

Siblings in Christ,

I hope that this email finds you well in these difficult times. As you know, the news from the Holy Land continues to be bleak. The bombardment of Gaza continues to destroy lives and communities by the thousands, not only through the staggering death toll, but also through the severe life-changing injuries faced by survivors with limited access to medical care, and now a rise in hunger and disease from the lack of food, housing, and other infrastructure. Palestinians in the West Bank are also extremely challenged by ongoing checkpoint closures and increased violence; and poverty and hunger are also on the rise there due to these the near-total loss of income many households are facing due to movement restrictions and the lack of tourism. In Jerusalem, many Palestinians are afraid to speak Arabic or to speak openly or post online about the injustice in Gaza, in fear that they might lose the limited rights they have or may not be physically safe. The people here are experiencing intense trauma on every level that will affect life here for decades to come, and the wounding is still ongoing. Until there is an end to the current crisis, we cannot even begin to think about recovery and healing.

During this time, the ELCA has continued to accompany our partners on the ground in holistic engagement through the following ways:

#### **Updates from the ELCA Middle East/North Africa Desk:**

- Presence on the Ground
  - ELCA mission personnel in Jerusalem (Rev. Dr. Meghan Aelabouni and myself) continue to accompany the ELCJHL and our other Palestinian partners daily. In a time when many in the international community evacuated, our continued presence has been extremely valued by the ELCJHL. It has also allowed us to provide real time updates on the situation with congregations, synods, and ELCA Churchwide leadership; and has positioned the ELCA to work closely with other ecumenical and global partners in the region.
  - As Director for Middle East and North Africa, I have represented the ELCA by accompanying ELCJHL Bishop Ibrahim Azar and leaders to official gatherings and worship services with the wider local Christian community, including The Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem.
  - As co-pastor of the English-speaking congregation at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem, Rev. Dr. Meghan Aelabouni has continued to lead the worship life of the community both in person and online through streaming of services. She continues to be a source of pastoral care to the English-speaking congregation and the wider ELCJHL community.
- Emergency Aid
  - Totalling over \$800,000 to date, this emergency aid from Lutheran Disaster Response, World Hunger, individual donors, and other various ELCA resources has supported:
    - Augusta Victoria Hospital which has provided shelter, relief, and medical care for Gazan patients who have been stranded in Jerusalem since October 7<sup>th</sup>.
    - The ELCJHL to keep schools operating and teachers employed in the wake of sudden and unexpected widespread loss of income among Palestinian school families due to the war.
  - Additional ELCA funding is planned, hopefully to be matched or supplemented by funds from other international church partners to support the work of the ELCJHL Diaconal Center that provides funds for food, medicine, tuition, rent, and utilities to people in need.
  - The ongoing Lutheran Disaster Response appeal will also provide for these needs and, we hope, will eventually be able to assist those in Gaza directly. (At the moment, bringing private aid into Gaza continues to be nearly impossible).

- As we continue to work with our partners on the ground, we are continually evaluating how best to accompany the Palestinian community. Currently we are discussing how to serve children and vulnerable adults through psycho-social support.

### **Updates from ELCA Witness in Society (Advocacy):**

- We continue to urge Congress and the Administration to:
  1. Publicly call for a ceasefire to prevent the further loss of life;
  2. Prioritize the protection of all civilians, including by urgently securing the entrance of humanitarian aid into Gaza and working to secure the release of hostages; and
  3. Urge all parties to fully respect international humanitarian law.
- As of January 4th, [64 U.S. legislators](#) have voiced calls for a Ceasefire
- We also are calling on Senators to co-sponsor Senator [Van Hollen amendment](#), which requires that “weapons received by any country under the [request be] used in accordance with U.S. law, international humanitarian law and the law of armed conflict.” The measure also requires the president to report to Congress on the matter and, according to the press release, to strengthen “current law that prohibits U.S. security assistance to any country that prevents or restricts U.S. humanitarian assistance to those in need.”
- [The Senate last week tabled Bernie Sanders' effort to curb military aid to Israel during Israel-Hamas war](#), but "the roll call vote begins to reveal the depth of [unease among U.S. lawmakers](#) over Israel’s prosecution of the war against Hamas." In all, 11 senators joined Sanders in the procedural vote, mostly Democrats from across the party's spectrum, while 72 opposed." A number of Senators were unable to travel in-time for the vote in Washington, due to winter weather storms. The future of the resolution is unclear, but Sanders has vowed to continue to advocate oversight from Congress.

### **Updates from Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations:**

- Churches Beyond Borders, the relationship of full communion among the ELCA, The Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, and the Anglican Church of Canada, put out an Advent prayer series following online meetings of the Heads of Churches and ecumenical staff counterparts on Nov. 16-17. [2023-CBB-Advent-Cycle-of-Prayer.pdf \(anglicanlutheran.ca\)](#) These online meetings took place during the timeframe of a long-planned solidarity trip, which was postponed. Planning is underway to reschedule this trip as soon as possible in 2024.
- The most recent round of the national Jewish-Christian dialogue co-convened by the National Council of Churches and the National Council of Synagogues took place in early December on the topic of Israel/Palestine. The meeting was hosted and facilitated by the Carter Center in Atlanta. The national Christian-Muslim dialogue has been in conversation via email.
- Ecumenical cooperation in support of a ceasefire has been ongoing. ELCA EIR has been in direct contact with the Armenian partners in the aftermath of the mid-December violence at the Armenian seminary in Jerusalem. The call for ecumenical advocacy was shared with the governing board of the National Council of Churches.
- Shoulder to Shoulder, an interfaith coalition in the US to disrupt anti-Muslim hate, held a press conference at the National Press Club in DC on December 19 to speak in interfaith solidarity against the rise of anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish hatred in the US in light of the war in Israel/Palestine. All are invited to join this joint sign-on statement: [December 19, 2023: Joint Multi-faith Commitment to Counter Anti-Muslim and Anti-Jewish Hate — The Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign](#)

### **Updates from Sumud: for justice in Palestine and Israel:**

Within the Middle East/North Africa Desk, the Sumud team has been working hard to put into place the foundations of a holistic ELCA engagement, not for the current crisis alone, but also for the long-term work that will be needed to address the underlying causes of this crisis: the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the systemic denial of human rights to Palestinians, and the lack of a path forward for Palestinian self-determination. The timing has been challenging, since we recognize that urgent response is needed; and at the same time, now more than ever, we need to continue to look ahead strategically to

provide ways for more ELCA members to learn and understand what is happening, so that they can be invited into action. Until now, a lot of Sumud's work has been behind the scenes: setting a strategic plan for the year, coordinating within the ELCA to establish web and social media platforms for communication (still in progress), and meeting with specific ELCA leadership groups such as bishops from the Middle East Ready Bench and networks from the companion synods of the ELCJHL, among other synod, congregational, and college/university/seminary groups both in person and via Zoom.

In addition to this ongoing relationship building, here is what Sumud will offer in 2024:

- **Virtual Network Gathering Series:** In this urgent and pressing situation, advocacy is needed; and so Sumud is partnering with ELCA Witness in Society to offer a series of webinars to help keep our ELCA networks informed and to assist in grassroots advocacy efforts. Our first event will be held **Saturday, February 24** and will focus on advocacy responses to the crisis in Gaza. The other dates and topics are being planned as we speak; but we will plan for one event per month for the foreseeable future and will include support for Sumud representation and advocacy at upcoming synod assemblies. This webinar will be recorded for those who are not able to attend live.
- **Sumud Lenten Video Series:** Our Sumud team has planned, organized, and developed, with a local Palestinian production company, a free weekly resource and study guide for Lent called *Following the Way of Jesus: A Lenten Holy Land Journey*. This resource includes weekly videos featuring reflections from Palestinian pastors and leaders on the theology of *sumud* and its connections to the way of Jesus as a way of justice for all of the people of the Holy Land. *The series is being produced in English and in Arabic* and will be made available on the ELCA website and shared on social media. It can be used by individuals and/or small groups throughout Lent and will be a featured option for Lenten small groups through ELCA Young Adult Ministries. We hope many of you will engage with this resource and share it in your own networks. **Watch our promotional Video Here:** [Lenten Devotional Trailer](#)
- **Synod Assembly Presence:** Our Sumud Launch coordinator, Rev. Jenny Sung, and her team will attend some synod assemblies personally and will also make available materials and training for those who want to bring a Sumud presence to your synod assemblies.
- **ELCA Youth Gathering, Multicultural Youth Leadership Event, and the tABLE:** Our Sumud team will have a presence in the interactive center spaces of these events to increase awareness and advocacy among young people.
- **Program Director for Sumud Position:** The job description for this full-time permanent position is being finalized now and will be posted on the ELCA job board as soon as possible.

As you can see, our three As - Accompaniment, Awareness-raising, and Advocacy - really do go hand-in-hand; and we will continue to keep you updated as best as we can while we seek to balance the short-term and long-term needs of this justice work. We also look forward with excitement and gratitude to welcoming the Rev. Khader El-Yateem as our new Executive Director for ELCA Service and Justice, recognizing his record of faithful advocacy for justice in the Holy Land. We take Pastor Khader's appointment as a strong sign for the future of Sumud and the ELCA's continued commitment to support justice for Palestinians in pursuit of a just and lasting peace for all of the people of the Holy Land. I hope to see many of you at our February 24 webinar as we continue to build our accompaniment, awareness-raising, and advocacy for justice in Palestine and Israel together.

In Sumud,



Gabi Aelabouni