

Update from Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem

Colleagues,

The internet provider to Christmas Lutheran Church/ International Center in Bethlehem was down for seven weeks. Here is a message from Rev. Mitri Raheb sent our way on May 22. It includes links to a number of articles on their website. Day before yesterday Mitri followed up with another message reminding us that the siege really continues in spite of media descriptions. Even so . . .

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Dear Friends, Salaam from Bethlehem. Thanks to all of you, who wrote, called and visited us during the 40 days of curfew and occupation. We would like to inform you that we are back online and able to communicate after a long absence due to the Israeli military invasion and occupation of Bethlehem. We were unable neither to tell our story nor to be in contact with you because on Saturday, April 6 at 06:10 AM the Israeli military bombed the main server provider and all telephone lines in the old city of Bethlehem where we are located. Only this past Friday we were able to restore most of our communications.

Since last week we are trying to go back to some normalcy in our daily life and work. The 40 days from Easter Monday to Ascension Thursday, which the first disciples also spent behind

closed doors, seemed to us like 40 years in the desert and were so far the most difficult in our lives. Our struggle is not over yet. The worse might still come. We have learned to take every single day thankfully from the hand of the Lord as if it were the last in our life. Yet, we continue to plan as if our brightest future is yet to come. We will never give up on our town and on the wellness of our community. We will continue to build and rebuild, to train and educate, to empower and to create life in the midst of death. We will continue to call for justice and reconciliation in the midst of rising hate, revenge and retaliation.

As such, we would like to invite you to visit our <http://www.annadwa.org/> updated website, to view our latest pictures and to gain an insight into the experience of these days through some of the reflections of the ICB staff:

1. " [Though war should rise against me...](#)", a sermon on Psalm 27 by Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb
2. " [A detailed report on the damages done to the ICB](#)", by Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb
3. " [The first day back](#)", by Rev. Sandra Olewine
4. " [A Moment of Resurrection](#)", by Rev. Sandra Olewine.
5. " [Die Zerstoerung Bethlehems](#)", by Viola Raheb
6. " [Zwangsexil](#)", by our art coordinator Johannes Zang
7. " [Life stronger than death](#)", by our art coordinator, Faten Anastas-Mitwasi.
8. " [Dar al- Kalima school](#)", a report by the School Principal, Dr. Charlie Haddad
9. " [Living a nightmare: walking as a shield](#)", by our youth coordinator Sami Abu Ghazaleh
10. " [Schooled in America, Seething in the West Bank](#)", Article on our colleague Dr. Nuha Khoury published in the New York Times

We look forward to hearing from you.

Blessings

Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb <mailto:mraheb@annadwa.org> , General Director

Ms. Rana Khoury <mailto:Rkhoury@annadwa.org> , Deputy General Director

Tel: ++972 2 276 4696

Fax: ++972 2 277 0048

Web: <http://www.annadwa.org/>

May 28

Dear friends,

Greetings from Bethlehem. Just last week we wrote you that we are starting to go back to normal. However, since yesterday morning curfew has been imposed again on Bethlehem. The old town from Christmas Lutheran to the Church of the Nativity was declared "military closed zone". The Israeli tanks are stationed on the square just outside our church. The whole city is closed, no one is allowed to walk or drive on the streets. Schools are closed as well, including our Dar al-Kalima school. A group of friends from the USA came to be in solidarity & fellowship with us. The following article was written by Suzan Balzer, describing their first two days in Bethlehem.

Blessings

Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb

A Solidarity of Eyes, Ears, Hands and Feet

with the People of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem

By Susan Balzer

Bethlehem, May 27, 2002

We came in solidarity of eyes, ears, hands and feet with the people of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. So far, we are showing our solidarity by sharing the curfew imposed on Bethlehem early this morning, (May 27, 2002). I woke up shortly before the Moslem call to prayer at 4 a.m. Roosters began to crow. Then seven loud shots reverberated around the hills – warning shots, I learned later, that a new day of curfew is imposed on this city. All the dogs of the city started barking and a child wailed. A car drove slowly past the Bethlehem Star Hotel. I looked out our third floor window, curious, but afraid. I wondered about the wisdom of my coming here now. What about my family? And the congregations that supported our coming?

I remembered the anointing I received my first night in Jerusalem (Was that only three days ago?) and the commissioning David Osborne and I received at Hesston (Kansas) Mennonite Church just one week ago. The refrain of a song our group sang together kept going through my mind: “No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to the Rock I’m clinging. Since love is Lord of heav’n and earth, how can I keep from singing?” (from “My Life Flows On” by Robert Lowry) I didn’t actually sing it last night, but once again I turned my trust over to God to keep me as long as I am meant to be here.

Ten of us have come from America to Bethlehem to listen to our suffering Christian brothers and sisters; to witness the destruction in the town where Jesus was born; and to lend our hands and feet to help in a physical way. Now with a curfew on only our second full day here, we don’t know what will happen

next. Before we came, Gassan Andoni from the Rapprochement Center in Beit Sahour told us that our mission would be worthwhile even if we were turned back upon our arrival at the Tel Aviv airport.

Knowing we will take home much more than we brought here inspires us to keep using our eyes and ears and pondering these things in our hearts. Our group is a collection of Mennonite and Church of the Brethren Christians who answered a call to come here to show Christian solidarity. Dr. Dorothy Jean Weaver, a New Testament professor at Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, called the group together. She had been planning with Kevin Clark, Pastor of Big Spring Mennonite Church, Luray, Virginia, to lead a tour of the Holy Land at this time, but had to cancel it April 10 because of the siege at the Church of the Nativity. Having established a loving relationship with people of Christmas Lutheran Church, Dorothy Jean was overwhelmed when she received an e-mail from Rev. Mitri Raheb shortly after the invasion of Bethlehem with the poignant message: "This is coming to let you know that we are still alive."

As the siege persisted well into April, Dorothy Jean called upon people who had a variety of skills and a common passion for peace in the city where the Prince of Peace was born. Another thing the individuals of the group had in common was their ability to travel at short notice. May 23-June 3 was the third 12-day period on the tentative schedule that was to be implemented as soon as Rev. Mitri considered conditions safe enough for our travel. When the 42-day siege finally ended and curfew stopped, Dorothy Jean made quick work of confirming the group members' decisions to participate and making Air Canada reservations for direct flights from Toronto to Tel Aviv.

Meanwhile, we had searched our souls, questioned our family

members and gathered support from church and peace friends. Many of us have received generous support for our travel expenses as well as donations which we brought with us for Christmas Lutheran Church and international center. We are heartened by our safe travels, eventless entry into Israel, and quick passage through the walk-through checkpoint into Bethlehem. The gunfire and tank activity that kept many of us awake on Saturday night was the first ominous warning of things yet to come. But as we learned early Sunday morning that church services would take place as scheduled, we took heart. The joy of coming together to worship our Lord and Savior with our Arabic Christian kin was the highlight of our stay to date. All afternoon we waited to see if we could use our hands and feet as well as our eyes and ears.

Rev. Mitri called us to say that a truckload of new furniture for the international center was coming into the port today and he would like our help to unload it later. After many phone calls and literally hours of waiting, our group, carrying our cameras and a makeshift white flag, walked the two blocks from the hotel to the church. Rev. Mitri patiently, but firmly, negotiated with the Israeli soldiers at the site they had hemmed in with three tanks. Another hour elapsed until they finally said we could go ahead and unload, but were not allowed to move the truck any closer to the church.

The unloading took only a small fraction of the time that the waiting had taken. It felt good after a day of sitting in the hotel to do something physical. The 8 p.m. call to prayer has just sounded. The curfew has not been lifted. We have to trust that the soldiers will let us return to our hotel for the night.

We pray for more opportunities to be in solidarity tomorrow and throughout the week. As Rev. Mitri said as we carried a box of

furniture, "This is experiential tourism." Our Palestinian friends say they don't know what normal life is. We are learning what it is to share in their suffering.