



Eastern Washington-Idaho

Synod supplement

# Pilgrimage to the Holy Land

Bishops travel to witness the Lutheran church in a struggling land

By Bishop Martin Wells

*This is written from notes I took during the trip to Jerusalem and the occupied Palestinian territories in January with 40 other ELCA bishops. Read more at [www.ewaidssynod.org](http://www.ewaidssynod.org).*

**W**hat you notice all night is the soft blue screen on the forward wall of each cabin section in the airplane. Over and over it tells you what used to be fascinating information: Distance to destination 2,906 miles; time to destination 4:59; local time at origin, interspersed with a graphic map of the globe and the location of your airplane on it.

But it's a long, long night. And despite real improvements in airplane seat design, sleep comes in fits and starts, if at all.

A woman dressed in red from her boots to her broad-brimmed hat has commandeered the two seats to the right and is sleeping with her head on my arm. Three moms with infants occupy the bulkhead row in front of me. One is traveling alone and the other two with spouses seated elsewhere. Each of them looks like a rabbinical school student, neatly put together until the late-night rounds of walking crying babies.

I'm taken with their prayer shawls, worn under a vest and showing at each shoulder and as fringe hanging below the jacket line. Altitude 34,047. The graphic map shows we're coming over the outer banks of England. The same map shows Tel Aviv and Jerusalem beyond—Jerusalem and Bethlehem, Israeli and Palestinian.

Gaza is occupied, as Israeli forces press inland to find the rocket-launching sites and smuggling tunnels. Stories of food shortages,



**Bishop Martin Wells stands at the Sea of Galilee.**

medical needs and sparse cooking fuel are hard to confirm, but logical in a war zone. Outside air temperature is minus 83.

So why am I here, writing in the dark?

I joked with my wife, Susan, that when we face the demanding Israeli security at Ben Gurion Airport, the most they'll be able to squeeze from me is that "We were invited." But that, really, is the truth: It's the only plausible explanation for why we're on this trip.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land has asked us to come in support of their ministry. They are a tiny church of Christians in a land of Jews and Muslims. Pressures from decades of old struggles for land and peace make it more and more difficult to sustain ministry in this land called "holy." Only 1.2 percent of the population in Jerusalem is Christian.

But it is also a pilgrimage, maybe not the same pilgrimage we would have made before Hamas broke the truce and resumed firing

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**The Pool of Siloam (John 9:11) ruins are inside the Old City.**



**The Rev. Susan Briehl enters the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.**

**Pilgrims walk along the shore of the Sea of Galilee.**



rudimentary missiles into Israel, but a pilgrimage nonetheless. It is the land of Jesus, and I haven't been here before.

I'm eager to see the terrain and smell the air and taste the water and feel the soil of this Holy Land. I've always wondered what the

Bible meant by "wilderness," having grown up in the wilderness of Alaska.

I understand the Jordan River is a trickle now, pooled mostly at Christian pilgrimage sites—on hard times just like so many watercourses in the world. And that Zion, Mount Zion, Jerusalem itself, is wedged between occupied territories to the east and fully developed Israel to the west. What of Jerusalem, the divided city, and its ancient ruins and modern culture?

These were our questions once the hostilities began after Christmas. Many of us felt, for the first time, the fear our adult children had for us, ones different and the same from those when we had said goodbye to them as they traveled abroad.

Local time at destination: 11:27 a.m. We're due in Jerusalem in four hours.

I've been wondering about this conflict. In reality it's less than 100 years old, not particularly long in historic terms. *The Lemon Tree*, a book

by Sandy Tolan, has filled in the parts of this history: Jewish diaspora; WW II and the horror of the Jewish Holocaust; Hungarian Jews seeking a homeland; England as the landlord in Palestine. It's unimaginable that England had 84,000

troops in the Holy Land in 1947.

A partition plan, proposed by the U.N. and agreed to by Israel, failed with the Arab states. Israel's War of Independence in 1948, then the Six Day War of 1967.

I was much too occupied by leaving for college to have noticed. Some lands occupied as a result of that war were never intended to be taken by Israel—but now they are in dispute.

And so it goes until today: some progress (Israel's withdrawal from Gaza) but equal setbacks (radicalization of parts of the Palestinian leadership, influences from Iran, Lebanon, Egypt, etc.).

I try to clear my mind of all the questions, all I don't know.

It will be enough if I am a witness: a witness to the Prince of Peace and Jesus' love for Jew and Arab; a witness for the plight of our small church in this land; and, maybe, even a witness for renewed hope if President Barack Obama can bring fresh focus to the region.

In biblical language a "witness" is said to be a martyr. I'm not a martyr, but I hope this trip can be for good. As we learn over and over again how this particular dispute drives other conflicts in the Middle East, it is more than ever time for attention.

But I have conflicting thoughts. Someone has said that you are not fully adult and human until you have contended with an issue that will not be solved in your lifetime. There's that, and then there is a sense that maybe this issue is always with us, like God used the lesson at the Tower of Babel, to teach the human family that when it thinks it's getting its act together, the Holy Land erupts again.

Holy Land as "humility land." Surely God is God and we are not.

Distance traveled: 3,480 miles. Or maybe none at all.

## The pilgrimage continues

# On the ground: Walking with our brothers and sisters

**W**e arrived at the Tel Aviv airport in the late afternoon and experienced a beautiful rosy sunset. But in Eastern Washington, we know that such a sunset means there's dirt in the air. It wasn't long before it occurred to me that we were only 40 miles north of Gaza. I prayed the lovely sunset wasn't caused by bombs lifting dust and death into the air. Already in our first minutes in Israel, we wept for this land.

- Redeemer Lutheran Church is located in the Old City of Jerusalem. It is stunningly beautiful, made from native limestone and designed in traditional cathedral style. Alongside the main nave is a chapel built by crusaders in the 11th century. I'm so proud to be represented in Jerusalem by this beautiful building and by the faithful ministry of our church. This ministry gives me a sense of presence at the heart of the faith.

- Except for the heavily armed soldiers on the streets, a visitor doesn't get much sense for the instability. The markets are full, noisy and rich with pungent smells of spices, olives and dried fruit.

We were blocked from two sites because of security concerns but never felt unsafe. The Palestinians we visited look tired and resigned, but we didn't see open fear. The concrete security wall that winds through much of the West Bank has proven effective in reducing suicide bombings. We're told that security checkpoints were easing off invasive searches to keep tensions from building during the Gaza bombing.

- Preparing for the trip, I wondered

what it would be like to stand in the places where Jesus walked, taught and prayed. Now there, I realize I don't know how to react. I think this is due to having imagined what these places looked like and then being a little confused to see how they actually looked.

The one site that matched pictures and my imagination was the so-called Wailing Wall, the western wall of the ancient temple. It was a genuine comfort to pray there, to witness the crevices stuffed with prayers. From the wall one can look across the valley to the Mount of Olives and see the thousands of above-ground graves lined up in expectation of the Messiah. Jerusalem is a place full of yearning.

- At the top of the Mount of Olives is Augusta Victoria Hospital, a Lutheran World Federation ministry. Built by the Kaiser during the early part of the 20th century, it has historically served the Palestinian community. Each day is a challenge for employees and patients who must pass through security checkpoints to get to it.

While we were there it was announced that a protracted tax lien adjudication had been settled and that the ministry was no longer under financial threat. Gifts from Lutherans all over the world will make it possible to build 90 houses on the property of the hospital, securing affordable housing for Christians in East Jerusalem.

- I caught the flu and spent two days sleeping on the floor of our nice hotel room because I couldn't get comfortable in the bed. Watching reruns of very bad American television on the Al Jazeera network made me wonder

how Americans are understood overseas. The world is impressed that we have elected an African-American as president.

One of the day excursions I missed was to Ramallah. Along the way the bus stopped at a site where our party was invited to join in planting olive trees. I'm sorry I missed this hopeful activity in a land where there is little hope.

- Most of us have seen or held the iconic olive-wood crèche sets made in the West Bank. One synod bishop managed to find a set that included a section of security wall blocking the wise men from adoring the Christ child. It was a revelation to me—because they were Arabs, the wise men would have been on the outside of the wall were Christ born today.

We visited the International Center, Bethlehem, a ministry of Christmas Lutheran, a tiny congregation with an imaginative leader. This retreat center/hotel/school/commercial center is the third largest employer in Bethlehem. The pastor is Mitri Raheb, and I recommend his book, *I Am a Palestinian Christian*.

- I'm glad to have made this trip though I don't think I gained much insight into the conflict. It does occur to me that this land makes a visitor very humble, which may be the most fitting response to such conflict at the heart of faith for three major religions. We met a beautiful Palestinian boy in Beit Sahour during our visit with his family, who are Muslims. There is no work for him and very little future. He hopes to receive a scholarship to an ELCA college, but his other choice is to join Hamas and become part of the problem.

*Lord, have mercy on this besieged land and her tired people—all her people, Jew and Christian and Muslim.* □

## 'The courage to go'

By Helga Jansons

I was asked to do something that was way out of my comfort zone. I did it, and now I can't stop talking about it.

I was given the opportunity to gather information about two rapidly expanding areas of the Tri-Cities in Washington (Richland, Kennewick and Pasco). Both Bishop Martin Wells and the Area Mission Strategy Team from the five local ELCA churches asked me to do some mission survey work in these expanding areas. They supported my ELCA mission development training in Chicago.

I hadn't thought of myself as a "shy" Lutheran, but it did take me a few weeks to get out to talk with people I'd never met about their community and their faith.

To begin with, I played it safe. I spoke with a pastor in a large evangelical church. Then I met with the fire chief who, in turn, referred me to a couple who invited me to their home and greeted me with a hot lunch. Next I talked with a woman working at an espresso stand.

Soon I developed a questionnaire and stood in shopping areas asking people for a minute of their time. Some gave up 10. Next, I worshiped in neighborhood churches to see what they offer and how they differ.

I was astonished by how many people wanted to talk about the church—or why they don't attend anymore. They shared what it was like to live in the area and what they thought the community needed.

It truly was a "learn as you go" experience. I didn't tell everyone that I was a pastor. I simply introduced myself and said that I represented the

Lutheran church.

I certainly gathered information. But more than that I learned about being "missional," how to connect with the community. Most of it can be transferred to your context.

### When your congregation or cluster wants to better engage your community:

- Drive around the neighborhood with people who know it. Ask about what is going on, what God might be up to.
- Ask your church council or evangelism committee what they would like to know about the community and who they would suggest you talk to.
- Print business cards and brochures of the churches.
- Prepare a brief statement about why God is central to your life (someone may ask you) and check it out with a pastor (even if you are one), as well as a friendly atheist.
- Be clear about how you would describe the Lutheran church. Know your congregation's mission statement and guiding principles.
- Know your favorite Bible verses and the stories that inform your faith.
- Create a questionnaire. Make sure to include "How could the Lutheran church serve this community?"
- Pray for God's guidance for where to go and what to say.
- Ask people who want the church to grow to visit other churches and report back.
- Invite an unchurched friend to worship with you and give you feedback.

### Here's what you might discover:

- If we don't try to convince others of what to believe and we aren't trying to get them to come to church, people

are eager to talk about their faith and church experience.

- People recognize those who are community-minded.
- What most people say they want in worship is to experience God's presence and to feel a sense of reverence.
- People want to be accepted as they are in a church community and want the church to be there for them when life is hard—divorce, illness or tragedy.
- Many nontraditional churches don't have rituals or recite the Lord's Prayer, yet people want both in worship when they are explained well.
- Family is what most people say brings them joy in life.
- Many churches that have effectively reached out to the community and demonstrate hospitality have been trained to do so. Members practice in places like the mall and then they evaluate how it's going.
- In some churches people feel comfortable sharing their faith and do so without being intrusive. I was told, "A Christian reads the Bible, a non-Christian reads us."

I truly believe the world needs what we have to offer. Those who grew up in the Lutheran church may not realize what we have.

We can learn ways of reaching out to people that don't involve "imposing" our faith. We can be curious about their lives, their faith and their opinions about the community.

It used to be that people first believed and then belonged to a church. Mission developers now find that people want to belong first—and then might come to believe in God as we share our faith. Are you ready and willing to talk about the God who is central to your life? □

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