

Christmas Lutheran Church, Bethlehem, Palestine Sister Congregation Relationship

What: Since 1992, Ascension and the Christmas Church of Bethlehem, which is located on the West Bank of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, have been sister congregations. As was explained in the November 1992 “Church Mouse,” “Being sister congregations means that we will be praying for each other during the time of the prayers as well as exchanging letters and photographs throughout the year. The shape of our relationship could grow so that people from our congregations might visit one another. The goals of this program . . . are to provide support and encouragement to each other as we carry out our unique ministries where we live.”

When: Activities take place on an ad hoc basis. Most recently, Christmas gift items have been sold at Ascension’s alternative gift fairs, simulcast worship services between the Christmas Church in Bethlehem and the Bethlehem Chapel, Washington National Cathedral have been watched by Ascension members, and Pastor Nancy visited Christmas Lutheran during her 2012 sabbatical, bringing with her a monetary gift from Ascension.

Who: This is a congregational initiative that began when Rev. Frederick Neu was the minister of Ascension and that has continued to the present day. Ascension members Mousa Ishaq and Kristin Peterson-Ishaq are liaisons with the Christmas Church.

How: To date we have had pulpit exchanges with the Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb of the Christmas Church. He has preached twice at Ascension, once by telephone hookup in October 1993 and once in person in May 1994. At that time he brought a lovely embroidered altar cloth as a gift to our church from the Christmas Church. In addition, a number of Ascension members, including Pastor Frederick Neu, have worshipped at the Christmas Church over the years. Most recently Rev. Nancy Wright represented Ascension on her April 2007 visit to the Holy Land at which time she brought a gift to the Christmas Church on behalf of our congregation.

In 1993, Ascension collected school supplies for Dar al-Kalima, the school run by the Christmas Church. At Christmas 2004, we donated funds to the Lutheran schools in Jordan and the Holy Land, which benefited Dar al-Kalima. We also collected funds to help rebuild the steeple of the Christmas Church, which was damaged by an earthquake in February 2004.

Throughout our relationship, we have directed our prayers for our sister congregation as it labors under the yoke of military occupation.

In addition to what is listed above, there are any number of possible activities. For example, the Christmas Church runs Al-Kahf Gift Store that is an outlet for internationally known artisans (see <http://www.annadwa.org/ecommerce/>); it sells among other handicrafts olivewood and stained glass Christmas ornaments that might be attractive gifts for people in the Greater Burlington area and whose purchase would help support traditional arts and crafts in a land that is under severe economic pressure. Likewise, Pastor Mitri Raheb has begun a Leadership initiative among Christian Palestinians ages 21-30 that perhaps we could support and that might provide an outlet for activities for people of that age group within our congregation.

Website: <http://www.elcjhl.org/cong/bethlehem/>