understand what makes us different and also understand what makes us the same so we can live together.

Differences can be a blessing. They don't have to be a cause for friction. So I think what is happening over there, we can learn from, and it can challenge us that there is a better way to deal with differences.

"Lutheran bishops reflect on Mideast pilgrimage," Toledo Blade, David Yonke, Jan. 24
Excerpts with Bishop Marcus Lohrmann

Pastor Mitri Raheb described how in many respects he has never been more pessimistic, yet he kept speaking about hope. Somebody asked, 'What gives you grounds for hope?' and his response was, 'Jesus.'

From my vantage point, that was a clear statement of faith where he was saying, 'We need to be here. We need to be making a witness that commits us to love our neighbors, and though the situation right now looks very, very discouraging, we're not going to give up hope.'

'Without a doubt, I'm still very much shaped by that experience,' Bishop Lohrmann said. 'It's easy to see it from a distance. It's easy to separate yourself from it even though you know there are matters of concern.'

Now, a little more than a week after returning to Ohio, he said he is wrestling with what he can do to help promote peace and justice in the Holy Land.

'I think it's going to have a radical, strong impact in terms of my concern for justice for everybody,' Bishop Lohrmann said.

"Some Lutheran bishops entered a war zone for ... peaceful engagement," Eau Claire (Wis.) Leader-Telegram, Alyssa Waters, Jan. 25
Excerpts with Bishop Duane Pederson

"We learned a lot about what life is like under occupation," Pederson said. "We saw the wall and what that does to the ordinary person. We had a chance to visit with ordinary church members."

"The struggles that that church has under Israeli occupation is of great concern for us," Pederson said. "We need to be more clear about our advocacy for ... peace, mercy and justice."

"ELCA visitors advocate for peace in Middle East," Appleton Post-Crescent, Cheryl Anderson, Jan. 27
Excerpts with Bishop James Justman

With a gate about 100 years down the road, Sabri Gharael Abu Sameer has to get permission every day from Israeli authorities just to leave his house.

"This is not about keeping Israel safe from suicide bombers," said Bishop James Justman, head of the East-Central Synod of Wisconsin. "That is to crush the spirit of people who have been on the land for a long time. I'm not taking sides in general because it's such a big mess and reminds me of the sadness when there are so many layers of hatred and violence and bad things that have happened. But there are so many stories like that, but this one stands out to me. Here's this grizzled old guy still in his house ... and he's surrounded by angry settlers."

'The heart and soul of the thoughtful people who wanted us there was to advocate for a just peace,' said Justman, who before the trip saw the border wall (erected by Israel after the outbreak of a Palestinian uprising in 2000) as a necessary evil. "But as I observed where the wall is and how it's being used, I would say now it's a strategic measure of apartheid."

"When I'm sitting in the basement of a local church, and there's warring factions that would rather destroy their own congregation than work it through, that's what's happening a million times over between the Palestinians and the Israelites ... Why not be the first

one to let go, to forgive, to have a positive word, to have hope, to have an attitude of let's work this through instead of getting stuck in the bitterness

"I really think you change the world one life at a time."

And there's this commentary:

"Salvation and Palestinian Propaganda," FrontPageMagazine.com, Mark D. Tooley, Institute for Religion and Democracy, Jan. 15 (commentary on the Middle East visit)

Ostensibly the visit was to examine Lutheran ministries among the Palestinians, although needless to say the number of Lutheran Palestinians is miniscule. If merely seeking ministry with overseas Lutherans, these globetrotting bishops could have visited much larger and more impoverished Lutheran communities in Tanzania, Namibia, or many other places in Africa.

But visiting poor African Lutherans would not have facilitated media attention and opportunities to denounce Israel. Hence, the North American Lutheran delegation, which included half of all the U.S. bishops of the 4.7 million Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), eagerly buzzed from one Palestinian photo op to the next, earnestly "praying" next to Israel's security wall and decrying Israel's supposed misdeeds.

Since Bishop Younan and his flock survive tenuously as a vulnerable minority among their Muslim neighbors, their parroting of Palestinian talking points is at least understandable as a survival mechanism. The eagerness of American bishops to mindlessly repeat those same predictable anti-Israel themes is indefensible. But perhaps Religious Left groupthink is as intimidating as Palestinian terror.