

Epiphany Eve

January 5, 2009

Dear Friends:

Grace and peace be unto you during this season of making Christ known.

Today, the majority of the Conference of Bishops will travel to the Holy Lands. For the last week, we have been individually involved in discernment as to whether or not we should go to Israel.

Last week the Executive Committee of the Conference debated this issue and decided to leave the final decision up to each bishop. We had a deadline of 10:00 a.m. of last Wednesday to decide. Since that time has past, issues in the Gaza Strip have changed and conference calls have taken place on Saturday January 3 and twice on Sunday, January 4. With 21 bishops and presiding bishop Mark Hanson already in Amman, Jordan and a scheduled meeting with the King of Jordan set for today, it was decided to continue with the Bishops' Academy in Israel.

Pastor Mark Brown, an ELCA pastor serving a Lutheran Congregation in Bethlehem, and Bishop Younan, the Palestinian Lutheran Bishop for the region, promise to do all they can to keep us safe. The last conference call centered upon "security, mobility, scheduling and political issues, as well as whether the purposes of the trip still can be achieved. Our colleagues in Jordan have not seen any indication of problems there. (There are 21 ELCA bishops, spouses and staff already in Amman.) In Jerusalem, the situation on the ground is currently quiet, although there have been sporadic demonstrations. Bishop Younan does not believe that security issues are appreciably different now in comparison with a few days ago. There is a one-day strike scheduled by Palestinians for tomorrow. With respect to mobility and scheduling, the belief is that we will be able to travel to places scheduled on our itinerary, with the possible exception of Hebron. Of course, the situation is fluid, and we may experience impediments to mobility and the need to be flexible in terms of itinerary. In addition, it also is important to point out that there may be power and water outages that cannot be predicted, so travelers need to be aware and plan accordingly.

In light of these circumstances and this church's commitment to accompaniment and the other purposes of the trip, the group recommends proceeding as planned.

The other factor to keep in mind is that we will be about 100 miles northeast of Gaza and have no plans to go anywhere near where the ground battle is taking place.

I invite your prayers for the people of Palestine and especially those trapped by their government in the battle in the Gaza Strip and for the people of Israel. I invite your prayers for the leaders of this church who walk with Arabs, Jews and Palestinian Lutherans. My flight leaves tonight for Tel Aviv. I am scheduled to arrive in Israel on January 6 around 4:05 p.m. I will return on Friday, January 16.

While I am out of the country, your Synod Council has reiterated that we will follow the Synod's Constitution in that Vice President Jim Hansen will be responsible for this synod. Should issues arise that he sees the need to consult, he will make use of the Synod Council's Executive Committee. I may have access to the internet while I am in Israel and the West Bank. The service may not be consistent.

Should you wish to E-mail me over the next 11 days, you may do so, but know that I may not have the opportunity to respond until I return.

When I return, I will take that weekend off. My first official duty once I return will be Monday night, the 19th, when I meet with the Call Committees of Messiah and Good Shepherd Lutheran Churches. I will return to the Synod Office on Tuesday, January 20.

In a later E-mailing later this week, Maureen will provide our Rostered Leaders with the information they need to register for the February 9 and 10, 2009 continuing education event.

A reminder to all of those same Rostered Leaders – now is the time to make use of the Board of Pensions Health Risk Assessment tool. This tool is confidential, will save your congregation 2% if 75% of this synod's clergy and spouses complete the assessment, and you will get money back for doing so. Last year I got a check for \$300 that I could use to off-set any medical expense. However, this year we have a very short window to complete this tool. Please take the 15 minutes needed and complete the form. If there is a figure (like your age or how much you weigh) that you do not want to enter into the tool, you do not have to do so.

Yesterday, Terry and I completed our annual visit to Cross of Grace Lutheran Church in Hurricane, WV. Annually, Pastor Kliner tries to schedule me for such a visit. With Cross of Grace now in her 8th year, it is a joy to see the changes that have come to this community over the last 8 years. They made use of an inter-generational choir that stretched from youth who looked like they were in the 3rd grade to adults with a great deal of more maturity. When Pastor Kliner invited the children to come forward for a children's sermon, I was not sure that they would stop coming.

Also, over the weekend I had a 30 minute phone conversation with Pastor Louise Knotts. She wanted me to express her thanks to you for your cards and your prayers. She is slowly recovering from her latest stroke. The gift of speech has returned, but her left side is not recovering as much as she had hoped. My encouragement is for you to continue with the cards and especially with your prayers.

Some of you are aware that I have anxiously awaited the Bishops' Academy that will be held in the Land called Holy. I am unable to travel to our companion Synod in Madagascar due to health related issues. My health should not be of any concern in Israel. I do covet your prayers for our safety as well as your prayers that we are able to achieve our goals of accompaniment and advocacy. Many of you have expressed your concern for our travel, especially now. My thought and concern is that what is taking place in the Middle East is what the people of God who live there must endure every day. In a small way, the Conference of Bishops can be a sign of the incarnation for them.

Yours in our Lord's service, + Ralph

PS: If it becomes possible, I will try to send to Maureen in the Synod Office a Road Show or two so you will know how we are walking with our sisters and brothers.