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Lutherans trace Jesus' steps and find violence

Dennis Coday | Jan. 19, 2009

JERUSALEM -- Two years ago, when U.S. and Canadian Lutheran bishops began planning a hands-on visit to the Holy Land for their inaugural Bishop's Academy, they had no idea what the political or security situation would be on the ground.

They relied on faith.

When the 44 bishops touched down at Israel's Ben-Gurion Airport earlier this month, they found themselves less than an hour's drive from a war zone as Israel launched an aggressive assault into the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip to stop rockets from being lobbed into southern Israel.

The delegation spent time in Jordan, Israel and Palestinian areas of the West Bank and stayed clear of the Gaza violence. Yet nearly every meeting they held with clergy, politicians and private citizens -- including a group of bereaved Jewish and Arab parents -- was colored by the suffering in Gaza.

"We didn't know what we would encounter, but regardless of the political situation, we knew the goals of the mission would remain the same," said Bishop Susan Johnson, who heads the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

Those goals were two-fold, Johnson said. One was to provide the bishops with the kind of first-hand knowledge they cannot get back in North America. The second was to show solidarity through `accompaniment' with the Lutherans' sister churches in the Holy Land.

The bishops met with the Palestinian president and prime minister, Israel's chief rabbis, top clerics of the Islamic Supreme Court, and numerous church officials and parishioners. They visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial, schools and churches, and planted olive trees on Palestinian land in the shadow of Israel's controversial separation barrier.

Johnson said she was particularly touched by the students at the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hope in Ramallah, on the West Bank.

"I listened to the stories of the children and was totally amazed by the articulate way they spoke and the depth of their knowledge and convictions."

The children, Johnson said, described their lives under Israeli rule, separated from Jerusalem and even some parts of the West Bank by the security barrier. Some expressed a desire to immigrate to a safer, quieter country, a growing trend among the Christian minority that make up less than 2 percent of the Israeli and Palestinian population.

"We have a deep commitment to the presence of Arab Christians in the Holy Land," Johnson said. "With every escalation of violence, those who can leave the country see this as an option. Our hope is that a just peace will

halt this trend."

Johnson's counterpart in the U.S., Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, said U.S. and Canadian church leaders had briefly considered canceling the trip due to security concerns, but pushed ahead in order to show solidarity with the tiny local Christian community.

"It has been very difficult to find any sign of hope," Hanson admitted. "I was very struck by the difference from my last visit" in 2005.

At the time, Israel has just full disengaged from Gaza, uprooting settlers and soldiers and leaving control of the narrow, poor strip to the Palestinians. Since then, Hamas forced Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah party out of Gaza, leaving the Palestinians with a split and warring leadership.

"I met with President Abbas in Gaza," Hanson said. "I was surrounded by young people, Muslims and Christians, and there was a feeling of expectant hopefulness both on the part of Palestinians and Israelis, who left Gaza out of a gesture of peace. And to come now and see the violence, it is clearly a time of much greater pessimism."

Hanson, who's also the president of the Lutheran World Federation, said his spiritual high point came during worship with Palestinian Lutheran Christians, "listening to the witness of their faith. As one Palestinian Christian said, `the presence of the wall cannot finally diminish my hope because the source of my hope is in Christ who has risen. That gives me power to confront the realities of occupation.'"

Another hopeful moment was seeing Christian and Muslim students from the Church of Hope School performing traditional Palestinian dances together.

"I only wish I could have seen Jewish students join them. If young people who are Jewish, Christian and Muslim can find a spirit of dance that does not deny the pain of suffering in war, but instead defies it, that becomes a witness of hope," Hanson said wistfully.

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