

Macedonian Call from Palestinian Christians (that you haven't seen on CNN)

Colleagues,

Today's posting is quite lengthy. So I'm sending it in three parts. This is part #1, the first of the three pieces I rec'd yesterday from Kit Kleinhans and Fred Strickert, one-time Seminex students and now theology profs at Wartburg College (ELCA) in Waverly, Iowa. Even in the face of this "apocalypse now,"

Peace & Joy!

Ed

Editor Note: All three parts that Ed refers to have been combined onto this one web page.

Letter from Bishop of Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan [ELCJ] Jerusalem on October 25th, 2000

To All our overseas partners

Subject: Our current situation.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Salaam and grace to you from a troubled Jerusalem / Palestine in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Through your good persons, I want to greet all your churches/constituencies with

Gods blessings. Please do share this letter with them in order that you all together can act upon it.

I herewith would like to update you about the recent occurrences / developments as regards to the difficult crisis we are currently passing through.

1. The recent Arab Leaders Summit came up with moderate decisions for the continuation of the peace process, but, at the same time, warning the Israeli government for its excessive use of force against the Palestinian civilians. In this regard, some practical measures have been taken as regards to the relationship of some Arab states with the State of Israel. These measures, however, might escalate, if the Israeli government continues to escalate the situation. They have also mentioned that peace must have substance, and must be built on justice. They reiterated the UN-resolutions pertaining to the Israeli Palestinian conflict.
2. In fact, the Israeli government opposed these measures and answered with harsher measures against the Palestinian areas:
 - a. The closure is still clamped over the Palestinian areas. The Israeli authorities closed off the Gaza International Airport, and the borders to Jordan and Egypt.
 - b. The freedom of movement of people and goods is still restricted between the Palestinian cities. Many kinds of foodstuff are becoming rare on the markets. At the same time, the Israeli authorities are allowing only Israeli products to be sold in the Palestinian market.
 - c. The Palestinian industrial and agricultural products are not allowed to be transported anywhere.
 - d. Palestinian farmers are not allowed to reach their

fields (mostly located in areas B & C which are under full Israeli security sovereignty) in order to pick their olive trees, where we have the best harvest since many years.

- e. In the Bethlehem region, as well as in other Palestinian areas the hotels are totally empty – no tourists and pilgrims. It is worth-mentioning that the Bethlehem region is living mainly from tourism. Factories are also working in a 15% capacity.
- f. Hospitals are lacking medical materials and equipment.
- g. High unemployment is prevailing now.
- h. The Christian schools are depending on tuition fees they cannot collect them at the moment. In consequence, they will not be able to pay the salaries of the teachers for some months, for example: the ELCJ schools will be in a serious economic situation to pay the salaries of our teachers for the next three months at least. This is very typical for all the Christian schools.

3. During the past days, Israeli army forces shelled with tanks, helicopters and automatic weapons residential areas in the town of Beit Jala, a Christian town, west of Bethlehem from Gilo, an Israeli settlement built on the lands belonging to Beit Jala inhabitants, causing injuries and huge damage in properties. Just yesterday, Israel's Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert stated in the Voice of Israel's morning radio-news journal that the night-time raid was a proportional Israeli response to the Palestinian shooting. It was, according to Olmert, an insufficient response, because only a disproportional Israeli response could reach the aim of silencing the Palestinian uprising.

4. The shelling on Bethlehem area, especially in Beit Jala

and Beit Sahour is paralyzing the life of Palestinian Christian towns. It is creating horror and terror in the hearts of the families. Our Church has a boarding section accommodating social cases. We had to transport foodstuff from Jerusalem, so that they can be fed and cared for. In addition, we have to treat the children psychologically. Our fear is that all these undue measures will force the Christians to emigrate due to the lack of vision for the future.

5. It seems that the present Israeli government is becoming more rightist and radical than anybody thought of. Or I can say, it is dealing with the present situation with a military, security perspective rather than a political security perspective. This is a frightful issue that leads our region to undue war, and to a growth of religious and political extremists, fanaticism and fundamentalism.
6. It seem that in these measures, Israel will be in isolation and the Palestinians under siege. Will then just peace ever be possible in such a formula???
7. This situation is causing psychological traumas that has effects on Palestinian children. During last Sunday school at our Beit Jala congregation, the Sunday school teacher told that children used to break crayons, reflecting their nervousness in class. On Monday, after the shelling of Beit Jala, the children suffered from headaches, diarrhea, dizziness, bed wetting and other disturbed psychological behavior. For this reason we need now to start special psychological treatment for our traumatic children.

We are crying as the Macedonian did: come and help us.

For this reason, I appeal to you:

- To use your good offices to seek protection for us unarmed people. We call for international protection for the

Palestinian people.

- To use your offices that all this spiral violence may immediately cease, and that negotiations among the two parties will soon start to find substantial solutions and implementation of the agreement signed and according to the international legitimacy, based on the UN resolutions.
- To intensively pray for the Christian Churches in Jerusalem and their prophetic role for a lasting, comprehensive, just peace and reconciliation in our area.
- To work with the all churches around the world that the rights of the Christian churches in the Holy Land will be secured and legislated in the constitutions of both Palestine and Israel.
- To support the mission of the Church in education, diaconia, dialogue and reconciliation. Our Christian schools are the haven to mold the Christian Palestinian identity, to teach equitable coexistence with the religions and nations and to promote peace education.
- To do your utmost that neither the church schools, nor its institutions can be stopped or closed for any political situation or financial deficiencies, because the witness and the mission of the Church are very much needed, especially at this stage of history.
- To form a delegation that will come and visit us and be in solidarity with us in such a terrible crisis, that we have never witnessed before.

As the Lutheran bishop in Jerusalem, I appeal to you, as sisters and brothers in Christ: **DO NOT LEAVE US ALONE**. I call upon you to move from writing statements to incarnate your good ideas on the ground. The Christian Church in Jerusalem needs you, your solidarity and immediate actions at this special time for the continuation of God's mission in the land of resurrection.

Please continue to pray for us.

May God bless you and your efforts

Your Brother in Christ,
Bishop Munib A. Younan
The Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem

Ed,

For wide sharing. Preface is from a Wartburg colleague Fred STRickert, followed by updates from folks in Palestine.

KK

My apologies for the length of this email— It comes from three messages I have received over the weekend as Israel has begun shelling the towns of Beit Sahour and Beit Jala near Bethlehem. Interestingly, these are the two towns with the highest percentage of Christian population in the West Bank (Beit Jala 70 %, Beit Sahour 83 %—their populations are about 8,000 and 11,000 respectively.) Ironically, both have been centers for peaceful co-existence and peaceful resistance. In the early 19th century, Beit Jala was punished severely for giving refuge to Muslims who refused to take part in a rebellion against the Egyptian Ibrahim Pasha. In 1907, when the Ottoman empire began drafting Christians into its army, many residents emigrated to South America. During the Intifadah, the residents of Beit Sahour became well known for the peaceful demonstrations and non-violent protests and were severely punished by the occupying Israelis.

Now they are all being punished and are beginning to flee. This may well be the beginning of the end of Christianity in the Holy Land. The living stones will be silenced and the ancient churches transformed into cold museums without a trace of humanity.

21 October 2000

Dear Friends, After dropping off folks at the Bethlehem checkpoint last evening, I went home. Within minutes of arriving there my phone rang. On the line was my Presbyterian colleague, who lives on the top floor of a building in Bethlehem with a clear view of Beit Sahour, the village just east of Bethlehem. In amazement, he described the scene from his living room window. He could see flares being shot up over the northern end of Beit Sahour, followed by a series of red dots making a trajectory across the horizon. I could hear the sounds of the explosions over the phone. At one point, he exclaimed, "Oh my God, someone or something just got pounded in Beit Sahour." Suddenly while he was describing what he was seeing I heard a series of loud booms. I asked Doug if he had heard them, but he hadn't. A few minutes later, I heard them again. Almost instinctively I feared that the tanks which for almost 2 weeks had been facing Beit Jala, the village west of Bethlehem, had finally been used.

I can't begin to explain to you the feeling I had at being on the 'backside' of tanks which are apparently being fired at a village of people, some of whom I love and care about most in this world. An utter sense of helplessness is as close as I can come. I began to call people I know in the village. Everyone confirmed that something seemed to have been fired at Beit Jala, but no one was reported as injured. It was unclear yet whether there was any physical damage. I then called Rev. Alex Awad in Beit Sahour, who described one of the explosions there as sounding as if it was on their roof.

I quickly turned on the television. No report of shelling on

either Israeli channels. I turned to the Palestinian channels. Nothing. I called friends who were watching CNN in the USA. Nothing was being reported about anything in the Bethlehem area. I waited for the 10 p.m. English news from Jordan and again nothing. This morning I was eager to hear the 7 am English broadcast of Kol Israel, but again nothing.

I must admit I was beginning to wonder if we were all losing our minds. I began to doubt what I heard and what others saw. How could no one have reported this if it had happened? Was it just a horrible nightmare? Maybe a shelling never took place?

I called Zoughbi Zoughbi at Wi'am, the Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center, to see if I could meet with him this morning to get an assessment of the situation and to find out what needs were existing in the community.

The first topic, though, was the attack the evening before. It was no dream. In fact, Zoughbi told me that one of the homes hit in Beit Sahour belonged to his cousin and her family. There were numerous emergency committees meeting at the center, but I was welcome to come visit. I meet Zoughbi and other staff members in his office and listened as they began to describe the damage done in Beit Sahour. The Center was sending a team to view the damage and make calls of support. Zoughbi asked if I would like to join them. I went, but I have to admit I was a bit anxious.

As we drove, though, we didn't go to the north side of Beit Sahour but to the south, across the street from the YMCA Rehabilitation Center. House after house had most or all of their windows blown out. Many of the homes had huge holes in them where bullets or shells had gone through walls. We came to one home and there was a large group of men gathered around something. I asked if I could see. There in front of them was a

pile of the remains of the various shells and what looked to me to be small rockets that had hit this house. I picked up one which had a black casing and was about three inches in diameter, about 18 inches long. Another was bright yellow and about one inch in diameter and six inches long. Another looked to be a circuit box, as if it was part of a guidance system. On all of them the specifications were written in English.

As I stood holding the largest one, one of the men quietly said to me, "This is the gift of your government to Palestinian children." "I know," was all I could barely whisper, as I looked from the casing to his face with tears in my eyes. I've never felt so ashamed of being an American as I did in that moment.

As we went to enter the homes, at each door someone greeted us and said, "Please, welcome, come in." We walked through inches of glass and debris. At one home, in the center of the house, a one-inch diameter hole went through the refrigerator. In an olive wood factory, one rocket had come through the window in the back and had exited the shop at the front. Some people's cooking gas canisters had 2 – 3 inch holes in them. One scene, though, will stay with me for a long time. Under the parent's bedroom window were the cribs of their twins, utterly filled with huge shards of broken glass. In the middle of one remained a baby bottle half-full of milk. A similar pile of spent shell fragments were gathered outside the bedroom door.

Miraculously, no one was killed in Beit Sahour and only about ten people were physically wounded from flying glass and pieces of the shells. Emotionally, though, it's another story. Thousands of dollars of physical damage was done and an incalculable emotional toll was taken. Another American from the Mennonite Central Committee was with us. He and I talked as we walked back to the car about what we were feeling. Neither

of us could look the families and people gathered with them in the eye. As Americans we felt embarrassed and ashamed. Person after person asked us, "Why does your Mr. Clinton not see this as disproportionate use of force? Why can't you criticize Israel? What they're doing is wrong. The violence could end tomorrow – just remove the occupation army from around our towns and villages. How do you think of peace when fragments of rockets are laying in your child's bed?"

In the homes we visited, pictures of Jesus, St. George and Mary adorned the walls. In this village, the traditional site of the Shepherd's fields, where the angels first announced, "Do not be afraid. For behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people..." and "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to all with whom God is well-pleased," I had to pray that God would work another miracle in this place. That harden hearts would be broken free, that wisdom and compassion would take hold, that a just peace with security for both peoples would be boldly declared. But, we must look to be God's agents for miracles; we must not only seek them in our prayers but manifest them in our lives. The violence must stop. But without a just solution we'll only postpone another outbreak of resistance.

If we have such faith – if we pray and live for miracles, then maybe the trauma and pain caused by' the shelling which the never took place,' can begin.

Believing and working for miracles,

Sandra

Rev. Sandra Olewine

United Methodist Liaison – Jerusalem

Date: Sat, 21 Oct 2000

Dear Friends,

This is my second message to you hoping to get some feedback from you on what is happening. I wondered what happened with all my friends.

Last night my home town Beit Jala, less than a mile away from my house, the Israeli army bombed a residential area by tanks from a near by-settlement. My nieces, cousins and aunts were so frightened and bundled in their mother's laps like sheep.

We felt the whole house shaking thinking we ourselves were hit. Children in Beit Sahour, next to Bethlehem were injured from missiles shot at their homes while they were sleeping. A month old twin, were saved just before a missile went through their bedroom window, breaking all the glass over their heads. The mother moved the babies just few seconds before the missile hit their house.

The fear that we are going through is causing trauma's for our children, and even for adults around us. My colleague at the Theatre Abeer, last night collapsed and had a nervous breakdown, from fear.

I cannot describe to you the anger I have towards the USA government and politicians who claim they are human, when they have proved the opposite. The missiles shot in Beit Sahour town showed that they were manufactured in the USA in 1997. Most of these weapons and ammunition was sent to Israel from the USA. I hope that you as people understand what is really happening in my country. In my last e.mail I sent you a statement that showed what is the real cause for all what is happening. If you need to keep up-to-date please look at the sites I include on this page.

I miss you all and I think of you all the time. Please tell

your government that they are causing the death of so many children and civilians in Palestine.

Take care and God bless you all.

Lots of love

Marina Barham , Presbyterian Church

Dear Friends,

It has taken me most of the day to feel as if I can sit and write this email due to the stress of last evening. Last night, gun shots were fired from the fields around Beit Jala towards Gilo. Sadly, numerous homes were hit. Two women were reported as treated for shock and I'm sure many children were quite scared. Fortunately, no residents of Gilo were hit by gunfire.

In response to the shooting, the Israeli military decision was not only to fire back with guns, or even with machine guns, but to also move to heavy artillery. From my home in Beit Safafa, I heard a large amount of machine gun fire in the early evening. About one hour later, attack helicopters came overhead and began to open fire on the village of Beit Jala. The barrage was deafening in my home, as if they were firing from my very rooftop. I sat on the floor of my living room absolutely terrified. Not because of worry about my being hit – they were firing the other direction – but absolutely frantic about what was happening just over the hill. Not long after the barrage stopped, the tanks located just below Gilo (about 1/2 mile from my house) fired two large rounds, rounds so big my house shook. Soon after, the power went out in Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Safafa. For the next 4 hours, a mixture of smaller fire from the tanks and machine guns filled the air off and on. Quiet fell at 00:15 am.

I sat in the dark, madly dialing the phone to check on friends and colleagues, shaking like a leaf. As I talked to friends on the receiving end of the fire, I could hear their children screaming in the background. Folks were describing the flash of light from the helicopters and tanks before hearing the booms.

Today, reports are that Israel is moving to isolate Beit Jala and that more tanks have been moved in, although this is not confirmed. We know that the roads into the village are blocked and folks have been warned to leave their homes. Olive groves between Beit Jala and Gilo are being uprooted. It is has also been reported that Prime Minister Barak has called President Clinton to ask permission to annex part of the West Bank. I hope this is a rumor – for what right do we have to give Israel permission to take Palestinian land?

If we don't find a way to interrupt the cycle of violence, many more will die on both sides. Already the trauma of the violence is severely impacting the children, not to mention the adults. People are depressed and in some cases, despondent. The toll on the children is gut-wrenching. Nightmares, vomiting, sleeplessness, uncontrollable crying, screaming, catatonia almost in some. Hearts and hopes are broken.

Friends, we must find a way to break the cycle. At this point, political rhetoric from both sides is killing us – literally. I've had numerous conversations with both Palestinians and Israelis today to try to figure out a way to call a 'non-political' ceasefire, maybe setting a 3 – day mourning period for the dead – to honor them. None of us yet know how or if such a thing is possible. But, it is imperative that we here and you there pray and think and act creatively.

But, to break it there must be a real vision for justice and security for both peoples. A simple ceasefire that attempts to

take a 'time-out' only to return us to the status quo will not be effective. If we can find a way to work towards a ceasefire and get the international community to work diligently with the two peoples towards a just solution, then maybe the bloodshed and terror will stop.

As I prepare to leave the office now, I have to admit I'm apprehensive. My nerves aren't ready for another night of shelling. I already feel as if I've had 200 cups of coffee. But, then neither are the nerves of the people of Beit Jala and Bethlehem. And I suspect, neither are the nerves of the people in Gilo.

Please don't give up on this situation. For the sake of the children of Palestine and Israel, we must find a path to justice, compassion, freedom and security. It's a difficult task, but in faith, we know all things are possible to those who believe...

Living on hope alone,

Sandra

Rev. Sandra K. Olewine

United Methodist Liaison – Jerusalem

Dr. Fred Strickert
Professor of Religion
Wartburg College

Church Leaders Speak Out Over Middle East Crisis

By Fred Strickert

Wartburg College

Date: Wed, 25 Oct 2000

Leaders of a number of main line churches have spoken out over the last several weeks in response to the Middle East Crisis. In the form of official statements and public letters to the President of the United States, these clergy have used their positions of leadership to express concern over a difficult situation.

The views expressed may well surprise the general public since they are at odds with popular opinion as well as that of a large portion of the news media and many governmental officials. The religious leaders do not claim to speak for all their members. Nor do they claim to represent all of Christianity. Rather theirs is a prophetic voice speaking out on the basis of biblical concerns for justice.

Concern for all victims

We are saddened by the deaths and injuries of so many people, both Palestinian and Israeli, in clashes prompted largely by the dispute over the future status of Jerusalem, wrote Bishop H. George Anderson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. With a high respect for human life these statements have been uniform in treating the personal side of the tragedy in an even-handed way. All the victims and their families, Palestinian and Israeli alike, need our prayers, wrote Bernard Cardinal Law for the United Catholic Conference.

Attacks on Religious Symbols

Church leaders have also expressed dismay at the attacks on Religious Symbols in the current crisis. Clifton Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), points

directly to the visit of Israeli Knesset member Ariel Sharon to the Al-Haram al-Sharif/ Temple Mount as provoking the conflict a concern repeated by other church leaders.

Bernard Cardinal Law notes also how subsequent attacks on religious shrines have escalated on both sides including the Jericho synagogue, the Tomb of Joseph in Nablus, mosques in Tiberias and Jaffa, and a Catholic church in Beit Hanin stories treated inconsistently in the press. Because religion has played a special role in the conflict and religious symbols have been under attack and have been used to provoke and incite, religious leaders bear a special obligation to work unceasingly for peace, he says. Likewise, support must be given for those who, in the midst of conflict, stand against violence and for the peace which the Holy Land should symbolize.

Augusta Victoria Hospital

Many of the early concerns centered around the misuse of medical facilities and a seeming disregard for the lives of agents of mercy. On Oct. 3, Bishop H. George Anderson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America protested the misuse of the Lutheran Augusta Victoria Hospital on the Mount of Olives in East Jerusalem the area where most of the early demonstrations took place. ELCA representatives happened to be present for a board meeting at the time, which facilitated communication back to the states. Not only were the wounded prohibited from entering the hospital grounds for treatment, but soldiers were using the high position of the hospital grounds to shoot at demonstrators.

Anderson expressed strongest objection to the use of Augusta Victoria's Hospital premises by Israeli forces. . . and demand(ed) that Israeli troops not use. . . the property. . . for military activity. Anderson's statement coincided with a formal protest delivered to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak by the Rev. Ishmael Noko, general secretary of the Lutheran World

Federation, representing 131 Lutheran Churches worldwide.

Leaders of the Methodist Church likewise have spoken out concerning the role Israeli soldiers have played in impeding the work of medical personnel and in denying access to hospitals for the wounded. They point out that medical rescue teams and ambulances have frequently been fired upon resulting even in the death of three paramedics.

Disproportionate Retaliation

Church leaders have been especially concerned for the escalation of violence—described as the worst since 1967. They have not refrained from pointing the finger at Israel.

On Oct. 9, Presiding Bishop Frank T. Griswold (Episcopal Church) wrote to President Clinton asking him to call upon Israel to refrain from the use of a disproportional military response to the violence, especially the use of heavy military equipment. Teenagers and children armed with sling shots and rocks do not deserve to be shot dead in cold blood.

The killing of Israeli soldiers is also singled out for condemnation. Kirkpatrick (Presbyterian Church) writes, We deplore hostage taking and the brutalization and murder of Israeli soldiers. Nevertheless he notes, that even this does not justify the unconscionable, massive retaliation of the Israeli military, including indiscriminate shooting of children and adults on the streets.

Anderson, along with the entire conference of bishops of the ELCA also singled out the Israeli army for the disproportionate and excessive use of force. The bishops were specific. We oppose Israel's use of U.S.-supplied Apache and Cobra helicopters against Palestinian civilians. They went on to ask the U.S. government to suspend the sale of such weaponry to Israel. Likewise a statement from the General Board of Global Ministries

of the United Methodist Church calls on the U.S. government to halt the sale of new armaments to Israel.

The various church leaders all affirm the basic rights of the Palestinian people and express their understanding of the current rage as frustration over years of injustice. Kirkpatrick wrote, Surely you can understand the frustrations of Palestinian Christians and Muslims forced to live under a clear form of apartheid, in which their land has been expropriated and turned into hostile illegal settlements, their workers denied access to their jobs, their homes destroyed and their basic human rights denied. The dead and wounded, said Bishop Griswold of the Episcopal church are at the end of the day, the victims of the failure to find a true peace rooted in justice.

While the cause of the Palestinian people was recognized, church leaders also addressed their concern for the growing violence and hatred on both sides. Methodist leaders called for non-violent forms of protest and demonstration to be considered in the future.

Calls for a Just Peace

Church leaders offered clear support and encouragement for President Clinton in organizing the Sharm al-Sheik summit and in calling for a cease-fire. However, Clinton and the U.S. government was likewise chastised for taking sides. Representatives of the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) wrote, While the U.S. has taken a lead role in convening the summit, they wrote, it has done little so far to pressure the Israeli government to acknowledge responsibility for the continuation and perpetration of unjustified control over the Palestinian people and occupation of Palestinian lands.

The church leaders all called for a greater role for the

international community and especially the United Nations in working for a solution to the problem including a full, impartial, investigation of the recent violence and a body to help both sides to work for peace.

Leaders reminded President Clinton of a common Sept. 6 letter in which they already had called upon him to continue the peace process based on principles of justice. This included a call for a return of lands rightfully Palestinian and for a vision of a Jerusalem shared by two peoples (Arab and Israeli) and by three faiths (Jewish, Muslim, and Christian).

These statements are available through the individual church offices or collectively on the web through the Washington based organization Churches for Middle East Peace: www.cmep.org.