

Lutheran Supplement, June 2009

God's beloved People,

In January 2009 Susan and I joined forty other ELCA bishops and spouses on a trip to Israel. We went at the invitation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) and their bishop, Munib Younan. They had asked for deeper accompaniment during the days of continuing unrest in the Middle East. We were in Israel during the assault on Gaza. Our ten days included visits with Israeli officials, the two presiding rabbis of Jerusalem, Palestinian families, and the pastors of the ELCJHL. Below are some of my impressions from the trip. The more complete account can be found on the Bishop's page of our synod web site, www.ewaidsynod.org.

- We arrived at the Tel Aviv airport in the late afternoon and experienced a beautiful rose-colored sunset. Those of us from Eastern Washington know that a rosy sunset means there's dirt in the air and so 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, on the first day, in the first minutes in Israel, we wept for this holy and conflicted land.
- Redeemer Lutheran Church is located in the Old City of Jerusalem. It is a stunningly beautiful church made from the native limestone and designed in the 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! Somehow having this ministry "inside" the wall of old Jerusalem gives me a sense of presence at the heart of the faith.
- Except for the heavily armed soldiers on the streets one doesn't get much sense for the instability of this land. The markets were 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 looked tired and resigned but we didn't see open fear. The concrete security wall that meanders through much of the West Bank has proven effective in reducing suicide bombings. We were told that security checkpoints were easing off on invasive searches to keep tensions from building during the Gaza bombing.
- In preparation for the trip I wondered what it would be like to stand in the places where Jesus walked, taught, and prayed. Once there I realized I didn't know how to react. I think this was 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 of healing. The hospital was built by the Kaiser during the early part of the 20th century and has historically served the Palestinian community. Each day is a challenge for employees and patients who must pass through security checkpoints to get to the hospital. 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 during our visit and spent two days sleeping on the floor of our nice hotel room because I couldn't get comfortable in the bed. Watching re-runs of very bad American television on the Aljezeera network made me wonder how Americans are understood overseas. The world is impressed that we have elected a black man 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 was sorry to miss this hopeful activity in a land where there is little hope otherwise.
- Most of us have seen or held the iconic olive-wood crèche sets made in this land. One 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 new revelation to me that, because they were Arabs, the wise men would have been on the outside of the wall were Christ born today. It was in Bethlehem that we visited the International Center, Bethlehem (ICB), a ministry of Christmas Lutheran Church, 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 very 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 one very humble and that that 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 Sahoor during our visit with his family. 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, Jew and Arab!