

Temple Talk, revised December 2, 2023

Friends, the Synod Working Group seeking peace based on justice has been tracking the news coming out of Israel and Palestine with heavy hearts and we wanted to share an update with you. We have also prepared a sheet of more detailed information, with some resources for how you can help.

Palestine has been under military occupation since 1967 and Gaza has been under blockade for 16 years. The Palestinian Christians are of one mind in resisting the occupation of Palestine only by nonviolent means. Many, if not most, Palestinian Muslims also refuse violence. Hamas is the exception; it has chosen to resist occupation by any means necessary, including violence. On October 7, as you know from news reports, Hamas militants came out of Gaza and took control of some Israeli towns near the border, murdering many. They also viciously attacked an outdoor music festival. 1200-1400 Israelis and foreign nationals were killed, and over 5000 were wounded. Around 240 people of all ages were taken as prisoners into Gaza, including American citizens. Hamas's actions on October 7 are horrible and inexcusable. We grieve with Israelis as they mourn. Hamas has also fired numerous rockets into Israel, although without causing any fatalities.

Since that time, Israel has responded with a continuous aerial bombardment of the Gaza Strip, home to over 2 million Palestinians, with a ground invasion beginning October 27th. Israel allowed for a pause in the war from November 24 to December 1. The number of dead and wounded is astronomical and keeps increasing. Now, as of December 16, , over 18,800 are dead, 70% women and children. At least 50,000 are injured. More than 1.9 million people, or roughly 85% of the population, are internally displaced in Gaza. Israel's continuous bombings of civilian targets amounts to collective punishment, illegal under international law. These attacks have included many hospitals, schools, ambulances, refugee camps, shelters, mosques and churches. Food, water, electricity, and shelter are in very short supply there, and only a very small amount of humanitarian aid is being allowed into Gaza by Israel, in comparison with the need. Conditions are catastrophic and worsening.

Others have been internally displaced too. Many Israeli communities near Gaza and near the border with Lebanon have been evacuated. Workers from Gaza who had legal permits to work in Israel as day laborers were also displaced by the war. These have been rounded up, beaten, mistreated, and expelled back into Gaza. In the West Bank, Israeli settlers have used the war to commit systematic, rampant violence against residents of Palestinian villages. Over 1000 people have been forced to leave their homes as a result, and 15 Palestinian villages no longer exist.

In Palestinian cities, daily life is greatly disrupted. Travel into and out of Palestinian cities is restricted by concrete slab barricades and closed checkpoints. People largely stay at home unless shopping for food. Israeli soldiers are on the streets. Arrests and detentions have increased. Free speech is greatly curtailed as phones are randomly searched and seized. The atmosphere is tense with anxiety and grief.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs is now referring to this war as a global crisis. There is great concern that the war will expand and involve other Middle Eastern countries. The World Council of Churches, Lutheran World Federation, Churches for Middle East Peace, and the ELCA are urging people around the world to advocate for a ceasefire. Ceasefire is not the same as surrender. A ceasefire gives opportunity to tend to the wounded and bury the dead, to assist with essential humanitarian aid, to consider how hostages might be released, to give some thought to the extraordinary human cost of war, and to pause to consider next steps that might lead to diplomatic solutions. The US blocked a resolution for a ceasefire in the UN Security Council on December 8, but in response, the UN General Assembly passed a nonbinding ceasefire resolution on December 12.

The ELCA has several mission personnel in Jerusalem at this time, including Gabi and Meghan Johnston Aelabouni. These missionaries assist Bishop Azar and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. When the war began, we also had several Young Adults in Global Mission on the ground assisting the local church and church schools, including Braden Hayes from our synod. While the Young Adults in Global Mission have all been evacuated to their homes now, the permanent mission staff believe firmly that they are exactly where God wants them to be, accompanying the Palestinian Christians in their time of need.

Augusta Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem is still providing medical care to those most in need. Due to financial shortfalls over several years, the hospital has not been able to continue to receive new cancer patients. There are a number of Gazans in Jerusalem who have completed their cancer treatment at AVH but cannot return home, so Augusta Victoria Hospital continues to house and feed them. AVH was working with Al Ahli Hospital in Gaza and had sent 7 cancer doctors to Gaza before the war. Currently the wellbeing of those staff since the Al Ahli Hospital was bombed is unknown. The ELCA continues to give regular support to Augusta Victoria Hospital.

Lutheran pastor Mitri Raheb resides in Bethlehem, but the university he founded has a satellite location in Gaza. He reports that one of the artists and one of the volunteers associated with the Gaza location have been killed. The director of the program there was not heard from for over a week but has since self-reported as safe, after having been forced to evacuate her home.

How can we be peacemakers in this situation?

Our Lord Jesus blesses peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God. But how? The situation seems hopeless. Pastor Raheb says that “Hope has nothing to do with what we see. Hope is what we do. He encourages us to “be the hope”. Here are some ways to begin.

First of all, we can accompany the hospital and mission staff with prayer and advocacy. Pray with them for all who have been affected by the war, in Israel, in Gaza, in West Bank, in Jerusalem, and throughout the Middle East. Pray urgently for a ceasefire, for an end to the occupation of Palestine, and for a way forward toward a peace that is based on justice for all. Consider following prayer with advocacy with the White House and with our elected officials for a ceasefire and an end to escalation of hostilities.

Secondly, we can accompany the hospital and mission staff with financial contributions. Lutheran Disaster Relief has a focus on the ELCA website, “Middle East Crisis”, where monetary donations can assist our mission personnel and the hospital to care for the Palestinian people in this crisis. UNICEF, UNRWA (United Nations Relief Works Agency), and Doctors Without Borders are also actively working in Gaza in this crisis.

Let us pray: O God, we know that you hear the cry of the poor. Listen to our prayer, for all who are in harm’s way and for all who grieve in Palestine and Israel. Protect our missionaries and hospitals, and all seeking to help those in need in the crisis. Lead us from occupation to justice, from blockade to freedom, from fear to trust, from hopelessness to hope, from war to peace. Bring a ceasefire to the Middle East, and help us all to see your holy face in the faces of our neighbors. Through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.