



The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL)

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Fifty years of living witness and creative *diakonia*

Anniversary worship service, May 17, 2009
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, Jerusalem

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The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you evermore.

“Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:7-8).

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

One morning Napoleon Bonaparte stood on the balcony of the Louvre palace holding his son, the crown prince, in his arms and declared to the people, “The future is mine.” After many years, the well known French poet Victor Hugo answered this despondent emperor in a poem: “No! The future is God’s.”

Years passed and Bonaparte was deposed from his office and spent the rest of his life as a prisoner on St. Helene Isle, reviewing his past and present, his deeds and wars, his victories and losses by saying, “What I have established by the sword and the canon has collapsed. But what you, Jesus, the Nazarene, established by love and sacrifice, will endure forever.”

This was the introduction of the sermon of the first president of the synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, the late Pastor Shadeed Baz Haddad, at the first session of the synod in 1959. Today we stand with those who preceded us and those who are still working with us, to celebrate what the early missionaries established 170 years ago by love and sacrifice.

We stand with those who united the church by establishing the synod and with those who established the Arab bishopric in 1979. We stand with them in humility, yet are proud to know that the Holy Spirit is working in our church. We stand with Propst Weiggelt, who was the spiritual leader of this church at that time. At the first session of the synod he said, “For more than one hundred and thirty years, Arab and German pastors and other lay members in the Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Schools, worked together inspired by the word of God and his Spirit from the spiritual side, and the moral and financial support given by *Jerusalemsverein* in Berlin.”

This support was widened by the theology of accompaniment and by establishing the Coordinating Committee of Overseas Partners known as COCOP. We have developed church-to-church relationships with these partners. Our partner churches in Finland, Sweden, Germany, Norway, U.S.A., Canada and the LWF have signed official accompaniment agreements. We thank all our partners, local and abroad, who have helped us to become a strong Arab Palestinian evangelical Lutheran church that preaches the word of God and serves God’s people. I agree with the poet Hugo when he says, “The future is God’s.” For we say, “The future is for every living Church that serves with love and sacrifice. The future is for every Church where Christ never gets old in it, but continually revives her, for “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

It is said that a famous evangelist asked a ministry candidate about when he decided to study theology. The student answered, “It was when I heard a sermon in the school church.” The evangelist asked

him, “Who was the preacher?” The student said, “I do not remember his name. All that I know is that the preacher showed me the face of Jesus Christ.”

For this reason, if you asked me today for a list of the names of those in the cloud of witnesses who labored to establish this church I would tell you, “I do not remember all their names. I only remember that they have shown us the face of Jesus Christ. They did not leave us anything except a living example and a renewed inspiration.” We are able to be a church and to serve today because of their living witness and creative *diakonia*. For ever since the evangelical movement began in the Middle East in the 19th century, it has borne good fruit.

We also do not remember all the names of those who served the evangelical family, whether in the Holy Land or the whole Middle East. But what we do know is that God sent them to us as an example and an inspiration. Their message was very clear. They revived the word of God in the hearts of the local people. They established schools and universities. They translated the Bible into Arabic. They strengthened the awareness of being responsible for the land on which we live. They initiated the ecumenical movement. They built and established churches. They created social and medical ministries.

And since the establishment of our synod on May 17, 1959, the ELCJHL has continuously flourished. Our work has increased. Our structure is better organized. We have established churches in Ramallah and Amman. We respond to the needs of society by establishing services that implant the Christian in their land and help them to responsibly continue to be a living witness. I am not in a position to count our work or boast, but I would say that this work attests to the fact that our Lord has sent his Holy Spirit to be among us. In spite of our mistakes and shortcomings, our risen Lord has made us a living church with a living witness and creative *diakonia*.

Thirty years ago, the Arab evangelical Lutheran bishopric was established. Our synod unanimously voted for this blessed, historic decision. All our partner churches fully supported this. The first Arab Palestinian bishop was the late Bishop David Haddad and the second was the late Bishop Naim Nasser, both of whom handed on to me what they received. At my 1998 consecration, I declared the words of St. Paul: “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel. It is the power of God for salvation for everyone” (Romans 1:16). I publicly declared that my mission is the mission of my church; that is, to proclaim the good news, to celebrate the sacraments, to educate the generations from the womb to the tomb, to work for the unity of the church and to work for reconciliation among the people. I continue to stand with our church, its congregations, its schools and its educational, cultural, diaconal and social institutions in asking God, “Lord, continue to make of us good examples by being living witnesses, renewing inspiration and offering vital *diakonia*, so that we would continue to assure everyone that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, the church of the resurrection teaches us that the strength of the Christian church is not in its numbers nor its political power nor its history nor its buildings or property nor its bank accounts. The strength of the church is always in its vital proclamation of the Gospel of salvation and its constructive, positive impact on its society. The ELCJHL – like all churches in the Holy Land and the whole Middle East – is small in number. Its strength is that it made way for the Holy Spirit to work in us, to guide us and to lead us, allowing us to become the local expression of worldwide evangelical Lutheranism.

The love of God works in our church, and so we serve human beings regardless of religion, gender, doctrine, political or religious affiliation. The love of Christ is reflected in us as we serve human beings for the sake of humanity. Our living witness and creative *diakonia* have shaped this church to be an instrument for peace based on justice, a ministry of reconciliation, a defender of human rights including women’s rights, initiators of dialogue among religions, educators of the coming generations and apostles of love. For this reason, I say our church has taken its pulpit to the streets, being a living witness in the streets of our land, thus responding to God’s call for a vital *diakonia*.

Arab Christianity has existed since the first Pentecost. Our church, as part of the evangelical family, is an integral part of this ongoing Arab witness. If you read the history of our church, you observe that it has remained steadfast in the midst of political and economic turbulence. To that I respond, simply, that “God has put us here for a holy commission.” The secret of our existence is our diversity, which serves as a living example and the source of inspiration. God calls all churches and Christians to be one, to work together, to

witness together, to heal together and to work for justice together. So, the ELCJHL continues to extend its hand to all our brothers and sisters in the churches of Jerusalem and tells them, God calls us to serve with you, to witness with you and to pray and carry the message of love with you, in order that the banner of Christ will be over our land. To our sisters and brothers that live with us and serve the expatriate Christians in Jerusalem, we tell you that our church is at your service, to proclaim the message of Christ. And we tell our evangelical brothers and sisters in the Middle East, and the other church families in the MECC, that God has called us for a witness of love together, for the world is waiting to hear from us a single voice speaking a common word of love, justice and service.

We also want to tell the representatives of our partner churches in the world that the ELCJHL wants to carry with you the message of love and join you in our Christian vocations. We will work with you locally and globally for social justice, for gender balance and for addressing such problems as climate change. We collaborate to oppose all forms of extremism, xenophobia, anti-semitism, Islamophobia or Christianophobia. Our church readily works with you, for we believe that this is an integral part of its living witness and creative *diakonia*. But allow me, a resident of Jerusalem, to remind you not to forget the Arab Christians in Jerusalem, whose numbers are declining. For what is Jerusalem without those who first carried Christ's message to the world 2,000 years ago?

The church of Christ does not live in shrines but in its people. For this reason, our church hears him when he says, "He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18).

Christ's message was one of peace and justice. Our church has existed amidst political and economic difficulties, leading many of our members to be displaced and some to emigrate. Our church suffers with all who suffer. We see religious fanaticism and political extremism growing, for the common denominator between both the Israeli and the Palestinian peoples is fear. Our church is afraid that there are those who want to shift the political conflict into religious war. We are afraid that this fear, insecurity and continuous denial of the other results in more hatred, more bloodshed, more violence. But our church wants to be a church with a prophetic vocation. It wants to heal the broken hearted, to call for release for the prisoners and restoration of sight for the blind. It wants to continue, with God's grace, to work for justice and reconciliation, peace, forgiveness and coexistence with shared responsibility. For this reason, we say to all politicians at this celebration, our nations are tired. It is time to implement justice in which both peoples can live in their own states with security, freedom, peace and reconciliation. It is time that both people comprehend that their security and freedom are symbiotic. It is time to hear the position, articulated by the Patriarchs and Heads of Local Churches in Jerusalem, that calls for a Jerusalem that is shared between three religions and two nations, Palestine and Israel. Our church will work with all people of good conscience for the Christian, Muslim and Jewish and together seek the common values that allow for justice, peace, forgiveness and the acceptance of the other. Our church desires that future generations may live in freedom and security, and that this Holy Land will be a lighthouse for all. Now is the *kairos* time for justice and peace in Jerusalem.

Hugo said, "The future is God's." This saying comes right from God through the Holy Spirit working in us. It calls us to apostolic vocation to, as Jesus succinctly described it, love God and love the neighbor as yourself. If we heed our savior's call, then our work will continue to be a living example and continuous inspiration, a living witness and creative *diakonia*.

May be the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.