

# WHAT MAKES FOR PEACE



by Kate Sprutta Elliott

I've worked in publishing for some 20 years now. When I travel or attend an event, I am always looking for an article to write, which means I am always taking notes, busily writing down facts, listening for a good quote. While I'm listening or looking—sometimes even when I'm talking—I'm thinking, "Where's the story here? What will I write? Are there any good photos?" This is what I do.

This means that I'm always at a little distance from what I'm experiencing. I like it that way. It's exhausting to be fully engaged with everything. Since people know that it's my job, taking notes gives

me permission to be an observer, not a participant.

In January, I went on a trip sponsored by ELCA Global Mission, as part of the ELCA's "Peace Not Walls" initiative. We went to Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Jayyous, and Ramallah in the West Bank. We were on a global accompaniment trip to learn first-hand about the situation in the Holy Land.

Our little group of 12 met church leaders in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL), including Bishop Munib Younan. We also met volunteers with the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accom-

paniment program. We talked with some governmental and political leaders, the former grand mufti of Jerusalem (a high-ranking Muslim religious official), a rabbi, and Mennonite and Jewish peace activists. We visited Lutheran congregations, schools, and Augusta Victoria, the hospital run by the Lutheran World Federation. That's the short version of our trip.

But this trip was different: I put down my pen and quit taking notes. It might have been the pace of our travel—we were really tired. Or it might have been a prompting of the Holy Spirit. I began to really listen to people. I tried to be fully present

to each person and in each place. This is hard work—much harder than taking notes and photos.

One reason this is hard is that when you really attend to someone, you may hear difficult things: pain, fear, anger, hopelessness. And to be really present to someone who is sharing their feelings, you have to open yourself to feeling them too. St. Paul says if one part of the body hurts, the whole body hurts. That's what happens in the church. That's compassion and the mystery of being the body of Christ, joined one to another by our baptism.

Instead of a full notebook and a suitcase stuffed with brochures and business cards, what I brought back from my trip to the Holy Land were actual experiences and stories. I want to share some of them with you.

## SECURITY AND SEPARATION

My experience of the Holy Land was framed by three things—security, separation, and suspicion. Before we left the airport in Frankfurt, Germany, we were already dealing with Israeli security personnel. One member of our group—a pastor, flying out of Berlin—was questioned by Israeli security for three hours before she was allowed on the plane to Tel Aviv. Even her laptop computer was searched, her e-mail opened. Everywhere we traveled, it seemed that we were stopped at

checkpoints, our passports inspected, our drivers questioned. There is compulsory military service in Israel and the checkpoints are staffed by young soldiers, so you find yourself faced with a 20-year-old with an automatic rifle slung over his or her shoulder, both bored and wary.

For us, as U.S. citizens and tourists, the security was unnerving and frustrating. For the Palestinians who live in Israel, security is more than an annoyance. Israel's security measures—the separation barrier and the checkpoint system—make daily living a struggle. The separation barrier is a fence in some places and a concrete wall in others. It is designed to physically separate Palestinian areas of the West Bank from the Israeli settlements built there and from Israel itself. Its purpose is to prevent suicide-bombers and other attacks.

If you are a Palestinian living in Israel, you live under a complicated system that controls where you live, what roads you can drive on, and where you can go. It would take several pages to describe fully, but in short, your movement is greatly restricted. For instance, Palestinians have different license plates on their cars. If you

are caught driving on the wrong highway or road, you can be arrested and jailed. Another example: If you are a Palestinian whose family is not from Jerusalem, you have to apply every year for a permit to live in the city—and that might be denied, even if you have a job there.

Imagine having to wait in a checkpoint line (sometimes for hours) to get to school or to work or to the doctor. In the United States, we take access to roads and the ability to travel for granted. Until I heard an Israeli lawyer at the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid in Jerusalem talk about access to roads as a major contributor to the humanitarian crisis there, I never gave roadways a second thought.

Essentially, these restrictions and the Israeli separation barrier are forcing Palestinian people to live in confined areas. Former



Children study at one of the schools of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land.

Photos: ELCA Global Mission



“Peace Not Walls” is the ELCA campaign to “stand for justice in the Holy Land.” The 2005 ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted this strategy to promote a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to call for a halt to construction of the separation barrier and its removal from Palestinian land. The ELCA is working with other Lutherans and with ecumenical and interfaith partners toward:

- safety and security for all Israelis and Palestinians,
- reduction of poverty and unemployment, and
- a negotiated final status agreement that includes a shared Jerusalem as capital of two independent states and with access and full rights in the city for Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

To learn more about “Peace Not Walls” go to [www.elca.org/peacenotwalls](http://www.elca.org/peacenotwalls)

U.S. President Jimmy Carter has been criticized for using the word *apartheid* (literally, *apart-hood*) to describe the situation of the Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, but the system under which they live has a similar effect if not intent: It enforces separation, with severe economic and social ramifications.

Consider the farmer we met in Jayyous. He lives in the village but his orchards are outside of town. The separation barrier runs between his house and his land. We visited him in his home, where he served us tea and anise cookies and coffee spiced with cardamom. We went with him to the checkpoint on the edge of town.

He and his wife have permits to cross at the checkpoint, but his sons were denied permission. When we were there, the soldiers put up a sign saying that the checkpoint would be open for only 15 minutes twice a day. This means that if he is working the land and needs something or feels ill, he has to wait until the appointed time to return home. It also means that if he is late or there is a long line to get through at the checkpoint, he may not be able to get to his orchards that day.

Access to roads has economic significance for him as well. Because of the system, he is greatly restricted as to where he can go to sell his produce—many markets are not open

to him. Now, multiply his situation many times. And then add to that the many other people who cannot get to their jobs, their schools, or their businesses, and you can see that the system has created poverty, frustration, and anger—whether it’s called *apartheid* or not.

#### EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT

I learned another thing from the farmer in Jayyous. The people we met have a high regard for education—higher than most people I know here in the States. The farmer has four grown children and proudly told us where they went to university and what degrees each one held. We wondered: Why would this farmer spend his hard-earned money sending all his children abroad to get university degrees? He said, “Well, your land can be taken away, and your home, and maybe your freedom, if you are put in jail. But no one can take away what’s up here (tapping his head). They can’t take away what you learn and read. You always have your education.”

We visited Lutheran-run schools and talked with students and teachers. The schools serve both Christian and Muslim children and teach tolerance and respect—as well as providing an excellent education. The children we met there were like the children you meet in many places—some shy, some curious, full

of energy, and ready to smile. The older ones can tell you about American music and movies. We asked one boy, about 14, if he thought that the movies accurately portrayed life in America. He thought for a moment and said, “We don’t think America is as violent as it looks in your movies.”

We also visited a technical school run by the Lutheran World Federation that trains young men



Ola, Saba, and Hania are students at the Lutheran school in Ramallah.

and women in the trades—plumbing, woodworking, telecommunications, and other vocational skills. These programs give young people a chance at employment and hope for the future.

The emphasis on education does not end with the children and young adults. At the International Center of Bethlehem, we had lunch with the Rev. Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran pastor and founder of the center. This Lutheran-based, ecumenically oriented institution serves all Palestinians. At the center there are workshops and classes in every-

thing from conversational French to water color painting to Pilates to health and wellness to cooking to dance. They hold art exhibitions and screen films and provide conference space for meetings. Their mission is “equipping the local community to assume a proactive role in shaping their future. . . . Through

“LET US THEN PURSUE  
WHAT MAKES FOR PEACE . . .”

(Romans 14:19)



An Ecumenical Companion from Sweden (left) introduces us to the Palestinian farmer in Jayyous.

empowering the local community, developing human resources, cultivating artistic talents, and facilitating intercultural encounters, the ICB actively promotes the building of Palestinian civil society.”

#### HEROISM AND HOPE

Everywhere we went, we met heroes. They wouldn’t call themselves that, but we could see it. These are ordinary people who, despite the hardships of living under such limitations, go to work and do ministry that makes a difference in their communities. From the pastors and teachers to the peace activists and UN humanitarian aid staff to the health-care workers at Augusta Victoria Hospital, we saw people working hard, doing their best to make life better for others.

At Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem, we toured the state-of-the-art oncology unit and the pediatric dialysis program. This



The wall snakes through villages and countryside.

LWF-run hospital offers medical services to all Palestinians regardless of ability to pay. We met with Dr. Tawfiq Nasser, the director of the hospital, and the Rev. Mark Brown, the regional representative for the LWF. Nasser told us about some of the difficulties the hospital has encountered, from struggling with the government over tax issues to the challenges presented by the security situation.

For example, Nasser told us that when they schedule an operation, they need to line up a team—a surgeon, nurses, and an anesthesiologist—as well as the patient. If any one of these people is stuck at a checkpoint, surgery has to be delayed or postponed. He said, “The situation is impossible. This is no way to practice medicine.”

Yet, in our time at the hospital, we could see the amazing good work being done there by the dedicated staff. As part of its special 20th anniversary offering this year, Women of the ELCA is supporting Augusta Victoria Hospital. To learn more, go to [www.womenoftheelca.org/20years/avh.html](http://www.womenoftheelca.org/20years/avh.html).

### PRESENCE AND PEACE

As part of my inter-unit work at the churchwide office, I serve on the committee for the ELCA’s “Peace Not Walls” campaign. Sometimes (usually when I’m on my way back from a committee meeting) my colleagues tease me: “Did you solve the Middle East crisis yet? What’s taking you so long?”

Once, when a group of us were discussing the initiative, a colleague

in Communication Services put a jagged piece of concrete on the table. We looked at the rock and we looked at her. She said, “It’s a piece of the Berlin Wall. When will we learn that walls don’t work?”

Do you remember when the Berlin Wall fell? I watched the news stories on TV—people dancing in the street, crying and laughing and celebrating. No, walls don’t work. A wall can’t resolve conflict, and may not even contain it. But a wall becomes a powerful symbol—a symbol of control and security on the one side, and a symbol of oppression and alienation on the other. Over the long term, this leads to division, not peace. By our prayer and advocacy, we can make a difference. **부디**

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Students at Evangelical Lutheran School of Hope in Ramallah in the West Bank gather at recess.