



Joint Statement from the ELCJHL and ELCIC

From January 21–28, 2024, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) and its Bishop, the Rev. Dr. Ibrahim Azar, were honored to host the Rev. Dr. Susan Johnson, Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC), for a visit of solidarity and support. We, the heads of these two churches, have enjoyed a long and faithful relationship not only through our shared membership in the Lutheran World Federation, but also as direct church partners for 25 years. We are grateful to have been able to spend this time together in Jerusalem, Beit Jala, Bethlehem, and Ramallah to hear from representatives of the ELCJHL's schools and ministries and staff from Augusta Victoria Hospital, and also to speak with local people on the ground about the current realities and challenges faced by the Palestinian people over these past few months. We also took part together in an ecumenical prayer service hosted by the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem as part of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, joining Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians in lifting prayers for this troubled land and for the world.

As part of the Indigenous Christian community of the Holy Land, the ELCJHL plays a vital role in the communities in which the church has a presence. The schools, environmental and gender justice programs, and diaconal center of the church provide essential educational and social services to the whole community, not only to Christians. Through the Lutheran World Federation, Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem offers specialized cancer and kidney care for Palestinians in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza that is not otherwise accessible. Despite being a small minority of the population, the Christian church is deeply embedded in Palestinian society and embodies the gospel of Jesus Christ through its presence for its neighbors.

However, this Christian presence is now threatened in an unprecedented way: by the ongoing 75-plus year occupation of Palestine by the state of Israel; by increased anti-Christian activity on the part of extremist groups who want a Jewish-only state; and by restricted freedom of worship for local Christians and Muslims in Jerusalem, which is meant to be a multi-faith city where access to worship is provided to all. The Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, an ecumenical group representing the various local Christian churches, has been reporting for several years on these pressures, which have also fueled emigration of Christian families that has continued to shrink the Christian population. Many church leaders now fear that if conditions do not change, the local church—which has embodied a continued Christian presence in the Holy Land since the time of Jesus—will vanish.

These fears have only increased due to the current devastating trauma being inflicted upon Gaza and the West Bank since Oct. 7. The Israeli government's actions of widespread retribution and collective punishment have included the bombing of churches and Christian hospitals and centers in Gaza, inflicting death on more than 25,000 people—most of them children and women. At the same time, Palestinians in the West Bank have faced severe punishment as well: checkpoints have been tightly closed, preventing people from going to work, to visit family, to harvest olives, or to seek medical care. Military and settler incursions in

the West Bank have killed hundreds and destroyed farms and property. The complete absence of tourism and pilgrimage has decimated the income of countless families who work in this industry, in a time when the economy was just beginning to recover from the COVID pandemic.

The physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual effects of this trauma cannot be overstated. During our visits this week, we heard from families who have lost loved ones; children who have reverted to bed-wetting and who cannot sleep alone due to fear; young people who increasingly believe it is pointless to study or prepare for the future, because they will not survive to see adulthood. Poverty, hunger, depression/anxiety, and domestic violence are all on the rise.

In the midst of this crisis, the ELCJHL and other churches are doing all that they can, with the resources they have, to offer aid and comfort to their neighbors; but these resources are also now being stretched thin, due to the pressures on the economy and the pulling back of some international church and government partners as a response to Oct. 7—despite the fact that the vast majority of Palestinians, including a Christian community long committed to nonviolence, played no role in these events. Many Christian families, if they have the means and ability, are now planning to leave their beloved homeland and to emigrate to places where they can live in safety and with the dignity that all human beings deserve, but which is increasingly difficult to find in the Holy Land. As previously stated, this will have a further negative effect on Christian presence in Palestine and Israel, which would be not only a spiritual loss to the global church but a tangible loss to the communities who rely on the church’s ministries.

As heartbreaking as it has been to see and hear this witness, this solidarity visit has been crucial to gaining a deeper understanding of how these times are affecting ordinary Palestinians—and particularly our beloved siblings in Christ. As the apostle Paul reminds us, the calling for the church is to be in solidarity with one another in difficult times; for as fellow members of the body of Christ, “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26).

In that Spirit, we—Bishop Azar and Bishop Johnson—call on our churches to remain in Christian solidarity and accompaniment with one another. Bishop Azar and the ELCJHL extend our deepest gratitude, not only to Bishop Johnson for this visit, but to the whole ELCIC for the steadfast support and prayer we have received. Likewise, Bishop Johnson and the ELCIC stand ready to continue this support: through advocacy within our own Canadian context toward our government’s actions to alleviate the suffering and injustice faced by Palestinians, including following the expectations recently laid out by the International Court of Justice to prevent genocide in Gaza; and through financial support for the ELCJHL appeal that will enable the church to continue to carry out its vital ministries at this time. Our mutual prayer is that the Holy Spirit will continue to strengthen the ELCJHL and Palestinian Christian community; and that the Spirit will lead our two churches into deeper love and care for one another, for the sake of the Gospel that is good news of God’s justice and care for all vulnerable and oppressed peoples, for the sake of the wholeness of the world.



Bishop Susan Johnson,
National Bishop of the Evangelical
Lutheran Church in Canada



Bishop Dr. Sani Ibrahim Azar,
Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church
in Jordan and the Holy Land