

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

“Liberated by God’s Grace to Walk Together”

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The Walk to Emmaus - Luke 24:30-32

“When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?””

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What is accompaniment? When we talk about the theology of accompaniment which is the foundation of Lutheran mission work in the world today, we often point to the story of the Walk to Emmaus. In this Gospel story, we see two disciples walking together on the evening of the Resurrection. They are walking and discussing the events of the day, when a stranger comes alongside them. This stranger not only shares the journey with them, he also listens to their story, and eventually shares Scripture with them. Finally, as they near their destination, they all sit together to share a meal. And it is then, in the breaking of the bread, when the eyes of the disciples are opened and they recognize Jesus for who he is. They

say in amazement: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?””

This moment of encounter with the Risen Christ is the foundation for the way the global Lutheran church practices mission today. Wherever we are, we seek to walk together with our brothers and sisters from contexts different from ours. As we walk together, we may have questions. Therefore, we seek to pray together and to learn from each other. We also seek to change some of the church’s older mission practices, which suffered from problematic power dynamics and did not respect cultural or contextual differences. Our task as disciples and missionaries of the Gospel is to ask “Where do we see the love of Christ at work in this particular context?” and then to join our gifts and talents in that mission. Through this practice of accompaniment, our eyes are opened to see Christ with us, and we are blessed.

Our two churches – the Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land – might seem at first to share very little. Our contexts are quite different. My country has been locked in a land and identity conflict for more than sixty years. Christians in my country are an extreme minority by number, equaling only 2 percent (or less) of the population. Lutherans number only about three thousand total, perhaps the size of one large congregation in many other parts of the world. And of course, we speak Arabic, and we call our Triune God “Allah” – a fact which may shock some of your neighbors, who often believe this word is used only by Muslims.

Our contexts are very different, and yet we share common values. We are a missional church, as you are. We are trying to be Lutheran in the Palestinian context, as you are trying to be Lutheran in your Canadian context. We are committed to educating our young people. We want to understand how to live in an increasingly global culture. We want to discover what a Lutheran response can be to the rise of extremism and terror in our world. We want to care for our families, to build better communities, to love God, and to teach our children about Jesus. We want to live freely, in peace based on justice, with the same human rights as our neighbors.

Although we are very different, I believe these are values we share across language, culture, and context. For this reason, the churches of the ELCJHL are committed to furthering our relationship with you, the churches of the ELCIC. As our companion synod, you are a blessing to us when you walk with us through prayer, through pilgrimages, and through your generous support of our church's projects. We hope to be a blessing to you as well, for we have come to know Christ in a new way as a result of our walking together. In the theology of accompaniment, everyone has riches to share. There is no church so small that it cannot give, and there is no church so big that it cannot receive. We are committed to continuing walking with you in mutuality and accompaniment.

Of course, Jerusalem is a long way from Toronto, and most of you have not had the chance to walk with us in person. Therefore, I would like to share with you some of the ministries of the ELCJHL which you have faithfully supported through prayer and financial offerings.

First, the ELCJHL is a worshipping community. We have six Arabic-speaking congregations: in Ramallah, Jerusalem, Beit Jala, Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, and Amman, Jordan. We also have a joint ELCJHL/ELCA English-speaking congregation in Jerusalem. Our churches are important spiritual centers for our congregants, who are often struggling to survive in the midst of the long military occupation of Palestine. Sunday morning worship, Bible studies, a lay preacher academy, women's groups, and youth groups are some of our vital congregational ministries.

Our churches are very involved in their communities outside of the congregation, and contribute greatly to the society as a whole. We are the only church in the area which has a Women's Desk to deal exclusively with the needs of women in our community. Recently, we held a one-day conference on Gender Justice, inviting men and women from our communities to share their thoughts and experiences. We hope this will be an ongoing conversation within our churches, to improve the lives of women within our society.

A central challenge facing Palestinian and other Middle Eastern Christians is emigration. Various pressures are making many Christians depart from this traditional homeland. Why are Palestinian Christians emigrating? Many outsiders assume it must have something to do with Muslims. On the contrary, Christians

and Muslims in Palestine have lived side-by-side in peace for centuries. Recent surveys among Palestinian Christians have pointed to several clear reasons why our community, in particular, migrates out of the region.

1. The top reason given by those who choose to emigrate is the general lack of freedom and security in the Palestinian territories and the lack of peace on the horizon.
2. The deteriorating economic situation in Palestine. The conditions of Palestinian life have made many of our young people concerned about their own economic futures.
3. The measures of the occupation, including dehumanizing experiences at checkpoints, property confiscations, home demolitions, and non-existent building permits, and the lack of possibilities for family reunification. All of this creates an atmosphere of hopelessness.
4. Finally, the growth of extremism on all sides of the conflict has forced many peace-loving Christians to seek safer environments in which to raise families.

We can see from the data that the main reasons for Christian emigration away from Palestine—lack of freedom and deteriorating economic prospects—are tied directly to the experience of the Israeli occupation. This is a long-term and harmful trend for our Lutheran congregation members.

Our church, small as it is, has made a tremendous impact on our society. Arab and Middle East Christians maintain a crucial balance in the region. One of our politicians has said that Arab Christians are the guarantors of building a modern civil society. We are agents of peace, brokers of justice, ministers of reconciliation, defenders of human rights and gender justice, initiators of dialogue, and apostles of love. One of the ways we have made such a wide impact is through education.

Our Lutheran schools are located in Ramallah, Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, and Beit Jala. We also operate an Environmental Education Center in Beit Jala. The witness of these schools is the same as the witness of the entire church—we are known for moderation and peace-building. We teach Muslim and Christian students side-by-side. All of our schools are co-educational. All of our schools require peace

education as part of the regular curriculum, and many participate in other peace-making and diplomacy opportunities such as the Model United Nations.

Some members of my synod have suggested that we consider closing our schools due to the financial burden they put on our entire church organization. My response is always to emphasize that the direct mission of the Church is accomplished through the schools. Through our schools, we impart the Evangelical Lutheran ethos in the Palestinian context.

What I mean by an Evangelical Lutheran ethos is this:

1. We mold the Palestinian identity of our youth, teaching our Muslim and non-Lutheran students that Christians and Lutherans are an integral part of Palestinian society.
2. We teach our youth to live with other faiths, especially the faiths of our neighbors with a focus on Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.
3. We provide peace education, teaching our children the tools for creative and life-affirming resistance to dehumanizing powers and dialogue to pursue peace with justice in a non-violent way.
4. We promote the role of women in our society.
5. We provide a quality education that equips students for life's many challenges.
6. We mold the future of Palestinian civil society by valuing diversity and promoting democratic participation.
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Today, our four schools serve 3,000 students. Sixty-four percent of these students are Muslim. We reject any efforts to convert students who are not Lutherans. Our mission is to convert our students from extremism toward moderation! This is our evangelical call. Instead of instilling a fear of the Other that promotes anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, or Christianophobia, we teach our students to see others as *Imago Dei*—persons created in the image of God. We should never allow fear, hate and extremism to hold our world (or our children) hostage. Any move toward dehumanizing the Other harms our own humanity as well. “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). Love overcomes fear, allowing hope to reside within us. This love is emblematic of the transforming power of education.

The schools of the ELCJHL are committed to peace education. But what sort of peace do we seek? Here is how my community responds to that question. Lutherans advocate for a two-state solution based on 1967 borders. We believe that Jerusalem should be shared the three religions and two nations. We seek a viable political solution to resolve the right of return of refugees. Finally, all parties in this conflict must admit to their part in perpetuating the conflict and be willing to seek painful and honest reconciliation. Once the acknowledgement is there, then we can find solutions.

We strongly believe that Israeli settlements built on land confiscated during and following the 1967 war are illegal, not just inconvenient. Politicians and public figures have consistently observed that Israeli settlements on Palestinian land are a major obstacle to peace.

If there is to be peace, Palestinians and Israelis must learn to share natural resources, especially water. The sharing of resources can be the foundation of economic growth and prosperity through further regional cooperation. What would this look like? It is self-evident that neither Israel nor Palestine can exist alone. While they can be independent states, they will be side by side, interdependently prospering through collaboration on resources and infrastructure development. If we truly honor the human dignity of every person in the region, then we must work to have regional cooperation.

Regional cooperation is essential if we are seeking peace and the flourishing of all communities in the Middle East—Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike. For the Arab and Muslim countries, the core conflict in the Middle East is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Once this conflict is resolved, the way will be easier toward regional cooperation.

In short, the peace that we seek means Jerusalem should be a shared city for the two nations and the three Abrahamic religions; settlement activity should end; there should be a just political solution for Palestinian refugees; resources should be shared and regional cooperation should flourish. We continue to believe in these principles, but political realities do not often seem supportive of that vision. While the present situation is tenuous and even dangerous, peace based on

justice is good for Palestinians and Israelis alike. It is a win-win situation we should pursue with all our might.

As Christians in the Middle East, the road we are traveling is uncertain at best. We are struggling to survive. Many people ask us, “How do you find the courage to continue in the face of such difficulties?” The answer is that we have no choice. Survival is never a privilege, it is a mandate. We must find a way to provide a peaceful future for our children and our children’s children. We must seek peace, justice, and reconciliation with our neighbors, so that the Christian presence in the land of Jesus’ birth, ministry, death, and resurrection will continue. We cannot allow the churches of the Holy Land to become only museums to a Christian past. For this reason, we continue to walk in faith and in hope, trusting in Christ’s power over sin, death, and oppression through the cross and the resurrection.

We thank you for your commitment to walk with us on this journey of hope. We know very well that we cannot do it alone. We need the accompaniment of our Canadian sisters and brothers. We need partners for the journey, who will listen to us, open the Scriptures with us, and break bread with us. We thank God for the ways our eyes have already been opened and our hearts have already been warmed through this journey we are on together.

Of course, accompaniment is never only one-sided. The next question to ask is: How can the churches of the ELCJHL accompany you, the ELCIC, in your journey of faith and of mission? This question is best answered by you! And one reason I am here with you in person at this Assembly meeting is to listen for the Spirit, guiding us into new partnerships. My ears and the ears of my church are open, ready to hear how we can offer our gifts and talents, experiences and resources to contribute to the mission of the Gospel of Jesus Christ here in Canada.

Through speaking many times with Bishop Susan and Bishop Michael, I know that the ELCIC is doing some ground-breaking work in confession and reconciliation with the First Peoples of Canada. This is of great interest to us in Palestine. The issue of living together, the indigenous people of the land alongside newcomers, and finding ways to reconcile difficult and violent histories, is critical to our context as well as yours. We are watching and learning from you as you seek to love God and your neighbor on this historic reconciliation journey. We welcome

the opportunity to walk with you, seeking where the First Peoples and Palestinian narratives overlap and can benefit one another.

It is well-known that Canada is receiving many refugees at this time, which will change your context significantly in the coming years. As a refugee myself, I thank you and your country for opening your borders, your hearts, and your homes to these families. At the same time, I recognize that these newcomers bring with them new challenges. The Lutheran churches in Canada will need to reflect carefully on what it means to live in an increasingly diverse religious and cultural landscape. On this matter, my church may be especially poised to offer support. We have centuries of experience living alongside Muslim brothers and sisters. We have much recent experience to share about our current efforts in Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue. Although our contexts are different, we are open to walking with you as you seek a faithful way to be Canadian Lutherans in a changing Canada.

We have much to offer one another in terms of prayer, support, and sharing of gifts, talents, and resources. But accompaniment is not only about building friendships so we can pat each other on the back, or so that we learn about new cultures. The theology and practice of accompaniment is critical for our respective churches today because we are facing the same enemy. That enemy is religious extremism, which is threatening to kidnap not only the church but the world today.

To be clear, the problem is not Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. The problem is when certain individuals, claiming to speak for God, or who seek to defend god, act in ways that are contrary to the core teaching that love for God reveals itself most fully in respect for the Other. As Charles Kimball said, “Whatever religious people may say about their love of God or the mandates of their religion, when their behavior toward others is violent and destructive, when it causes suffering among their neighbors, you can be sure the religion has been corrupted and reform is desperately needed.” When, on the other hand, “Religion remains true to its authentic sources, it is actively dismantling these corruptions.” Rather than calling for the elimination of religion, the proper response to religious extremism is found in greater, more authentic expressions of faith.

In the Middle East, we understand that extremism very often has little to do with religion at all. What we see, in fact, is religiously sanctioned or religiously identified political extremism. In order to achieve a particular political or economic goal, certain leaders concoct interpretations of religion which mobilize people toward that goal. We are worried about ISIS and its likes. We are also concerned about Israeli settler violence, which justifies itself with a particular political theology developed after 1967. Both systems of religious thought seek to realize particular political goals. Recent events in Gaza show how Hamas and other groups are relying on a religiously-informed logic of violence. All of this is frightening and concerning for those of us in Israel and Palestine committed to the goal of peaceful coexistence. We are concerned that the logic of violence will infiltrate our children and negatively affect progress toward reconciliation.

For the sake of our children, we must relearn what it means to be in relationship with one another, affirming our God-given differences and promoting one another's God-given dignity. This is one reason why it is so important for us to accompany one another as Lutheran Christians across the globe. There are many who will resist any effort to give dignity to a neighbor of a different faith. There are many who desire to counteract extremism with more extremism. Together, we can unite our voices to stand for human rights, human dignity, and moderation.

This is a role not only for churches, but for governments as well. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "It is part of the Church's office of guardianship that she shall call sin by its name and that she shall warn men against sin; for 'righteousness exalteth a nation,' both in time and in eternity." Today we need the church in our world to be prophetic and speak the truth to power—especially the powers promoting extremism—and to work for peace based on justice, and reconciliation based on forgiveness.

The world in which we live today presents many challenges, not only for Christians, but for all who seek peace, justice, and dignity. At times, these challenges may seem too great. Certainly, they seem too great for any one church to tackle. But the Greek philosopher Diogenes, when he was presented with the challenge of proving whether or not motion was real, said simply, "Solvitur ambulando. It is solved by walking." And he got up to walk.

I believe that most of the challenges in the world today can be solved by walking – walking together as Christians from very different contexts. Walking together with our neighbors of different faiths. Walking together with refugees, with our young people who bring new perspectives, and with our elderly who possess so much wisdom. Much can be solved if Christians would commit to walking the Way of the Cross, which is the way of love, and of humility, of non-violence, and of great personal sacrifice for the sake of the Other.

It is solved by walking. We remember again the Walk to Emmaus, on the evening of the resurrection, when the two disciples were met along the way by the Risen Christ. We remember that the journey was long. We remember that the news of the day seemed confusing. We remember that they first did not recognize the stranger walking with them.

And we remember how in the breaking of the bread their eyes were opened, and they realized the Risen Christ had been walking with them all along. I pray that our two churches, like those two disciples, will continue to accompany one another in faith. Our mission is yours, and yours is ours. Do not leave us alone. Our mutual accompaniment is an integral part of our spirituality. Let us pray together. Let us listen to one another. Let us break bread together. For we know that wherever two or three are gathered in His name, Christ is there also.

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