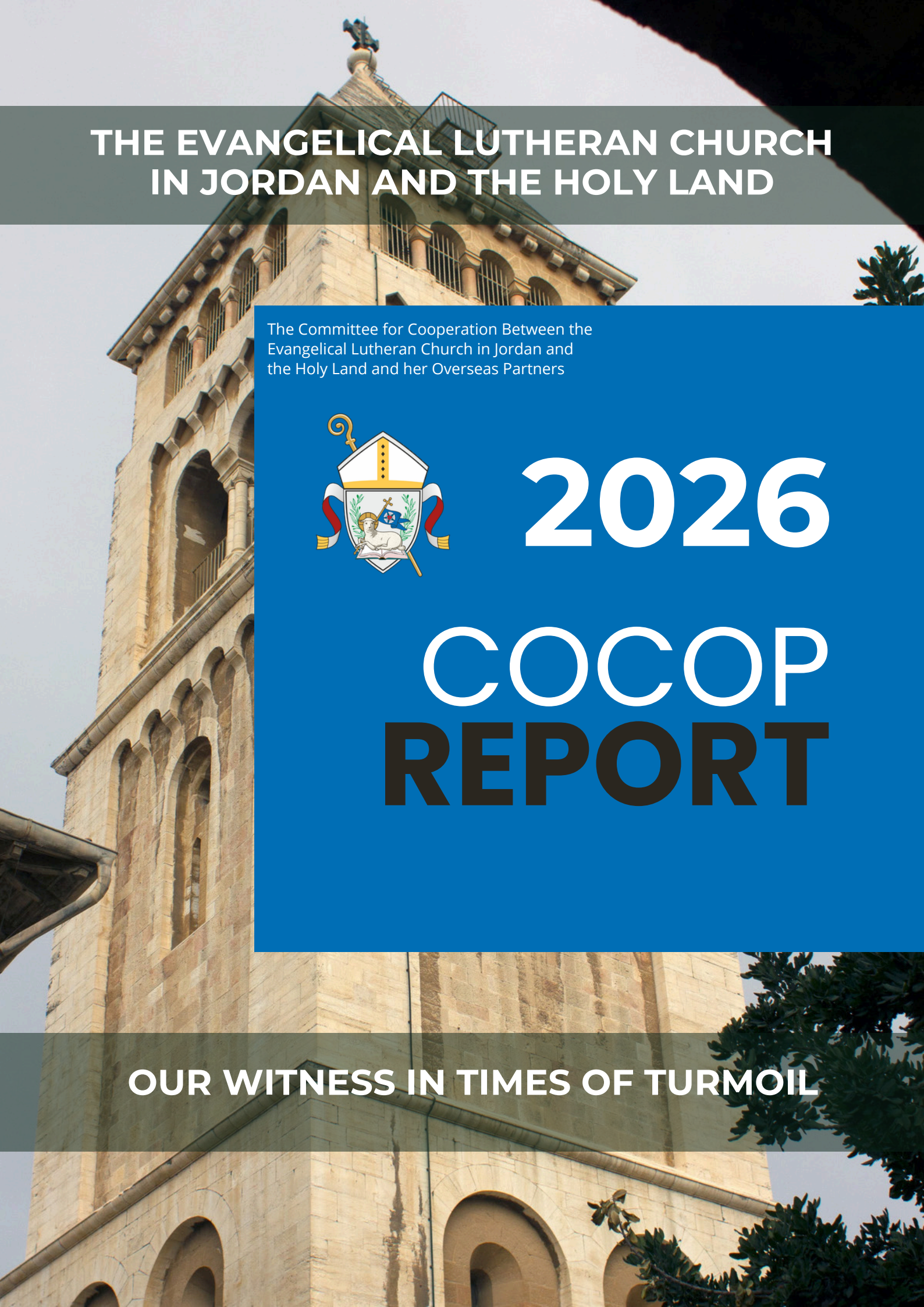


THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN JORDAN AND THE HOLY LAND

The Committee for Cooperation Between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land and her Overseas Partners

2026 COCOP REPORT

OUR WITNESS IN TIMES OF TURMOIL

COCOP 2026 PARTICIPANT LIST

COCOP REPRESENTATIVES

Rev. Gabi Aelabouni	ELCA	COCOP Co-Chairperson USA
Jessica Lindberg Dik	COS	Sweden
Rev. Jennie Nordin	COS	Sweden
Rev. Dr. Simon Kuntz	BMW	Germany
Elina Mikkola	FELM	Finland
Rev. Dr. Detlef Görrig	GNC/LWF	Germany
Propstin Katja Kriener	EKD	Germany
Rev. Tobias Pfeifer	ELCNG	Germany
Bishop Larry Kochendorfer	ELCIC	Canada
Arni Svanur Danielsson	LWF	Switzerland
Berit Hagen Agøy	CON	Norway

ASSOCIATED COCOP MEMBERS

Mrs. Sieglinde Weinbrenner	The Lutheran World Federation (LWF)

ELCJHL REPRESENTATIVES

Bishop Dr. Imad Haddad	Bishop, COCOP Chairperson
Rev. Dr. Fursan Zumot	Pastor, Beit Jala
Rev. Dr. Munther Issac	Pastor, Ramallah
Rev. Rodny Saeed	Pastor, Jerusalem
Rev. Ashraf Tannous	Pastor, Bethlehem & Beit Sahour
Rev. Sally Azar	Pastor, Jerusalem
Rev. Tony Nassar	Pastor, Amman
Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb	Pastor, Dar Al-Kalima University
Dr. Khader Zeidan	Church Council
Mr. Randy Saeed	Church Council
Mrs. Hala Tannous	Church Council
Mr. Osama Nassar	Church Council
Rev. Dr. Mark LaChonce	Bethany Beyond the Jordan Baptismal Site
Dr. Jennifer LaChonce	Bethany Beyond the Jordan Baptismal Site
Rev Dr. Christy Lohr Sapp	Pastor, English-speaking congregation Jerusalem
Deacon Bassem Thabet	Director of Operations
Mr. Adeeb Murabia	Chief Accountant
Mrs. Eva Azar	Director of Education
Mrs. Ranan Issa Abu Shanab	Gender Justice Ministry Director
Deacon Rana Zeidan	Diaconal Ministry Director
Mr. Simon Awad	EEC Executive Director
Mrs. Olivia Slagle	Communication Officer
Deacon Marc Falconer	Deacon

GUESTS

Bishop Emeritus Dr. Munib Younan	ELCJHL	Jerusalem
Bishop Emeritus Dr. Sani Ibrahim Azar	ELCJHL	Jerusalem
Dr. Rodney Schofield	ELCA	USA
Mr. Douglas Dicks	PCUSA	USA
Birger Nygaard	ELCID	Denmark
Rev. Dr. Maria Leppakari	Diocese of Borg	Norway

AGENDA

October 22, 2026 - October 23, 2026
Abraham's Guest House, Beit Jala; Zoom

JELEB Meeting: 21 Oct, 2 pm - 5 pm

Finance Committee Meeting: 21 Oct

THURSDAY, 22 OCTOBER	
3:00 PM - 3:30 PM	**Opening Devotion** *Bishop Dr. Imad Haddad*
3:30 PM - 4:00 PM	**Business Session** • Roll Call and Welcome of Guests • Adoption of Agenda and Program Schedule • Reading & approval of the 2025 COCOP Minutes • Appointment of Recording Secretaries
4:00 PM - 4:30 PM	**ELCJHL Bishop's Report: The ELCJHL's Witness in the Midst of Turmoil** *Bishop Dr. Imad Haddad*
4:30 PM - 5:00 PM	**Discussion** (Q&A)
5:00 PM - 5:15 PM	**BREAK**
5:15 PM - 6:00 PM	**Witness in ELCJHL Congregations and Ministries Video**
6:00 PM - 6:30 PM	**Discussion** (Q&A)
6:30 PM - 7:00 PM	**Our Witness in Education: ELCJHL Education Report and Discussion**
7:00 PM - 7:30 PM	**Closing Devotion** *Rev. Gabi Aelabouni*
FRIDAY, 23 OCTOBER	
3:00 PM – 3:30 PM	**Morning Devotion** *Rev. Sally Azar*
3:30 PM – 4:30 PM	**Finances** *(Closed Session: Attended by COCOP Members Only)*
4:30 PM – 5:00 PM	**Sustainable Witness: Endowment Fund Updates and Action Plan**
5:00 PM – 5:15 PM	**BREAK**

5:15 PM - 5:45 PM	**Finance Discussion** (Q&A)
5:45 PM - 6:15 PM	**Closing Business and Reflection** • Creation of Committee to Plan 2027 COCOP Meeting
6:30 PM - 7:30 PM	**Closing Worship**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land
2026 COCOP Report

The Committee for Cooperation Between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) and her Overseas Partners

COCOP Theme:

"And You Will Be My Witnesses:"
Our Witness in Times of Turmoil

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." ***Acts 1:8***

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COCOP 2025 Meeting Minutes

1. **Opening and Devotion**
   The meeting opened on Wednesday, 27 May 2025, with a morning devotion and Holy Communion led by Bishop Dr. Sani Ibrahim Azar.

2. **Roll Call and Welcome**
   Participants introduced themselves. Representatives from COCOP partner churches, associated members, ELCJHL leadership and staff, and invited guests were present.

   COCOP Representatives:
   Rev. Gabi Aelabouni – ELCA (USA) – COCOP Co-Chair
   Ms. Maria Wålsten – Church of Sweden (Sweden)
   Rev. Jennie Nordin – Church of Sweden (Sweden)
   Mr. Einar Tjelle – Church of Norway (Norway)
   Rev. Dr. Simon Kuntz – BMW (Germany)
   Rev. Dr. Maria Leppikari – FELM (Finland, via Zoom)
   Rev. Dr. Detlef Görrig – GNC/LWF (Germany)
   Propst Joachim Lenz – EKD (Germany)
   Rev. Erik Schumacher – EKD (Germany, via Zoom)
   Rev. Tobias Pfeifer – ELCNG (Germany)
   Bishop Larry Kochendorfer – ELCIC (Canada)

   Associated Members:
   Mrs. Sieglinde Weinbrenner – Lutheran World Federation (LWF)

   ELCJHL Representatives:
   Bishop Dr. Sani Ibrahim Azar – Chairperson
   Rev. Fursan Zumot – Pastor, Jerusalem
   Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac – Pastor, Bethlehem & Church Council Member
   Rev. Imad Haddad – Pastor, Amman & Synod Chair
   Rev. Rodny Said – Pastor, Ramallah
   Rev. Ashraf Tannous – Pastor, Beit Sahour & Beit Jala
   Rev. Sally Azar – Pastor, Jerusalem
   Mr. Bassem Thabet – Director of Operations
   Mr. Adeeb Murabia – Chief Accountant
   Mrs. Eva Azar – Educational Office
   Mrs. Olivia Slagle – Communications Officer
   Mrs. Ranan Issa Abu Shanab – Gender Justice Office
   Mrs. Rana Zeidan – Diaconal Center Manager
   Mr. Simon Awad – Environmental Education Center

Rev. Dr. Mark LeChonce – Baptismal Site
Dr. Jennifer LaChonce – Baptismal Site
Deacon Marc Falconer – Deacon

Guests:
Rev. Doug Dicks – Presbyterian Church
Anna Hjälm – Swedish Theological Institute

3. **Adoption of Previous Minutes**
The minutes of the 2024 COCOP meeting were reviewed.

Decision:
The minutes of the 2024 COCOP meeting were unanimously adopted with minor corrections.

4. **Appointment of Recording Secretaries**
Decision:
Mr. Bassem Thabet (ELCJHL) was confirmed as permanent Recording Secretary.
Mrs. Olivia Slagle (ELCJHL Communication Officer) was appointed as co-recording secretary.

5. **Adoption of Agenda**

Wednesday, 27 May 2025
- Morning Devotion and Holy Communion
- Roll Call and Welcome
- Adoption of Previous Minutes
- Adoption of Agenda
- Bishop's Report
- Lutheran Identity Thematic Session
- Congregational Reports
- Ministry Reports
- Evening Devotion

Thursday, 28 May 2025
- Morning Devotion
- Finance Session (Closed)
- Endowment Fund Discussion
- Education Report
- Site Visits
- Ministries Dinner

Friday, 29 May 2025

- Closing Worship
- Unfinished Business
- Governance Matters
- Co-Chair Election
- COCOP 2026 Planning
- Wrap-Up and Reflections

Members discussed a proposed interfaith march scheduled in Jerusalem during the meeting period.

It was emphasized that attending all the COCOP sessions is necessary, especially that the agenda was sent long time ago.

Decision:

The agenda and program were unanimously adopted.

6. **Bishop's Report**

   The Bishop presented a comprehensive report addressing:
   - The worsening political and humanitarian situation
   - Increased pressure on Palestinian Christians
   - Ongoing emigration trends
   - The importance of sustaining an indigenous Christian presence in the Holy Land

   The report emphasized the church's mission, witness, and responsibility amid the current crisis.

   The bishop's report was received with thanks and appreciation.

7. **Thematic Reflection: Lutheran Identity**

   Discussion focused on Lutheran identity as:
   - A lived and reforming faith
   - Contextual and responsive to injustice
   - Expressed through diakonia, gender justice, environmental responsibility, and public witness

   Participants affirmed the importance of contextual theology rooted in lived Palestinian experience.

8. **Congregational Reports**

   Reports were received from congregations in:
   - Amman
   - Bethlehem
   - Beit Jala
   - Jerusalem (Arabic- and English-speaking)
   - Ramallah

Key themes included:
- Pastoral care under pressure
- Community resilience
- Youth engagement
- Financial strain on families and congregations

All the congregational reports were received with thanks and appreciation.

9. **Ministry Reports**
   Reports were received from:
   - Diaconal Ministry
   - Ecclesiastical Court
   - Gender Justice Ministry
   - Youth Ministry
   - Environmental Ministry

   Key observations included:
   - Rising medical and emergency needs
   - Increasing demand for diaconal support
   - Strong engagement of youth despite difficult conditions

All the ministries' reports were received with thanks and appreciation.

10. **Finance Session (Closed Session – 28 May 2025)**
    The audited 2024 Financial Report was presented.
    Key points noted:
    - Approximately 35% of school income is covered by special gifts
    - Tuition shortfalls persist even with full collection
    - Strategic land sales and investments are underway to improve sustainability

    Decision:
    A special emergency appeal for school tuition support will be prepared and circulated to partners.

    Action Points:
    - The Bishop will issue a formal appeal letter by the end of June 2025.
    - Partners will circulate the appeal within their churches and networks starting July 2025.
    - Student-specific sponsorship options will be included.

11. **Endowment Fund**
    The establishment and funding of the ELCJHL Endowment Fund were discussed.
    Agreements:

- ELCJHL is encouraged to proceed with the initial USD 600,000 investment.
- Partners will explore creative approaches to matching contributions.
- Fundraising materials and ethical investment policies will be prepared.
- Opportunities for ELCJHL representatives to visit partner countries for fundraising will be developed.

12. **Baptismal Site – Vehicle Request**
    The need for a replacement vehicle for the Baptismal Site Ministry was presented.
    Agreements:
    - ELCJHL will identify a suitable vehicle and define its own contribution.
    - Matching support from partners will be explored once details are finalized.

13. **Governance Matters**
    Interest from the Jerusalem Society (Germany) in joining COCOP was discussed.
    Agreement:
    - ELCJHL will continue consultations and submit a recommendation to COCOP members for confirmation.

14. **Co-Chair Appointment**
    Decision:
    Rev. Gabi Aelabouni was unanimously re-elected as COCOP Co-Chair for a further two-year term.

15. **COCOP 2026**
    Decision:
    The next COCOP meeting will be held 12–15 May 2026 in Beit Jala.
    All heads of partner churches and organizations will be invited.

16. **Closing**
    Participants shared reflections highlighting:
    - Mutual trust and solidarity
    - Strengthened partnerships
    - Hope rooted in shared mission

    The meeting concluded on Thursday, 29 May 2025, with closing worship.

Bishop's Report

The Bishop's Report of the ELCJHL

Bishop Dr. Imad Haddad

Salaam, grace and peace be with you all from our troubled Holy City of Jerusalem. This year's COCOP meeting and report are a bit unusual, as we have had to pivot from our regular plan due to ongoing war and instability in our region. This ongoing uncertainty in part is what inspired our theme for this year's COCOP report: *And you shall be my witnesses:* Our Witness in Times of Turmoil. This message, taken from Jesus's words to the disciples in Acts 1:8, is incredibly fitting for our current moment.

Here in Palestine, we are living through incredibly difficult times. Despite a nominal ceasefire in Gaza, the devastating impacts of genocide continue. Airstrikes, displacement, hunger, and disease have not ended. Beyond Gaza, our people continue to suffer. Checkpoint and roadblock closures and home demolitions in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are at an all-time high. Israeli settler violence in the West Bank has reached a fever pitch. People fear for their homes and their lives. Many people have gone without steady income for nearly three years, especially in tourism-dependent areas like Bethlehem.

Our church has not gone untouched. Our congregants, students, staff, and all those throughout our community face immense psychological, spiritual, and economic burdens. The number of people who reach out to our Diaconal Ministry for help with essential needs like food, electricity, and medicine grows every day. The church itself is experiencing intense financial difficulty due to a near complete loss in income over the last few years.

Despite our specific challenges in Palestine, we are not alone in facing turmoil in recent years. All around the world, we see our partners and siblings in Christ experiencing turbulence and upheaval in their contexts. In the face of an uncertain future, what is our calling as followers of Christ? In the verse that precedes our theme verse, Acts 1:7, Jesus tells his questioning disciples, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority." He will not tell them when they can expect their troubles to end. Then he continues, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

What does it mean to take up Jesus's call, to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth? Like the first disciples, we are not living in peaceful or easy times. Taking up the witness of the gospel, living out a theology of martyria, takes sacrifice and courage. Martyria is, put simply, going out of the self and pointing to the Lord who calls and sends. Martyria is sharing who Christ is with the people, the community, the society. It literally means being incarnate among the people for Christ. It means that we never point to ourselves, but to Christ. That's what makes our witness powerful.

This witness is not to be taken lightly. It is not without difficulty. But the difficulties of this witness do not change our call. 2 Timothy 1:7 says, "For God has not given us a spirit of

cowardice, but of power, and of love, and of wise discretion." This spirit of power, love, and wisdom leads us to the martyria of life, no matter the cost. The church is blessed to bear witness to the resurrection in a time marked by death.

This call to witness has been in the forefront of my mind this year as I begin my tenure as Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. During this reporting period, from May 2025 to May 2026, I was both elected and installed as Bishop. This has been a time of significant transition and change for our church. But even as a new leader, I'm not starting from zero; no one starts from zero, or alone. We are partnered with God through our Baptism as well as with each other through Christ in our Baptism. We build on what was planted years before us, and we aim to carry forward the message of partnering in the building of the kingdom.

As we continue the important work of following God's call, we are facing increasingly difficult circumstances. The rising number of settler attacks in the West Bank are not abstract statistics to us. Our church has been deeply impacted by this violence. Earlier this year, the family of one of our teachers at the School of Hope in Ramallah was attacked. Settlers severely injured her elderly mother who had to be hospitalized. When Israeli soldiers arrived, they arrested the woman's sons rather than her attackers.

We are deeply concerned about the recent establishment of a new Israeli settlement in Beit Sahour, the location of which threatens the safety of many families from our school and congregation there. In April, settlers from this outpost damaged Palestinian lands and livestock near Beit Sahour. When men from the village confronted the settlers and demanded they stop trespassing, the settlers called Israeli soldiers who detained the Palestinian villagers including a student from The Evangelical Lutheran School in Beit Sahour and his father. Thankfully, they were released after a few days. These are only two stories out of the hundreds I could share with you from the last few months alone. Every single Palestinian in the West Bank currently lives with the ever-present fear that Israeli settlers could come any night to burn their land, uproot their trees, steal their livestock, drive the from their home, or even kill them. Accompanying this fear is the knowledge that any attempt by Palestinians to resist this violence will be met with harsh and immediate punishment from Israeli authorities, while settlers operate outside the law with impunity.

There are entire villages that have been depopulated by these settler pogroms, and still others where people are unable to sleep as they are always on alert for the nightly attacks. Try to imagine living in these circumstances for even one day, much less months or years. This is untenable.

The Christian village of Taybeh near Ramallah has been the target of many of these attacks. one of the members of our Deaf Ministry lives there alone, and she is terrified for her own safety. Now, Israel has declared the village a closed military zone. Rather than make the people of Taybeh safer, this cuts them off from their schools, jobs, family members, and other essential services.

Many of you may already be familiar with the story of Natalie Abudayyeh, a youth from the Evangelical Lutheran church of the Reformation in Beit Jala who was detained by Israeli forces in June of this year. Natalie is a journalism student at Birzeit University and a former member of the Palestinian National Football Team. On June 6, armed Israeli soldiers broke into her student apartment and took Natalie and three other young women without explanation.

Since then, her family has been barred from seeing her or speaking to her directly. Despite local and international advocacy for her release, she is still being held without due process at the notorious Damon prison, which has been the site of extensive documented human rights violations and abuses. She is allowed limited contact with a lawyer, but no one from her family or the church has seen her in months. Her family is devastated. The entire church is deeply anxious about her safety. Our youth miss her intensely, and fear that they too could be targeted at any time.

How can our young people see a future here, in their homeland, when they see their siblings and friends abducted and imprisoned without cause? As they face limited job opportunities, rising costs of living, housing shortages, and rising violence all around them, how can they find the hope needed to envision a secure life in their land? As they struggle with these questions, more and more youth are choosing to pursue education or work abroad, leaving behind aging family members without support and threatening the very existence of our community in Palestine.

Christians and Christian institutions in Jerusalem are also facing extreme pressures, resulting in the decline of our already small community. In 2026, Christians made up only 1.5% of the population of Jerusalem. In a 2025 report from the Rossing Center, which monitors violence and discrimination against Christians in Jerusalem, documented 155 attacks against Christians in Jerusalem that year. 40% of Christians reported being uncomfortable wearing open symbols of Christianity such as crosses for fear of physical or verbal violence.

The Rossing center divides the pressure on Christians into two categories: "smash" and "squeeze." While "smash" incidents, like the Israeli settler who attached a nun in the Armenian quarter or the priest who was beaten by Israelis on Mount Zion, are what typically make the news, the Rossing Center maintains that the "squeeze" is what has the biggest impact and results in the most loss for the Christian community. Many of these "squeeze" policies have come into effect in recent years.

One big concern for churches and Church institutions is the municipality's choice to move away from the long-held Status Quo regarding Arnona, or tax, of church properties. Since the Ottoman period, all church properties that are used for public service and do not operate on a profit model such as hospitals and schools have been exempt from municipal tax. However, in recent years, the city government has demanded not only current tax payments for certain properties, but back payments of several years of taxes. This has impacted the Armenian and Greek Orthodox Patriarchates, both of which have faced land seizure threats, bank account freezes and other penalties. If this demand for huge tax payments on charitable properties continues and extends to

all churches, it would be devastating both for the Christian presence in Jerusalem and the extensive network of social services in Jerusalem that are run by churches but serve the entire community.

Many of these institutions, especially schools and hospitals, are facing other barriers that threaten their missions. Recently it has been much harder for church institutions to obtain both visas for international clergy and volunteers, and work permits for staff from the West Bank. This year, the Israeli government announced they would not renew dozens of permits for teachers from the West Bank to work in Christian Schools in Jerusalem. Several schools may have to close if they cannot secure these permits. The ELCJHL has not been exempt from these difficulties. We have several staff who have been waiting for years to obtain permits to access the offices in Jerusalem and continue to be denied. Some of our pastors are forbidden from worshipping with us in Jerusalem. My wife and children were not granted permits to live in Jerusalem, forcing us to relocate to Bethlehem. Several of our international partners have struggled to send clergy or volunteers to work with us on the ground in Jerusalem, as Israel is rejecting or extensively delaying their visa applications. International Christian groups making solidarity visits to local churches have been rejected specifically for meeting with Palestinian Christians. The world Council of Churches faces mounting roadblocks in bringing volunteers for their Ecumenical Accompaniment program in Palestine and Israel. In fact, at a recent EAPPI turnover Service at the Redeemer church in Jerusalem, threats of doxxing by Israeli photographers forced the EAs to leave the church in small groups from the back entrance.

All of the "squeeze" tactics are having a disastrous overall impact on our community. People are leaving. Many avoid the Old City and Holy Sites altogether. Young people struggle to see a future here. In the same 2025 report from the Rossing Center, 48% of Palestinian Christians under 30 said they were considering emigration. We fear the complete disappearance of indigenous Christians from the land of Christ's resurrection. We have also seen an alarming disregard of the Status Quo at both Christian and Islamic Holy sites in Jerusalem. During Israel's war with Iran this spring, they imposed a strict closure of these sites, in direct violation of the Status Quo. These closures extended through Ramadan, Lent, Eid al Fitr, and western (Catholic) Holy Week. Latin patriarch Cardinal Pizzaballa was prevented from praying at the Holy Sepulcher on Palm Sunday, despite complying with the restrictions on large gatherings.

There were years in which our pastors and community members discouraged their friends and neighbors from leaving the land. Today, we cannot blame them for leaving our current situation. But we can continue our mission to support our community that remains here and strive to build something better by providing opportunities for people, especially youth, to stay.

As part of our mission, we will continue challenging the Church and the community with our Gender Justice Ministry. We want to continue to lay new bricks toward building justice in the church and society. We are not alone in this endeavor, so we draw examples from our partners, and, at the same time, we learn from the local judicial system and inspire them in turn to revise

their laws. This is not something with an endpoint. This must continue in perpetuity because it is an innate part of our identity in Christ. This year the Gender Justice Ministry:

- Held the 6th Annual Conference on Gender Justice from a National and Religious Perspective
- Implemented psychosocial relief activities for women from each of our congregations, tailored to the interests and preferences of each church
- Supported the development of new research papers into the situation of women and children in Palestine, particularly Gaza
- Held a women's Advent gathering in Palestine and Jordan
- Supported ongoing efforts to update the 2015 Lutheran Family Status Law
- Worked with the ELCJHL Ecclesiastical Court to implement trainings for our judges with the Palestinian Judicial Institute in order to better safeguard the rights of vulnerable populations in our church

In the coming years, we want to maintain the mission of our Diaconal Ministry and build on it. Diakonia is the heart of Martyria. It is the work that we do for Christ through his people. It is how we live out the message of Matthew 25: "What you did for the least of these you did for me." It is work that listens before it acts. It is not only giving alms; it is restoring the spirit of the people. This year our Diaconal Ministry has:

- Served Hot Meals to the community once a week to over 2,500 people in total
- Provided emergency food and medical aid, particularly during the war between Israel and Iran, supporting over 1000 families
- Hosted weekly meetings for the Deaf Ministry, including workshops to build professional and life skills to increase members' capacity for independence
- Held special events for Christmas and Elder's Day
- Launched the "Cooking for a Cure" program to provide local women with mental health support and coping mechanisms while developing culinary skills

Education is where our values are channeled through the pupils into society and into the places of leadership. Therefore, we will always stress the importance of providing holistic, quality education. Our Educational Ministry is one of the pillars of our church. In the last year the Education Ministry:

- Completed the 2025-2026 School Year across three schools and Al Mahaba Kindergarten on the Mount of Olives, serving over 2000 students and employing over 200 staff
- Facilitated extra-curricular, leadership, skill-building, and psychosocial relief activities for students and staff
- Provided ongoing mental health support for students

Our work with youth will continue to lay the groundwork for a better future for our young people in their land and their society, focusing on empowering youth to remain in their homeland. As

we look to the future of our church, we are taking steps to invest in the futures of our young people. Faith formation in our Youth Ministry is one of our main priorities. We are thankful and excited that the Holy Spirit has called three of our youth to study theology at the Near East School of Theology in Lebanon (NEST). George Zeidan completed his first year of study this spring, and Bishara Daoud Nassar and Siraj Khader will begin their first years in the program this fall. Our prayers and support go with them as they answer this call. This year our Youth Ministry has:

- Held annual summer camps in Jericho for over 200 youth, organized by youth leaders
- Organized youth meet-ups for Thanksgiving, Advent, Lent, and other special times, providing safe spaces for our youth to relax and grow in faith and relationships
- Traveled abroad with youth for cultural exchanges with partner churches like Crossroads
- Grew the youth leadership program, providing opportunities for youth to grow in professional and leadership skills. Youth participated in various church ministries as volunteers, deepening their engagement with the church, and developed ownership and accountability in the youth programming by participating in the organizing and implementing of activities for their peers and younger youth

We will also continue the groundbreaking work of our Environmental Education Center to foster the connection between a new generation of Palestinian youth and their land through their work in environmental stewardship and advocacy around climate justice. This year the EEC has:

- Worked with environmental clubs from numerous local schools to implement ecofriendly projects in schools and communities
- Brough hundreds of students to the EEC to learn about native flora and fauna and how we can protect creation
- Worked with local and international councils and government entities to promote policies that support climate justice
- Developed and supported research papers on the impact of ecocide in Gaza
- Held two conferences on Environmental Justice and Education in Palestine
- Celebrated 40 years of the EEC

Another essential aspect of our ministry is continuing to build our relationships with ourselves and with our partners. We are far from a perfect community. We have our struggles and conflicts, but that's what makes us a church. The church is the umbrella under which everybody is gathered. Our relationship with our partners is a church-to-church relationship. We may counsel each other about our difficulties, but we cannot attempt to resolve things for each other. Our witness together means we need to listen to each other so we can walk together in living the joy of the Gospel.

Our partnership does not mean that you only visit us or talk to us; it means you walk with us. We felt you walking with us through your responses to our letters and appeals over the last year. In

Luke 10, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, who sees an injured man lying by the roadside and does not walk by. Likewise, you did not walk by us in our time of need. Partnership means stepping away from the safety of the road and pouring oil and wine on us, offering compassion and care, continuing on to the endless end.

Though much of the core of the ELCJHL's ministry will continue, we are also in a time of transition and growth. As I begin my ministry as Bishop and look toward the future of the church, I see three streams running side by side, intersecting sometimes without interruption to any.

The first stream is working on the organizational part of the church: from the offices to the Synod, the council, the administration, and the schools. Our goal is to bring all of these elements into unity of voice. This includes working on securing the finances of the church through difficult times through establishing and sustaining income generating projects and building the endowment fund to strengthen the church for years to come. Additionally, this stream requires the review of the organizational charts of the church to trim, revise, and empower where necessary. This is not work that can be done on a whim; the church must undertake this effort together. This is also not something that happens overnight. Several aspects of this essential work, such as revising our constitution, taking a close look at our administrative models, and reviewing our financial accounting policies, are difficult, long-term efforts. What we strive to build now will hopefully stabilize and support the church for years to come.

In the last year, the ELCJHL has experienced a serious financial crisis due to circumstances beyond our direct control. Much of our direct support is received in U.S. dollars and euros, while our ministries operate in Israeli shekels. Because of the significant drop in foreign currency rates this year, we have essentially suffered large monetary losses. In addition, the ongoing war and worsening economic conditions have severely affected our local income generating projects. Our tenants have not been able to make regular rent payments. Parents of students in our schools who have never missed a tuition payment or registration fee are now struggling to provide food, shelter, and other basic necessities for their children. We will never refuse an education to any child because of lack of ability to pay, and we will not ask parents to prioritize tuition over feeding their families. However, this has put a significant strain on our education ministry and created a serious cash-flow crisis for the church.

We are grateful for our partners who helped support our basic ministry operations and staff costs during this time. As we move forward, we are exploring long-term projects that will bolster the financial sustainability of the church. We are also working on growing our endowment fund.

The second stream is the public-facing ministry of the church. This is the stream that goes out of the church into the community. This is one of the most fundamental aspects of our work as a church. We can never exclude or remove ourselves from the society in which we live. We cannot close our doors. We think of ourselves as a sent church. This is why our services always end with sending. This element of our mission is our service to the community. We must go out among

the people to serve them. And, as a sent church, we must challenge every part of the things that hurt our society and people. This stream is about our public theology, through which we challenge our society, the occupation, our partners, and the world.

Finally, the third stream is our relationships. This encompasses all our relationships, near and far. We must work to grow and maintain all of them. Our local relationships include our ecumenical partners in Palestine and Jordan, our local interfaith partners, and the civil society in which we operate. These form the bedrock of the partnerships that bolster our day-to-day work. These local churches, organizations, and government ministries are essential partners in our witness.

Our regional partners include the Middle East Council of Churches, the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches, and the Near East School of Theology. It is crucial for our involvement in these councils and associations with our regional peers to be vibrant and sustained. We must cultivate and maintain a visible presence with these regional partners.

The last segment of the relationship stream is, of course, our international relationships with COCOP partners and beyond. This also includes international associations like the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches. Part of our work with the Lutheran World Federation is support of Augusta Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem and their partnership with Al Ahli Hospital in Gaza, a ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem. Despite numerous Israeli strikes on the hospital, Al Ahli has remained open and as operational as possible, becoming a refuge in Gaza's devastated healthcare system. The LWF and the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem have been advocating extensively for the free flow of medical supplies and aid into Gaza, which has still not been restored, and for the establishment of a humanitarian corridor to bring patients from Gaza to Jerusalem for treatment and then facilitate their return to Gaza. This corridor is essential for providing critical care not available in Gaza to many patients, particularly pediatric and cancer patients. This advocacy continues, as Israel refuses to allow the creation of this corridor. We appreciate the efforts of the LWF and all our international partners in contributing to this advocacy.

We need to understand our partners and ask them to understand us at the same time, working to empower our relationships to the benefit of both. At the same time, it is important to cultivate our relationships with partners in the global south as much as in the global north. These south-south relationships are also essential to our work as the global body of Christ. We cherish our COCOP relationships because we amplify one another’s voices, and we also look ahead to how we can expand these vital relationships to our other siblings in Christ throughout the world.

In this report, you will read updates from May of 2025 to May of 2026 from each of our congregations and ministries. This has been a profoundly challenging and transformative time for our church. I invite you to engage deeply with the stories recounted throughout this report. As our pastors and staff relate how the witness of their congregations and ministries continue despite the turmoil of our situation, consider how your churches can be Christ’s witnesses through the power of the Holy Spirit, in Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth.

We give thanks for those who will be able to join us for this year's COCOP gathering and for those who will join from abroad, and our prayers go with all of you. We hope to welcome each of you to Palestine soon.



Bishop Imad Haddad is installed as the 5th Bishop of the ELCJHL, January 2026.



Bishop Imad and partner bishops meet with HM King Abdullah II of Jordan after his installation, January 2026.



Bishop Imad preaches at the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in the Church of the Redeemer, January 2026.



Bishop Imad visits the Evangelical Lutheran School in Beit Sahour, March 2026.

Congregational Reports

Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Amman Arabic-Speaking Congregation

Bishop Dr. Imad Haddad

Overview

The Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Amman, Jordan is the youngest of the ELCJHL congregations. The Church was founded in the 1970s with a primary goal of accompanying the people of Jordan. Our mission has remained constant as we adapt to the changing circumstances caused by the nature of Jordan's geographical location and historical significance to our sister congregations in Palestine.

The Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd is the only congregation of the ELCJHL in Jordan and is an important link between our ministries in Palestine and the Jordanian context and society. Moreover, Good Shepherd is a very important link between the ELCJHL and the Church in the rest of the Arab world especially when taking into consideration travel, communication, and political restrictions.

2025-2026 in the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd

Throughout the year, the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd continued meeting for regular worship, bible study, and fellowship activities. The women's group held regular activities including a visit to the Royal Botanical Garden in Pomegranate Hill and other special meals, visits, and gatherings.

As summer began, we rejoiced at the confirmation of three young women from the Arabic-speaking congregation.

The congregation traveled to the Dead Sea for a retreat in August for a time of relaxation, connection, and biblical study. The theme of the conference was to discuss the use/misuse of scripture in discussions of conflict in the Middle East, and how the local church is called to respond. Our keynote speaker was Rev. Ibrahim Nairouz, and many good conversations were had during the retreat.

During the summer I represented the church at the General Assemblies for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

We ended the summer with a Family Fun Day in September, that brought many families and children to the church for a day of songs, activities, games, and sharing food together.

This fall I traveled to Oslo with Good Shepherd congregation elder Nada Zabana to finalize the friendship agreement between our congregation and two congregations from the Church of Norway. We enjoyed getting to know our partners in Kampen and Vålerenga better, and we look forward to many years of strong relationships between our churches.

At the beginning of October, we held a Thanksgiving Sunday joint service with English-speaking Congregation. As the English-speaking Congregation grows, we continue to host regular bi-lingual services one Sunday a month and on special occasions.

We began Advent by decorating the church together as a congregation. During the first week of Advent, we held the annual Wine and Cheese gathering. The congregation gathered for an evening of fellowship to continue to grow and deepen our community. Later in Advent, we held a special Christmas Festival for the children of the church where they received gifts and were able to experience the joy of the season. We held services with the English-speaking Congregation on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

A group from the Good Shepherd Congregation was able to travel to Palestine to attend the retirement celebrations from Bishop Dr. Sani Ibrahim Azar and the service for my Consecration as Bishop of the ELCJHL. Although only a small group were able to obtain visas to come to Jerusalem for the celebrations, it was a joy to have the Amman congregation represented by this group.

Following the Consecration Service in Jerusalem, I traveled to Amman with a group of international partner bishops for a special service in Amman. We were grateful to have many local church and government partners as well as diplomats attend my first official service in Jordan as Bishop.

At the end of January, I officially moved to Jerusalem to undertake my role as Bishop. Since then, the Arabic-speaking congregation has not had a full-time pastor. We are currently seeking a pastor to fill this role, but at this time the pastors of other ELCJHL congregations are rotating through visiting Amman each week to lead Sunday service.

For the first time in many years, we brought back the annual service at the Bethany Beyond the Jordan Baptismal Site with our siblings from the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem to celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord in February. We hope to continue this tradition to affirm our partnership with our Anglican siblings and to deepen the congregation's connection with the Baptismal Site as a ministry of the ELCJHL.

The outbreak of the war between Israel and Iran caused some disruptions to life in Amman. Sirens sounded regularly throughout the city, and citizens are warned of the dangers of falling

debris from rocket interceptions. The entire region is in a state of turmoil. Worship and church activities continued, but our community has been greatly affected.

Our World Day of Prayer service was delayed due to the war, but we held the service using liturgy from Nigeria at the end of March.

We began Lent with an Ash Wednesday service in February. Throughout the Lent and Easter seasons, we continued meeting as a congregation for worship despite the situation. We celebrated together the hope Easter brings as we continue to pray for peace.

Challenges

One of our biggest challenges now is the lack of a full-time pastor for the Amman Arabic-speaking congregation. Since I was consecrated as Bishop in January, there has not been a full-time pastor who is solely responsible for the Church of the Good Shepherd. This issue was exacerbated when Pastor Mark from the English-speaking congregation evacuated due to the war between the US/Israel and Iran. During this reporting period, the ELCJHL did not have a pastor available to take over in Amman, so this was a challenge we had to manage throughout the year.

Another long-term challenge for the Church of the Good Shepherd is connection between congregations on the East Bank and West Bank of the Jordan River. As the only congregation of the ELCJHL in Jordan, Good Shepherd can feel isolated from the other churches. The current situation including visa issues, border closures, and safety concerns has further entrenched this challenge. A few congregation members from Good Shepherd were able to travel to Jerusalem for the Consecration service in January, but this was an exception.

Witness in the Church of the Good Shepherd

Unfortunately, times of turmoil are not new for us in the Middle East, including Jordan. Now, this turmoil has reached such a point that it is deeply affecting everyday life. In Amman, we were just coming out of a bad situation before COVID. We were still recovering from COVID when the assault on Gaza began. The impacts of the Gaza war were still weighing heavily on the community when the current war began. People in Jordan are very tired. The Jordanian economy depends heavily on tourism and is very impacted by how safe travel is. Whenever there is a situation of this scale, the need for the practical witness of the church becomes even more essential. We cannot separate ourselves from the context of the whole Middle East. We are called, as we have been in many such times, to walk with our community in every way.

Times of turmoil can be personal as well. As a church, we have seen many families experiencing turmoil from our congregation and community. We are able to witness to God’s mercy and love even through the heavy times these families were experiencing. It is my priority that those who come to the church for help will be heard and supported by the church.

Looking Forward

Looking forward, we give thanks for the recent installation of Rev. Tony Nassar as pastor of Good Shepherd. This is a great joy for the ministry and life of the congregation. Moving into the future, we plan to continue to grow our ministries through the grace of God, including our local and international partnerships. We are developing close relationships with congregations in some of our partner churches, and we hope to continue to play an active role in ecumenical Christian relationships in our region.



Confirmation at the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in July, 2025.



Congregants attend the annual Wine and Cheese Advent Gathering at Good Shepherd, December 2025.



Worshippers pray at the cross on Good Friday at Good Shepherd, April 2026.

Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Amman English-Speaking Congregation

Rev. Dr. Mark LaChonce

Overview

The English-speaking congregation in Amman began with some informal meetings in autumn 2024, then formal gatherings at the end of 2024. We have seen steady growth of new people and families, and have already said goodbye to a number of regular attendees, mostly people leaving the country. The congregation maintains a loose relational connection with the Arabic congregation while remaining under their guidance and supervision formally. We established our own advisory council (official leadership remains with the Arabic congregation) in January 2026.

2025-2026 in the Good Shepherd English-speaking Congregation

The congregation continues to meet three or four times a month. Our typical meetings are on Saturday mornings. On the first weekend of each month, we join the Arabic congregation on Sunday evening for combined worship in both languages.

We also host a weekly home Bible study that draws 5-10 individuals. Topics have included studying the Bible as a whole, spirituality and brain science, and discussion of weekly lectionary passages.

In October, we held an overnight trip to the Bethany Beyond the Jordan Baptismal Site, which was attended by five of our congregants.

In November, we continued our annual Thanksgiving meal tradition and hosted 25 people for good food and fellowship.

On December 5th we held a lessons and carols evening Advent service, which was very well attended. Congregation members and a few friends provided the music for the evening. We joined the Arabic congregation to celebrate Christmas together.

A small number of congregants joined the Arabic congregation and our siblings from the Episcopal Church for their annual pilgrimage to the BBJ Baptismal Site to celebrate the Baptism of our Lord on January 30. It was wonderful for our congregation to be part of this special tradition, led by Bishop Imad and Archbishop Hosam Naom of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem.

On Ash Wednesday I led a combined worship for the English of Arabic-speaking congregations.

Throughout the year we have hosted other special outings for the congregation including Baptismal Site visits, hikes, and more.

Challenges

The greatest challenge this year has been my frequent absences. My summer home assignment (a time when many congregants are also away) was replaced with a hastily arranged spring home assignment due to our evacuation from the region during the war with Iran. We pulled together some activities to keep some ministry going and fortunately did not lose any of our regular community, as was feared.

The congregation continues to grow, including families with a number of children. We are facing the need to provide more age-appropriate activities for the children that will also enable full involvement by the parents in worship. Ideas include a nursery, children's message and activity pages for young worshippers.

Saying goodbye to people who have been an important part of the church community is a normal and frequent occurrence in a ministry like this. It is difficult to say goodbye, but it is a joy to have had people be part of our lives together.

Another challenge remains encouraging the English congregation members to participate in the bilingual meetings. I will continue to ask about their interest levels and look for changes that would encourage their involvement, or consider ceasing the bilingual meetings and meeting in English every week instead.

Joys

The large number of children we have in the congregation and their energy and exuberance are always a great joy. It has also been a joy to witness the consistent growth in attendance throughout this year.

Each week, I witness how strong our community is, as evidenced by the practice of most attendees remaining after worship for around an hour to talk. We also arrange social activities that are well-attended, and are a great joy for all of us.

Witness in the English-speaking Congregation

We continue to proclaim the gospel in word and sacrament on a regular basis. Many of our congregants are also motivated and active in presenting a witness to the broader community by their deeds and words. Many are active in caring for marginalized populations such as refugees and in efforts toward building peace. As a community of foreigners, the presence of our congregation in Jordan is a witness to the love we share for God's people throughout the world.

Looking Forward

As we move into the next year, we are looking forward to providing more community and social opportunities for our congregants such as game nights, picnics, and hikes. These opportunities for fellowship are always beloved and well attended by our community.

We are also looking for ways to include our youngest members in worship in age-appropriate ways, whether that be secondary activities outside the sanctuary or more hands-on options to get involved with the service.



Rev. Mark LaChonce leads English-speaking worship at Good Shepherd, August 2025.



Pastor Mark participates in the multi-lingual welcome service for Bishop Imad Haddad following his installation as Bishop, January 2026.



Rev. Mark LaChonce and Rev. Christy Lohr Sapp give communion at English-speaking worship, February 2026.



Members of the English-speaking congregation participate in joint worship with the Arabic-speaking congregation on Easter Sunday, April 2026.

Lutheran Church of the Reformation Beit Jala in the ELCJHL

Rev. Dr. Fursan Zu'mot

Overview

The Church of the Reformation's congregation is in Beit Jala, Palestine, and is the oldest congregation in the ELCJHL. There is a strong culture carried throughout the years by the church's original member families which still informs the congregation's tradition today. The strong Lutheran presence and heritage in Beit Jala is important in this congregation. Members are proud of the church's strong relationships and cooperation with other Beit Jala churches and organizations. This church has always been dedicated to the vulnerable in their community and prioritizes opening its doors to all.

2025-2026 Events

The beginning of the summer was disrupted by Israel's war with Iran, but we were able to continue holding regular worship.

In August, we held a joint congregational retreat with the Jerusalem congregation. Over 150 congregants from both churches traveled to Jericho to rest and engage in fellowship and spiritual renewal.

As the school year began, we continued weekly worship and resumed regular Bible Study for the congregation. The Abraham's Tent after-school program, which shares space with the congregation, also resumed their regular meetings and increased their number of teachers.

This year we held Sunday School activities every Friday, averaging between 25 – 100 attendees each week.

In October we held the annual Thanksgiving service and meal for the congregation, celebrating the bounty of the harvest season and giving prayers of thanks to God for all his blessings.

During Advent, we held two special events in partnership with the Diaconal Ministry and the Youth Ministry: The annual Diaconal Ministry Christmas Concert and an Advent worship and fellowship evening for youth.

We celebrated the First Advent, Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day as a congregation.

In January, Bishop Dr. Imad Haddad was installed as Bishop in Jerusalem, and some members of our congregation were able to attend the service there. Following the installation, we held a service of welcome in the Beit Jala church.

In March, the World Day of Prayer service that we hold annually was disrupted by the outbreak of another war between Israel and Iran. However, we were able to hold a women-led service to

recognize International Women's Day and Mother's Day. We continue to prioritize uplifting and honoring the role of women in our church and society.

During Lent weekly worship and Bible Study were held with a special focus on the seasonal liturgy.

Our Holy Week plans were also disrupted by the war, and we were not able to hold the annual egg hunt in partnership with the Diaconal Ministry due to safety concerns.

However, during Holy Week we were able to hold worship on Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday. Despite the fear and death that surrounds us, we continue to proclaim the joy of the resurrection.

In May I received my Doctor of Ministry from United Lutheran Seminary, and spend time visiting our ELCA partners in the U.S.

This year we welcomed visits from many of our international partners and sister congregations, including a congregation from Hamburg, a congregation from Schleswig, and Lutheran partners from Switzerland. We also hosted an ELCA group from Wisconsin.



Children from the Church of the Reformation light the first Advent candle, December 2025.



Women from the Church of the Reformation celebrate Mother's Day, March 2026.



Worshippers from the Church of the Reformation pray during Good Friday service, April 2026.



Pastor Fursan poses with ELCA partners Presiding Bishop Yehiel Curry and Global Mission MENA Desk Director Rev. Gabi Aelabouni after receiving his Doctor of Ministry degree, May 2026.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Beit Sahour in the ELCJHL

Rev. Ashraf Tannous

Overview

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Beit Sahour is one of the smallest in the ELCJHL, but the church and congregation play a vital role in this tight-knit community. The church is located on the grounds of the Evangelical Lutheran School of Beit Sahour, and has one of the closest connections to our ELCJHL schools of any congregation. The church also hosts the Beit Sahour Lutheran Shepherds Scout program, which is a vital part of keeping our youth engaged with the church and community. Sharing a pastor with Christmas Lutheran in Bethlehem has created a deep connection between the two congregations, and joint events throughout the years and grown the impact of both communities. This year, we celebrate the 125th Anniversary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and School in Beit Sahour.

2025-2026 in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Beit Sahour

On May 18th I was installed as the pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Beit Sahour in a special service that also included the confirmation of several youth from the church. A few days later, we held a special prayer and celebration to offer gratitude and farewell to Pastor Munther Isaac after his years in the Beit Sahour community. This event was attended by many local partners including government and local church officials.

After my installation, we held a congregation-wide family day to discuss the future of the church and set a schedule that worked for everyone. During the meeting we brainstormed activities that the church community would like to implement and shared a fellowship meal together to get to know each other better.

Each Wednesday we hold bible study in a different congregation member's home, giving us the unique opportunity to get to know one another better through spiritual connection and shared hospitality at the same time. Every Tuesday older youth in the church attend a joint meeting with youth from Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem.
On Thursdays, youth ages 12-16 have their own meeting in Beit Sahour. The congregation meets for worship each Sunday at 9. a.m.

We continued the annual summer camp for children from the Beit Sahour congregation and church on the Beit Sahour campus. This campus has historically been a community hub for Beit Sahour year-round, and we are proud to continue that. The camp was very well attended and successful. At the beginning of August we had a time of renewal and fellowship at our family retreat in Jericho where we discussed church liturgy together.

We celebrated Thanksgiving together as a church on the first Sunday in October with an evening service and dinner.

In December, we had several services and activities related to Christmas. Though violence has continued throughout the country this year, the decision was made to resume some Christmas celebrations this year as a sign of resilience and an acknowledgement of the hope Christ's birth brings to a broke world. Beit Sahour held an evening prayer service and dinner to celebrate the First Sunday of Advent. On Christmas Eve we worshiped with Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. As the dire economic situation in the Bethlehem area continues, we distributed coupons for food to congregation members this year in addition to gifts for the children.

The Beit Sahour Lutheran Shepherds Scout Group is an important part of our ministry. This year, Christmas celebrations resumed in Bethlehem for the first time since the genocide in Gaza began in 2023. In December, our Scouts joined the parades around Christmas. In total, between the Eastern and Western liturgical calendars they participated in five total marches on December feast days and Christmas Eve.

In January, the Scouts also had the honor of participating in the procession through Jerusalem before the Consecration Service of Bishop Dr. Imad Haddad. Several congregation members were able to attend the service in Jerusalem as well. On January 25th, the Beit Sahour congregation and school held special service to welcome Bishop Imad, attended by many important local government and church officials.

As Lent began, the congregation attended a joint Ash Wednesday service at Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, followed by a fasting dinner. We celebrated Holy Week and Easter together as a congregation against the backdrop of the ongoing war between Israel and Iran. This was a challenging period for everyone in the community, but we continued to meet as a congregation to pray and support one another.

Throughout this year we have welcomed solidarity visits from many of our partners around the world including some from the United States, Germany, and beyond. We are in the process of starting a new partner relationship with two communities in the Church of Norway: Lambertseter Parish and Bekkelaget and Ormoy Parish.

Challenges During the 2025-2026 Report Period

Today, the biggest challenge for us is how to provide a decent life for our congregation, especially in the absence of work and income in Beit Sahour. This absence of work leaders to an absence of a decent and dignified life. As the lack of tourism continues to devastate the Bethlehem area, many families from the church and school have chosen to emigrate. This is leading to existential concerns for the Christian population here. We are also very concerned

about the new illegal Israeli settlement in Beit Sahour and what this will bring for the community. Land confiscation and restriction of movement is already crippling for our entire community, and we are very worried about how this will progress and impact our ministry.

Witness in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Beit Sahour

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Beit Sahour we have four main pillars of ministry. The first one is the church itself; the members of this church who are resilient and steadfast. The congregation itself is a strong witness, speaking about our faith as Palestinian Christians and sharing it with the local and international communities through youth, confirmation classes, attendance at the services, women's work, bible studies and Sunday School. With these activities we continually witness to the great work done by the church throughout the 125 years we have been in Beit Sahour.

The second pillar is the school. Our mere existence as a school is a big witness to our existence and resilience in Beit Sahour. As Palestinians, to exist is to resist, and this is what we do through our educational ministry through the school. The third pillar is the Shepherds Scout Troop, which consists mainly of the younger generation. Through this scout troop, we teach our younger generations how to have Sumud; how to be steadfast and connected to the land. And the fourth pillar is the Alternative Tourism Group (ATG) that works hard to bring visitors to the Holy Land and transform their perspectives through an alternative form of tourism. This tourism challenges the very idea of tourism and helps pilgrims get to know the land, culture, and traditions by getting to know the indigenous people of the land.

In this way, every element of our ministry in Beit Sahour is a witness to our faith, our resilience, and our existence as Palestinian Christians living in the Holy Land, throughout the many times of turmoil we have faced.

Looking Forward

As I conclude this report, I want to be honest and say that the vision for the future as we look forward to 2026-2027 is not clear. Our challenges are more pressing than ever. The future is foggy. But still, we are planning to keep our people here by the help of God's grace and God's Holy spirit. In the face of impossible circumstances, we are trying to improvise and work hard, and we ask God help us.

As we look forward, we still plan to keep praying, holding bible studies, engaging in exchange programs with partners abroad, organizing youth and family conferences and summer camps, and continuing our witness to Christ's justice, peace, and everlasting love.



Youth are confirmed into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Beit Sahour, May 2025.



Thanksgiving worship in Beit Sahour, October 2025.



The Beit Sahour congregation celebrates Christmas Day, December 2025.



Church elders, representatives from the Evangelical Lutheran School, and local ecumenical partners welcome Bishop Imad Haddad for his inaugural service in Beit Sahour following his installation as Bishop, February 2026.

The Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church, Bethlehem in the ELCJHL

Rev. Ashraf Tannous

Overview

Nestled in the center of Bethlehem's Old City, Christmas Lutheran Church is one of our most centrally located churches, and one of the most internationally recognized. The church is home to a vibrant and passionate local congregation and has historically hosted a constant stream of international visitors. As we minister from Christ's birthplace, Christmas Lutheran has captured the attention of the global church for many years. Our ministry here has historically had one of the clearest and most unique witnesses to our international Christian siblings.

2025-2026 in Christmas Lutheran and Evangelical Lutheran

On June 1st, 2026, I was installed as the new pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church, after many years of service from Pastor Munther Isaac. The work of Christmas Lutheran has always been very large in scope and unique to the church. As I began my work with the congregation, we had a large meeting as a congregation to discuss and plan how to build on the strong foundation left by Pastor Munther and his predecessors and continue our work in the future in a way that best serves the congregation and community. At this meeting we decided to host weekly bible studies on Fridays, older youth meetings on Tuesdays, and confirmation-aged youth meetings on Saturdays. We hold worship each Sunday morning at 10:30 a.m. with a joint Sunday School program for our robust children's ministry.

During the summer, we held several conferences and camps for children and families as a way to maintain engagement and spiritual renewal during the holidays. We held a two-week summer conference in Bethlehem for Sunday School-aged children. In July, we held the annual family retreat for the whole congregation in Jericho, focused on the theme of Church Liturgy. Youth from Christmas Lutheran also joined the ELCJHL-wide youth conferences in Jericho throughout the summer months.

Throughout the 2025-2026 period, our local and international partner connections have been very strong. Many local government and ecumenical church officials have visited Christmas Lutheran for special holidays, services, and events because of its position and historic significance. We have also participated in many Zoom meetings and online conferences with partners and friends abroad to keep them informed about the situation and the church's activities. This year we hosted several solidarity visits from partners from the United States, the United Kingdom, Norway, Germany, Finland, and more.

As we entered fall, we continued regular worship and activities with a special prayer and lunch on the 5th of October to mark Thanksgiving Sunday.

Advent and Christmas are very busy times for Christmas Lutheran Church in particular due to its location in Bethlehem. On the 7th of December we held our annual Zoom service with United Reform Church in the United Kingdom. Then on the 13th, we hosted the popular joint simulcast service with our siblings from the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, the Episcopal Cathedral of Philadelphia and ELCA Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, followed by a reception.
On the 21st of December we had a service in the evening just for our congregation, followed by a celebration and light dinner where we distributed Christmas gifts for families and children. This was an important chance for fellowship and community before the large Christmas Eve service. On Christmas Eve we were joined by the Beit Sahour congregation and the English and German-speaking congregations from the Church of the Redeemer for a tri-lingual service.

The new year brought a very busy time for the entire ELCJHL including Christmas Lutheran. Our youth joined a combined conference with youth from Beit Sahour and Ramallah from January 2nd to the 5th. In early January, many visiting delegations arrived for the installation of Bishop Dr. Imad Haddad. Many of these delegations worshipped with us or visited the church during this time. We had meetings with groups from the ELCA, Church of Finland, Church of Norway, ELCIC, and German churches.

Many from our congregation were able to attend the consecration of Bishop Imad on the 11th of January in Jerusalem, which was a blessing. We had our own special service in Bethlehem to welcome the new Bishop on February 8th, and were honored to be joined by several government and church officials for the occasion.

The women's ministry in Bethlehem is very active. They meet regularly for activities that foster psychosocial relief, fellowship, spiritual renewal, and more. In February they held a special breakfast together. On March 8th they prepared and led a Sunday service for International Women's Day.

During Lent we hosted a joint Ash Wednesday service with the Beit Sahour congregation. We also held two evenings of hymns and meditation with some of our Anglican colleagues.

At the end of February, life in Palestine was significantly disrupted by the beginning of the war between the United States/Israel and Iran. Despite this, our congregation continued to worship together as the situation allowed. Many larger events and activities were cancelled or postponed.

Even in the midst of war, we held our usual Holy Week worship services and celebrated Christ's resurrection together as a church on Easter. We also started a new tradition of holding a simulcast Easter Vigil with our sister congregation of St. John's Lutheran Church in Salisbury, North Carolina.

During this year we began hosting an evening service once a month. Because Sunday is a work day for many people, this allows those who can't attend on Sunday mornings to join us with some regularity.

Challenges During the 2025-2026 Report Period

Economically, Bethlehem is one of the cities most dependent on tourism. Unfortunately, both internal and external tourism is still very weak due to the situation. During the 2025-2026 period, the continuing genocide in Gaza, escalating violence in the West Bank, and two wars with Iran have decimated the tourism industry. Internationally, people are afraid to visit, and sometimes they are even restricted from visiting by their government's policies. Internally, Bethlehem is surrounded by hundreds of gates that isolate the city from the other close cities like Jerusalem, Hebron, and other places in the West Bank. This keeps Bethlehem empty of even people who are close by, like from other West Bank cities or places in the north of historic Palestine who traditionally make up most internal tourism revenue. This has a significant impact on our church community, with many of our congregation members living in very financially insecure situations.

Additionally, recent annexation of land has left the Bethlehem area with only 20% of its historic space. Recent decisions by the Knesset have brought more anxiety to Bethlehemites, many of whom are afraid of losing their lands because the Israeli authorities are not respecting property deeds. All of this has led to increased emigration of people from Bethlehem. More and more people are considering leaving the country.

The war this spring further exacerbated these existing challenges.

Beyond the political situation, Christmas Lutheran is a big church with a very large space. The historic building is aging, and needs significant renovations. As we move forward, we are looking for creative ways to raise the necessary funds to preserve and protect this space that is not only an important symbol of Christianity and Lutheranism in the birthplace of Christ, but home to a vibrant congregation with many needs.

Witness in Christmas Lutheran Church

Bethlehem is the city of peace. The city that witnessed the birth of the love, the hope, and the faith of the world in the birth of our lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, Bethlehem plays a unique role for Palestinians, and especially Palestinian Christians. The role of Christmas Lutheran Church and her congregants is very important for the local and international community. Our people are widely known for raising their voices to speak out for justice and peace for this land and for the whole world. The city of peace can't do anything except witness for peace. And this is what we do as Lutherans here in this church – by welcoming international groups, sharing our stories with them, reaching out to international communities to form relationships and speaking up boldly

about the witness that we have been carrying throughout the history of the dawn of Christianity. In this, we are witnessing, no matter what turmoil we are experiencing, not only to our faith in Jesus but to our rights as human beings and children of God.

Looking Forward

As we look forward to next year, we find joy as a congregation in how our ministries have continued despite all circumstances. In this resilience, we also witness to the strength and hope our faith gives us. However, as the situation in the region continues to deteriorate, we are also concerned about what the future will hold. We are experiencing times of great uncertainty. We trust in the grace of God to bring us through and guide us as we begin another year of ministry in our community. Despite everything, we will remain in Bethlehem and continue to show Christ's love to our people.



Pastor Ashraf is installed as pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church, June 2025



Christmas Lutheran Church youth Bishara Nassar prays during the multi-lingual Christmas Eve service in Bethlehem, December 2025.



The Beit Sahour and Bethlehem congregations hold a joint Ash Wednesday service at Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, February 2026.



12 youth from Christmas Lutheran Church celebrate Confirmation, May 2026.

Lutheran Church of the Redeemer Arabic Speaking Congregation in the ELCJHL

Rev. Rodny Said and Rev. Sally Azar

Overview

The Arabic speaking congregation of Redeemer Lutheran Church has a long history of seeking out church in times of struggle and loss. In 1948, many of the families of our current congregants fled their northern homes to seek refuge in then-Jordanian Jerusalem. Since then, these families have found their identity in the church, as often the Christian identity gets lost as a minority between our Jewish and Muslim neighbors. Today, our congregation continues to find meaning and belonging in their Lutheran identity. The congregation has a large youth population, and parents love finding a safe and entertaining place for their children in church events and activities. Throughout the year, the congregation loves spending time together and enjoys the active nature of church life with Redeemer Lutheran.

2025-2026 Events

This reporting period began with great joy as five youth from our congregation were confirmed in their faith in a service on June 8th.

However, shortly after, war between Israel and Iran that significantly disrupted day to day life and ministry. In Jerusalem, very strict regulations were in place regarding mass gatherings including religious services. This continued for several weeks before a ceasefire was called.

In August, we were able to travel to Jericho with around 180 people from the Jerusalem and Beit Jala congregations for a three-day joint retreat there. This was an important time to rest and relax after a stressful summer and was a good opportunity to deepen the relationship of fellowship between our congregations.

Throughout the year, we continued to hold our weekly bible studies for the congregation.

In September, we planned a special two-day retreat for the Church Elders in Tabgha. During the retreat we discussed the new by-laws that were to be implemented in the congregation. This was a very fruitful time of deliberation and decision making with congregational leadership.

Our annual Thanksgiving worship and meal with the congregation was a chance to give thanks to God for all we have and to lift up prayers for those in our community who are still without food, water, and shelter.

Also in October, youth from the Jerusalem congregation participated in a special event in partnership with the Gender Justice Ministry where they took a tour of Jerusalem's Old City, including walking along the walls of the city. They also visited the room of the Last Supper, Dormition Abbey, and David's Tomb. In a time when Palestinian youth are continually being

alienated from their own city, this was an important opportunity for our youth to reconnect with their home.

On October 31st we celebrated Reformation Day with our annual tri-lingual worship with the English and German congregations as well as international guests and visitors in the Redeemer.

In November, both pastors (Rodny and Sally) traveled to Zimbabwe to participate in the Peace Branches program there in partnership with FELM.

As Advent began, we resumed our joint bible studies with our siblings in Christ from the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, sharing dinner and fellowship together each week after our discussions.

This year we held a special St. Nicholas Day celebration on the Mount of Olives, with a visit from St. Nicholas himself and activities for children.

During Advent the Arabic, English, and German-speaking congregations met for Christmas Caroling at Augusta Victoria on the Mount of Olives.

We celebrated Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day together as a congregation.

January brought another important annual tradition to Redeemer, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. During this week we hosted one night of worship in Redeemer and joined our Ecumenical partners around the city for the other nights of prayer.

At the end of February, another war between Israel and Iran began, bringing new challenges and disruptions to our community. In Jerusalem, the restrictions around gatherings were very serious. Gatherings at workplaces and places of worship without a shelter were prohibited and all mass gatherings were banned.

In the early weeks of the war, we were unable to safely hold Bible Studies, so we began visiting congregants to pray with them in their homes. As Lent continued, we were able to hold joint Bible Studies with the Anglicans at St. George's Cathedral, because they have a shelter in the building.

Due to these restrictions, the World Day of Prayer service scheduled for March was canceled.

As the war continued into April, our Easter celebrations were significantly impacted. The typical Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday processions through the Old City were not allowed to happen. The Holy Sepulcher was completely closed, and access to the Old City was restricted for non-residents or employees.

We were able to hold a small Maundy Thursday worship in the Church of the Redeemer, but it was greatly reduced in scale. We participated in a Good Friday service and stations of the cross procession at St. George's Cathedral instead of the typical procession on the Via Dolorosa.

Our egg dyeing event for children from the congregation took place at the LWF Training Center in Beit Hanina.

For the first time ever, due to restrictions on accessing the Old City, we held our Easter Sunday worship on the Mount of Olives.

Shortly after Easter, a ceasefire was announced.

In April of 2026, we both visited Ulsteinvik, Norway, to begin forming a relationship with the congregation there and a local Folk School. We are continuing to grow this partnership today, and we have an upcoming joint worship service in January. While in Norway, we also traveled to Oslo to meet with Einar Tjelle at the church headquarters and meet with Oslo Bishop Sunniva Glyver in her office there.

In May we held our joint Ascension Day service on the Mount of Olives.

Despite the many challenges and disruptions that impacted this reporting period, our regular ministry continued including weekly worship, baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

Challenges

As mentioned above, the wars during this period significantly disrupted our ministry. Besides the periods of active fighting and government restrictions on gatherings, the general atmosphere throughout the year has made many things more difficult. Increased checkpoint closures and new gates and barricades have made it harder to reach the West Bank. We are seeing that people from Jerusalem are now scared to enter the West Bank at all due to high levels of settler and military violence.

We are also seeing many more young people from the Christian community who are planning or preparing to leave the country. Now when we meet with people in their 20s and 30s, the main topic of conversation is always how to find opportunities abroad. Even people with well-paying and stable jobs are beginning to make plans to raise their families abroad. This is a shocking change from three or four years ago. This change has come because of the dangerous increase in extremist behavior in Jerusalem. Racism against Palestinians, including Christians (and sometimes especially Christians), is reaching an intense level. Our community members no longer go to Jewish areas of the city out of fear for their safety. If you speak to any Palestinian in Jerusalem, we can give you numerous examples of the disparity in rights and treatment between Palestinians and Jewish Israelis. There is so much mistrust in the city now, and the current Israeli government is fueling this hatred. Spitting attacks against clergy are on the rise, and we hear many stories of Jewish Israelis shouting at indigenous Christians to “go back” to Europe. When Israel claims to support and protect Christians in Israel, they only mean international Christians who support them, not indigenous Palestinian Christians.

Witness in the Church of the Redeemer Arabic-Speaking Congregation

Because of the extreme difficulties of living in Jerusalem as a Palestinian Christian today, the way our congregation and the broader Christian community continues to live out their faith is a strong form of witness through turmoil.

In the last few years, the small Christian community here has been growing even closer together in support of one another's homes, livelihoods, businesses, and more. Even as many Christian families are forced to leave, others have opened businesses and continued to put down roots in the land. This itself is a witness to the presence of indigenous Christianity in Jerusalem.

We both grew up in Jerusalem, and in our lifetimes there has not been a harder period for life in the city. Today even wearing a cross can make you a target, so continuing to wear the cross is a witness to our faith, our church, and our community. Each activity and show of presence from our congregation and our Ecumenical partners in Jerusalem is part of proclaiming our faith and hope in Jesus Christ, and our belonging as Christians in the Holy City.

Looking Forward

As we look forward to the future, we struggle to see a light at the end of the tunnel. This has been a very difficult year for our community. We see hope in the continued life of our congregation, in the faith and participation of our youth members, and in the mutual support of our Christian siblings in Palestine and Jordan and around the world. In the coming years, we hope to strengthen our partner relationships, continue to foster opportunities for our youth to deepen their connection to their homeland, and hold more joint activities with other ELCJHL ministries and congregations. We continue to pray for an end to war and violence, and we hope a time will come soon when all our congregations can meet together in Jerusalem.



Pastor Rodny and Pastor Sally lead Reformation Day Service in the Church of the Redeemer with Pastor Ines Fischer of the German-speaking congregation.



Pastor Rodny gives the children's sermon during Thanksgiving worship, October 2025.



Pastor Rodny and Pastor Sally participate in the installation of Bishop Imad Haddad at the Church of the Redeemer, January 2026.



Congregants from the Church of the Redeemer process around the church on Palm Sunday, April 2026.

Lutheran Church of the Redeemer English Speaking Congregation in the ELCJHL

Rev. Sally Azar and Rev. Dr. Christy Lohr Sapp

Overview

The English-Speaking Congregation at the Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem is a long-standing ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL), serving a diverse international community of pilgrims, students, diplomats, aid workers, and long-term residents of the Jerusalem area. It offers a spiritual home grounded in Lutheran liturgy and theology while remaining ecumenical and inclusive in spirit.

This ministry is significant to the ELCJHL as a symbol of hospitality and international witness in the heart of the Holy City. It brings together people from across the globe for worship, fellowship, and shared concern for justice and peace. The congregation is defined by its openness, its grounding in Word and Sacrament, and its ability to hold space for people navigating life in Jerusalem, often during very challenging times.

Since July 2024, Pastor Sally had been shepherding this community as the sole full-time pastor of the congregation with help from other ministry partners, particularly Deacon Marc Falconer. In November 2025, Pastor Christy Lohr Sapp and her family arrived in Jerusalem to accompany the ELCJHL as part of the English-speaking ministry at Redeemer. Rev. Christy was installed as co-pastor of the congregation in January 2026.

We share special gratitude to some of our German colleagues, Rev. Ines Fischer and Micha for helping us with music during worship this year.

2025–2026 in the English-speaking Congregation of Redeemer

June 2025 began with the 12-day war between Israel and Iran. Worship continued online for our community during this time. Worship resumed in person after the war and continued during the summer. Many from our group travel abroad during the summer, but we still had a small group attending each week.

In August we had an end of summer gathering to mark the start of a new school year where we baked communion bread together. In September we also met for a fun pancake breakfast one week after service.

In October, we joined the German-speaking congregation from Redeemer along with our Anglican siblings for a volunteer day at the Tent of Nations. We helped with the olive harvest and also did some tree planting and maintenance with other volunteers.

We helped plan and host the annual Reformation Day multi-lingual service at the end of October with many of our Lutheran and ecumenical siblings.

In November we celebrated the arrival of Pastor Christy and her family to Jerusalem. One of their first events with the congregation was a Thanksgiving dinner on the Mount of Olives which was a great chance to get to know the community better.

During Advent the congregation met weekly for Bible study based on the devotional, “Expecting Emmanual,” focused on the genealogy of women who helped bring Jesus into the world. This facilitated great discussion.

January was a very busy month. We celebrated Pastor Christy’s installation as co-pastor, quickly followed by the honorary service and reception to mark Bishop Ibrahim Azar’s retirement and the consecration service for Bishop Imad Haddad. During this time, the English-speaking congregation hosted many groups and visitors who were in town for these big events. We saw many pilgrimage groups from our partner churches as well as individual visitors and tourists during the winter and early spring.

We helped plan and host the service at the Church of the Redeemer during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity alongside our partners from their Arabic and German-speaking congregations.

As we approached Lent, we held the first annual Shrove Tuesday pancake dinner in Redeemer, which was very well received. We also hosted many international guests in our packed chapel on Ash Wednesday to begin the season of fasting and reflection.

During Lent, we also held weekly Bible Studies, based on the devotional, “Prone to Wander.”

The second war with Iran that began at the end of February created significant disruptions in our ministry. Services and bible studies temporarily moved online, although we were able to resume meeting in person after the first week. Pastor Christy and her family were temporarily evacuated to the U.S. by the ELCA, where they continued their ministry until July. Pastor Christy continued to help lead bible studies and other congregational activities in Jerusalem online.

We were thankfully able to continue gathering as a congregation during this time and continued to support each other as a congregation. Most of our international community remained in Jerusalem throughout the war.

As the war continued into Holy Week, many of the typical annual traditions such as the Palm Sunday procession into the Old City, Maundy Thursday procession and candle-light vigil in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Good Friday Via Dolorosa were cancelled. Access to the Old City and any mass gatherings were severely restricted. Despite this, we managed to hold a small multi-lingual Maundy Thursday service at the Church of the Redeemer, and we joined our siblings at St. George's Anglican Cathedral for Stations of the Cross on Good Friday. On Easter Sunday we worshipped at sunrise on the Mount of Olives.

Challenges

One of the biggest challenges for us is the political situation in Jerusalem. On top of the hardship of occupation in Jerusalem and the West Bank and the ongoing devastation in Gaza, regional instability and war has once again dampened tourism and the number of internationals living in the Holy Land. This also impacts our budget as a congregation due to limited offering contributions.

Despite this challenge, our congregation continues to meet regularly. Through the last several years of turmoil, we have developed a core group of long-term international residents in Jerusalem who have been present throughout numerous wars and difficult periods. Though we look forward to the return of pilgrims to our services, we give thanks for this steadfast community.

Pastor Christy's temporary relocation to the U.S. early this spring was also a challenge for us as pastors and for her family to navigate, although worship was able to continue during those months. We were happy to welcome her and her family back this summer.

Witness in the Church of the Redeemer English-speaking Congregation

Because this congregation includes diplomats, aid workers, pilgrims, students, and others, the English-speaking congregation is an open place for people to connect through their work in this land regardless of their nationalities, cultures, backgrounds, and opinions. As a ministry of the ELCJHL, we are here to strengthen and support the work of the rest of the ELCJHL through our joint services and activities, and through bridge-building across culture and tradition. This is a place where unique relationships and formed and strengthened, and where people both give back and learn from each other based on their perspectives and background. Each of us have something to learn and teach. This is a bold witness to our faith and to our values that persists even through times of turmoil. As we mentioned above, the core of our congregation today is a very steadfast and resilient group who are committed to continuing to live their faith here in Jerusalem regardless of what comes.

One of the ways the congregation supports each other is through knowledge sharing, advocacy, and action throughout the situation. Our WhatsApp group is a very active hub, both of people currently living in the Jerusalem area and regularly attending service and those who have moved on to other places in the world. This community reaches beyond the Holy Land and touches many places through those who have come and gone in years past. These people continue to pray for and uplift the ministry of the ELCJHL, and they continue to share what the reality is in Palestine to those in their home contexts.

Looking Forward

It's difficult to look too far forward when the future is very uncertain. However, as we continue to pray for more peaceful times ahead, we hope to hold some outings and retreats for the

English-speaking congregation. We also want to uplift and incorporate the work and talents of our congregation members into our ministry. For instance, one of our regular attendees has written a book about pilgrimages in Jerusalem, and we plan to have him lead a walkthrough of Holy Sites in the Old City soon.

We hope that the situation moves in a more positive direction where we can welcome more tourists and pilgrim groups to worship.



Pastor Sally and Pastor Christy at Pastor Christy's installation service, January 2026



Members of the English-speaking congregation attend worship in St. John's Chapel.



Pastor Sally, Pastor Christy, and members of the English-speaking congregation work to prepare the Advent wreath, November 2025.



Shrove Tuesday pancake dinner for the English-speaking congregation, February 2026.

Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hope, Ramallah in the ELCJHL

Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac

Overview

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hope in Ramallah was founded in 1954, in response to the stated need of Christian refugees in the area. Thanks to the passion, dedication, and drive of the congregation, the church continues to grow into the present day. The Ramallah congregation is always full of life and energy, new ideas, and the spirit of community. An important aspect of ministry in Ramallah is the deep ties the Church of Hope has to the Ecumenical Council of Christians in Ramallah and the time and energy invested in this partnership. The church used to share a campus with the Evangelical Lutheran School of Hope in Ramallah. Although the school has moved to a new location, the congregation still maintains close ties to the school community.

2025-2026 in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hope

"For everything there is a season." This season has been a time of new beginnings and significant change for both my family and the congregation. Like any period of change, there have been challenges during this transition, but it has mostly been a very positive time of growth for our community.

I am grateful that the ELCJHL devoted funds and time to the renovation of the parsonage in Ramallah. I was involved with the project from the beginning, even before I relocated to Ramallah in June, and we were able to complete many necessary repairs to both the interior and exterior of the house. The congregation strongly values this parsonage, and having the pastor live so close to the church itself has many benefits for myself and the community.

Since I began my ministry in Ramallah in June, I have realized that the church building itself needs lots of work. This year we upgraded the AC system, at a cost of $25,000 that was raised by the congregation and immediate community in Ramallah. We also installed a completely new sound system and a new live broadcasting system including a camera and a new computer. This has allowed us to stream our services weekly and to hold broadcasts of special services and events for our international followers, partners, and community members who are not able to worship with us in person.

As we began our work this year, the youth ministry was highlighted as a priority by the church elders. Since my ministry began in June, the youth ministry of the church has blossomed. We have almost-weekly youth meetings for three age groups: confirmation class, teenage youth, and young adults. In total we have 45 active youth in the congregation. We are blessed to have young people in worship each Sunday. The young adult group is made up of 12 very committed people, and they are currently undergoing community leadership training based on psychosocial relief methods led by the Anar organization.

The women's ministry in Ramallah is also very active. For several years women from two age groups have been meeting each week without fail, regardless of the situation.

In the summer of 2025, we had a family conference in Jericho which was an important time of respite and renewal for the congregation. We also had several other fellowship gatherings. The Ramallah congregation loves to gather in community whenever possible, and we try to keep those opportunities frequent.

During the height of the starvation crisis in Gaza this summer we held a special prayer for peace. This prayer was coordinated with other churches in Ramallah and was attended by many local officials including the Palestinian Prime Minister.

On Thanksgiving Sunday, we held an evening service and dinner by more than 150 people. We have now made it a goal to hold at least one evening worship per month, because many congregation members have to work on Sunday mornings. These evening services usually coincide with special events or holidays in the church calendar like Thanksgiving, the First Advent, Ash Wednesday, and more. These services have been very well attended, and we are committed to providing more opportunities for these large gatherings.

During the Christmas season we held services for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, as well as two Christmas concerts. I want to uphold the church as a space for the community to gather, and these concerts were part of that effort.

We continue to play an important role in the Ramallah church council. Ramallah is very focused on unity, and we have shifted our liturgical calendar so we celebrate Advent and Christmas according the western calendar and Lent and Easter according to the Eastern calendar. Churches in Ramallah have always discussed things together, and we have a very strong ecumenical relationship that guides our ministries.

This year I have made an effort to introduce more contemporary music into worship. Each week we prepare a printed bulletin, which gives us more flexibility in the prayers and songs we want to include. I have discovered that there are many talents in the church, especially among the youth, so we are working on forming a regular contemporary music group to assist with worship. On International Women's Day, several young women accompanied the service on piano, guitar, oud, and violin.

One of my priorities has been building and maintaining a strong relationship with the new principal of the Evangelical Lutheran School of Hope in Ramallah and making sure that the church and school life intersect. It is important that our students, teachers, and congregants view

the school as a Lutheran, Christian school and understand the connection with the church. This year we hosted two services in the church especially for Christian students and teachers from the school. One during Christmas, and one on Ash Wednesday. We also hosted a special event for teachers in the church hall.

We continue to foster and celebrate our international partnerships. We have hosted visits from partners this year and continue to reach out to them virtually as well. Depending on the security situation, I am planning to visit partners in Sweden and Finland later this year.

Challenges During the 2025-2026 Report Period

The biggest challenge in the Ramallah area right now is the restriction of movement imposed by the Israeli occupation. To be frank, we live in constant fear. Due to the war with Iran, I had to cancel a planned trip with students from the School of Hope to visit South Africa. After the trip was cancelled, I proposed to the elders an alternative trip for students and youth to visit Bethlehem during the school holidays. We ultimately decided against doing this because the consensus was that it is too dangerous. It is now too dangerous to go to Bethlehem from Ramallah, less than 30 kilometers. The reality is that we live in a big prison. After a while you begin to think where else is there to go, what can we do? Living in a state of constant fear is troubling for those in our congregation and beyond. This deeply impacts not only our ministry, but our entire presence here.

Witness in the Church of Hope

Simply put, right now, merely by existing and refusing to leave our land, we are witnessing. It is witness through resilience. That resilience comes from faith. In Ramallah, the threat of settler attacks is very pressing and very real. In fact, the mother and family of one of our teachers at the School of Hope were attacked by settlers in Birzeit. Nearby villages like Birzeit, Aboud, Taybeh, and others are constantly under attack. One of our church members who lives in Birzeit is having their land targeted by Israeli forces.

So, in the face of this, the most important thing for us is to continue to hold firm to our values and principles. We will not give up, we will not turn to violence, and we will not flee. Despite attempts by settlers to ethnically cleanse us, we are called to remain here. This is our witness. Our resilience has everything to do with the goodness and justice of God, and with our principles. We do not hate. We do not turn to violence. And in this way, through all challenges, we are a living witness to our faith.

Looking Forward

As we look forward, I have three main hopes for the future of the congregation. First, we hope to strengthen the children’s ministry in the same way our youth ministry has grown. On a personal level, I hope to have more opportunities to visit the families of the church and get to know them

better. And third, we hope to establish a regular meeting for young couples. I also hope to find ways to renovate the outdoor garden and playground attached to the church and the old playground in the basement of the church. These are resources that can better serve our community in the future.

And when we look to the future of our people, my main message is that the existential threat facing Palestinian Christians is more real than ever. It's not just a talking point, or a slogan, or an exaggeration. It's real. Young people are leaving. Young people have given up on the future. And as political violence consumes the country and the region, we look to the horizon and feel that the West Bank is next. People are afraid. My fear as a Lutheran is that minorities are the most vulnerable in situations like this. As a Christian minority, we will suffer more. As Lutherans, this suffering will be compounded by our small numbers. For our church, the size of our impact has always mattered more to us than numbers. Despite our small size as a church, we have a very large impact on the community. But as we see young Lutherans leaving the country, we worry for the future of our community. It is becoming harder and harder to find Lutherans to lead our churches and ministries. In the face of this, all I can do is trust the goodness of God that he will provide and thank our partners for standing with us in these difficult times.



The congregation bids farewell to Pastor Rodny Said as Pastor Munther is installed at the Church of Hope, June 2025.



Worship on the First Sunday of Advent at the Church of Hope, December 2025.



Youth in Ramallah pose after Ash Wednesday service, February 2026.



Youth play music for worship on a Sunday morning (left).

The Church of Hope joins the Ramallah Palm Sunday procession with ecumenical partners (right).

Ministry Reports

Bethany Beyond the Jordan in the ELCJHL

Rev. Dr. Mark LaChonce

2025-26

Overview of Ministry

Our journey as Christians begins with baptism. As Lutherans, we recognize baptism as the first of only two sacraments, with the second being communion. Under the leadership and stewardship of the ELCJHL, the Bethany Beyond the Jordan (BBJ) Baptismal Site exists as a church and pilgrimage center ministering to the local, regional, and global community of Christians. As a local church, the BBJ is called and envisioned to help local and international pilgrims and visitors of diverse traditions to remember and to live out their baptismal vows. It also is organized to contribute to the on-going journey of spiritual formation of Christians throughout their life's pilgrimage as followers of Christ. It is an affirmative response by the ELCJHL to the offer by the Jordanian King to give Christians a central role in the future of the Middle East.

Though no congregation worships at the church at the BBJ full-time, there is a Chaplain who cares for the site and ministers to both pilgrims and locals.

Bethany Beyond the Jordan in 2025-2026

My second year in leadership at the site began smoothly. I had several visits organized, including baptisms. Highlights in the summer months included a visit by local and regional leadership from Tearfund UK in May, a visit by a group of eleven from Metro New York Synod of the ELCA in June, and an international group of 27 with Pastor Rodny in July. August was a quiet month due to my taking vacation time in Europe and a low number of visitors, partly because of the high heat.

The fall months of 2025 were characterized by a steady flow of visitors including baptisms. I hosted an overnight outing in October and three larger groups in November – two bible tours from Germany and a group of seven from ACT Church Sweden. December was a slow month largely due to people being occupied with holiday celebrations. We attempted to arrange an Advent Readings and Carols evening in early December but changed our location to the church in Amman after the Baptism Site Commission required full payment of fees by all attending or participating in the concert.

The most significant event in January was the installation of Bishop Imad in Jerusalem. 17 members of an ELCA delegation who had come for the installation also visited the baptism site on January 15. On January 30, members of our church in Amman joined with hundreds of Anglican Church congregants for a joint pilgrimage service with both bishops and a large number of clergy. This was a significant event in continuing the positive relations between the two churches and a visible sign of Christian unity to the leadership and staff of the site.

February was a productive month with eleven total groups including a group of 13 Anglican women hosted by Pastor Sally. However, the beginning of the war on February 28 significantly diminished the number of guests and ability for the ministry to thrive. ELCA leadership made the difficult decision to relocate us out of Jordan on March 15. We then took our home assignment in the US until May 13. We were ablet to make productive use of that time by visiting a number of congregations in the US to report on the ministry and ask for support and prayer.

Upon returning to Jordan in May, I took on supervision of several maintenance projects that were carried out in May, June and July. Most significant among them were painting the church and community hall and installation of awnings in a number of outdoor areas.

The BBJ board has not met this year. We are hoping to schedule a meeting sometime after COCOP.

I continue to learn about everything available at the site and how to make it attractive to Jordanian and Palestinian Christians as well as internationals. Groups appreciate the availability of the hall and bathrooms, and the guest rooms are ready for more regular use. We have now taken a few groups for overnight stays. Visitors are often impressed by the beauty of the church and the views of the area from the church and from the hills outside. The public areas of the site have been improved in a number of ways through efforts by the commission and its leadership.

Our caretaker Muhammad continues to keep the site cleaned and plants watered and assists me in improving several aspects including the landscaping and aesthetic appeal of the site. Because of the harsh climate where the site is located, the facilities need a lot of upkeep.

In total, I hosted 46 groups of 262 individuals from May to December 2025, and 20 groups of 156 visitors in January through May 2026. Consequently, the total numbers for the year came to 66 groups of 418 individuals.

While it has been a gift to host each of these groups, the number of visitors remains lower than what the site has seen in years past. Fear and limited and expensive travel due to the war has hindered the growth in visitors to the site.

Of these visitors, twenty-five individuals were baptized, and fourteen received baptismal remembrance or reaffirmation.

<u>Witness in times of turmoil (Acts 1:8)</u>

Baptism is a witness to God's promises to wash His people of all their sins. It is a faithful response to God's promises and a witness to the world that we trust God and that God makes forgiveness available to all. We baptize young and old because this promise is true for those of all ages, even those who do not yet show signs of a personal response. We teach and nurture all baptized people to grow into a living, daily response to the grace of God that is offered to them in baptism. We are honored to be able to offer this sacrament in the same place where Jesus received it. We perform new baptisms and baptismal remembrances, so all can feel the powerful spirit of the Jordan River whether they are receiving the sacrament for the first time or remembering this important moment in their faith journey.

We also express our witness in an open and welcoming response to other Christians. We are blessed to have these facilities, and we hope to use them to be a welcoming and bridge-building presence. As the only Protestant church with a facility near the official Baptismal Site, we are making connections with Lutherans and Protestants from all over the world, and we want to make sure all know they are welcome. In this time of trouble, we want to have a unified stance with other Christians.

Our witness also extends to the ends of the earth. Since beginning this ministry, people from ten different countries have received baptism: US, UK, Finland, Germany, Norway, Pakistan, South Africa, Mexico, China and Hong Kong.

Challenges

The first major challenge is in bringing visitors to the site. Fear of violence in the region, along with suspended flights and increased ticket fares has had a very negative impact on the overall tourism in Jordan and has affected us as well.

One of our major challenges is finances. The lack of group bookings for almost two years has decreased the income of the site. We pray that an end to the war and more peace and stability in the region will lead to the return of tourists and pilgrims. In the meantime, we are looking into different ways to supplement the site's income. Because a fee is charged by the Jordanian Tourism Ministry for entrance to the site, it is difficult for us to charge an additional required amount. Instead, we largely rely on free-will donations. There is also the possibility to develop different revenue streams, but this is also challenging.

Another challenge relates to governance. The current board membership has changed from a few years ago, as many original partners are no longer serving in the same role with their churches, and those in the new roles may be less familiar and less committed to the BBJ ministry. This affects our funding from donor institutions as well. Proposals have been made to clarify board membership and expectations for financial contributions from their organizations.

Facility upkeep and improvement remains a challenge. Among the facility improvements that are currently needed are replacing the air conditioning in the hall and replacing some of the concrete walls around the garden area.

Hopes for the Future

The BBJ is not a "project" of the ELCJHL or its partners, rather it is an important ministry that should function both as part of the church and as an opportunity for partners to be involved in our ministry here.

Looking ahead, we hope to host more groups, both local and international. We are such a special location, and the remote area around the site is perfect for pastors' retreats for the ELCJHL and others. There are expats living in Jordan who might benefit from having another location for group retreats. We also have great facilities for youth gatherings, both for locals and visitors.

In the same vein, now that there is no one living on site full time, it may be a good opportunity to have long-term guests like pastors on sabbatical or those working on writing projects, for them to enjoy the solitude and for the benefit to us of keeping a constant eye on the site and providing another potential revenue stream.

We hope to be able to hold special services in the church, particularly during the Advent and Lent seasons.

We would like to increase the site's focus on environmental sustainability, starting with how we work on the facilities and the garden, but potentially including utilizing green energy, water reuse, and other projects.

Above all, we look forward to the continuation of being part of people's faith journeys, whether they are being baptized, remembering their baptism, or visiting this holy place.



Pastor Mark baptizes two visitors from England, October 2025.



Celebrating the Baptism of Jesus with Anglican partners at the Baptismal Site, January 2026.



Pastor Mark welcomes a pilgrimage group of Anglican women led by ELCJHL Pastor Sally Azar to the Baptismal Site, February 2026.



Pastor Mark baptizes a visitor to the Baptismal Site.

The Diaconal Ministry of the ELCJHL

Diaconal Ministry Director Deacon Rana Zeidan

Overview

The Diaconal Ministry is part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. The Ministry began in 2021. The core of our work focuses on providing essential aid, meeting immediate needs, and offering ongoing support to individuals and families in need. Our work is particularly focused on the most vulnerable members of society, including the elderly, disabled, sick, and families struggling financially with food, housing, medical health and educational needs. We take a holistic approach to supporting individuals and families. When someone seeks assistance, we consider the entire family dynamic and the broader context of their situation, ensuring a comprehensive and compassionate response. The Diaconal Ministry operates in all cities where the ELCJHL has a presence, though our work varies from place to place depending on need.

We are also providing job opportunities to several community members through the Diaconal Center by offering work in the garden, kitchen, and in facilities management.

2025-2026 in the Diaconal Ministry

This year began with a very joyful celebration, as I was ordained as a Deacon in the ELCJHL on May 30th at the Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem. It is a huge benefit to us as a Diaconal Ministry to have our work led by an ordained Deacon. This has also opened new doors and partnerships for our ministry, as I am now part of the Lutheran Diaconal Association.

Additionally, I am currently enrolled in a leadership development program from the Danish Church with the support of Kerk in Actie. This June I will complete the course in Church-based Developmental Leadership and Diaconia.

Throughout this year, our work as a Diaconal Ministry has continued to grow. Our biggest area of assistance is food aid, and we serve more than 1300 people on a regular basis. We also regularly provide medical cost assistance, school tuition assistance, rent and utility support, and more. Critical to our ministry is the fact that we don't only provide money or aid; we develop a relationship with the individuals and families we serve. Most people who receive support from us also spend time with us and join us for awareness sessions, individual counseling, or even just peer-to-peer discussions. This sets us apart as an organization and helps us carry out our witness and mission.

The Hot Meals program that we began in the fall of 2024 continued throughout this entire year, despite significant challenges. This program has numerous benefits throughout the populations we serve. We ensure that the meals provided are fresh, nutritious, and homemade. This not only helps us make sure those we serve are fed, but it increases their consumption of healthy foods

and helps them feel cared for and supported. This makes the work of the church in our society feel more concrete for many people. When you receive a fresh, home-cooked meal, you feel God's love in a very tangible way. This program also helps us support many people through job creation. Those who prepare the food and distribute it are paid by the ministry as a way to support them and their families economically as well. Over 2,500 people received food through the Hot Meals program this year.

In June 2025, Israel engaged in a 12-day war with Iran. During this period, we provided a lot of emergency aid in the community for those who lost income or were unable to safely obtain food or medicine.

During the summer, we also began working with Qader institute, which supports people with mental and physical disabilities, to offer some of their beneficiaries job placements in our center. Throughout the summer and fall, several people from the institute worked on cleaning and restoring the old boarding section connected to the church and Diaconal Center. We, alongside our partners, want to provide opportunities for youth and those with disabilities to work in ways that support their mental and physical health as well as their sense of purpose and dignity.

In August, I traveled to Finland to meet with our partners from the Kuopio Diocese and strengthen the relationship between their churches and the Diaconal Ministry.

At the beginning of the new school year, we held separate psychosocial sessions to support the teachers and students of the Abraham's Tent afterschool program.

Our monthly meetings of school social counselors recommended at the beginning of the school year, and they have continued to meet throughout this period. Each month we work with different psychologists and experts to hold workshops on how the counselors can support the mental health and resilience of students, teachers, and themselves.

The ELCJHL Deaf Ministry has continued to be active. We meet regularly to work on candle-making, including a candle-making workshop with leadership students from the Evangelical Lutheran School in Beit Sahour. We also held a pickle-making class to continue to provide new skills for independence and income generation to our deaf group. Though it was not possible to hold our planned retreat in Jericho due to safety concerns, we spent the day at Beit Al Liqa in Beit Jala where members could swim, share a picnic lunch, and enjoy fellowship time.

In October, we held our first ever day of programming to celebrate the International Day for Older Persons. We welcomed elders from the church and the community to the Diaconal Center for a day of activities to celebrate and uplift them as pillars of our community. We provided wellness activities like hair and nail care and special educational sessions on nutritional guidelines for older persons. We also had time for spiritual connection and prayer and ended the event with gifts for each attendee. This program was a wonderful success and was a great opportunity for us to support elderly people from our community. We hope to make this an annual event.

In November, we launched our inaugural “Cooking for a Cure” program, supported by FELM. The program included six sessions, held from November to February, to support mothers facing daily life difficulties and ongoing challenges. Through learning new cooking techniques, participants were encouraged to focus on mindfulness, creativity, and personal growth in a supportive and low-pressure environment. The program was implemented in partnership with Psychologist Jumana Kaplanian and Chef Muna Khroufeh. Each woman took a recipe book with her after the course so she can continue cooking at home. We received amazing feedback about the course and hope to hold the program again when funding is available.

In December we held the first annual Diaconal Ministry Christmas Concert for the first time since 2022. We partnered with the youth ministry to hold a special event for youth and families at the Diaconal Center following the concert from the Edward Said Conservatory Nativity Choir at the Church of the Reformation. At Christmas we also distributed food coupons to 220 families across the six cities where the ELCJHL has congregations, targeting not only Lutherans but many from across the Christian community in need. These coupons helped many families hold Christmas dinners together.

At Christmas we also held special gatherings for the Deaf Ministry and the School Counselors. The school counselors took a trip to the Sister Brigette Home in Bethlehem, and the Deaf Ministry members participated in a wreath-making workshop and enjoyed lunch together.

With the outbreak of a new US/Israeli war with Iran at the end of February, we have continued our emergency work providing food, rent, medical, and tuition assistance. Though we do not have significant funds available this time of year, we immediately put emergency food in our kitchen and began increasing the scope of the Hot Meals program in order to reach as many people as possible. Since the war began, we have given food coupons to many families and have also opened our doors for psychological support. We are trying to use our funds in creative ways to help as many people as possible. Part of this effort is connecting people with our network of aid organizations, hospitals, and pharmacies to help them find assistance as soon as possible.

Because of the tenuous security situation, we were not able to hold the planned Easter event this year. However, at Easter we did distribute food coupons for people to enjoy a holiday meal with their family.

2025-2026 Diaconal Ministry Statistics

These numbers focus on direct diaconal support, not including group activities and the Deaf Ministry.

DIACONIA	***PEOPLE SERVED***	***AVERAGE PER MONTH***
Food coupons	1350	28
Medical aid	300	14

Hot Meals	2500	3
Emergency Support	60	
School tuition fees	120	11

Challenges

One of our biggest challenges is that our work is directly tied to the overall situation of the community. Many of the families we work with are facing "chronic" needs due to war, occupation, restrictions of movement, and other political challenges. Because of this, the needs of our beneficiaries persist month to month and the number of families who need support continues to grow as people go longer and longer without income. Compared to the level of need, our capacity is very limited. More people come to us to ask for help every day.

Much of our work is also with elderly people who used to have social support through family. Traditionally, our society is structured around younger generations taking care of older generations as they age. However, because of the unstable situation in Palestine, many young people are emigrating. This leaves parents and grandparents without a social safety net. There are not sufficient government or social institutions to fill the need at this time. Our church is filling that role as best we can. As Israel enforces new restrictions or outright bans on many NGOs and other organizations, faith-based institutions are some of the only ones left to operate.

We also face logistical issues related to our capacity. Our support from partners is generous, but as prices continue to rise our funds do not stretch as far. Our work continues to expand rapidly, but we can only sustain two full-time staff members for the ministry at this time. Restrictions of movement, safety concerns, and cost of travel make it difficult to utilize volunteers. Neither of our staff members currently have permits to enter Jerusalem, which also limits our scope. It takes an entire day to travel to and from Ramallah, and we do not have a designated Diaconal Ministry vehicle with which to conduct aid deliveries or home visits.

Our Witness in the Diaconal Ministry

Diakonia is the ministry of action. It is well known that "tell" and "do" is better than "tell" alone. Every time we reach out a hand to help someone, we are putting the word of God into action. And this is more powerful than words alone. We feel that our work is a model of what God wants Christians to be in the community; this is a witness to God every day. Diaconal work is a living witness, a physical witness. Our work is not about waiting to do what we can after the war ends. We have learned that sometimes the war does not end. We have to go to people now, where they are. There is a quote by Vivian Greene that I have returned to many times throughout the last three years: "Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass, it's about learning to dance in the rain." In our own way, this is what we are doing. Things are not getting any easier, but we

are learning to cope through everything. The last three years have been incredibly difficult for our people, and now things seem to be getting even worse.

Looking Forward

When we look to the future, our primary goal is to have the strength to maintain our humanity and our Christian faith through our ministry. Despite everything, we do not want to lose hope, and we do not want to lose our faith. Our vision is to spread this message of humanity and dignity throughout the world. We want people to know that we are still here, and that we are acting for our people.

As the need continues to escalate, we hope to continue to grow and develop our capacity to help more people. We feel we need a miracle to keep Christianity in the land of Jesus, but we are striving to support our people every day.



A local nutritionist leads a lecture on health and wellness during the Diaconal Ministry Elder Day event, October 2025.



Deacon Rana Zeidan introduces the annual Diaconal Ministry Christmas Concert, December 2025.



Diaconal Ministry staff prepare food for the Hot Meals program during the war, March 2026.



Members of the ELCJHL Deaf Ministry complete the food preservation and pickle-making course, April 2026.

The Ecclesiastical Court of the ELCJHL

Rev. Ashraf Tannous and Judge Scarlet Bishara

Overview

The Ecclesiastic Court of the ELCJHL is one of the most significant testaments to gender justice in our church. Our court system has two tiers: the first court receives all cases and consists of four judges, and it meets weekly. This system also includes an appeals court, which sees all appeal cases and consists of four additional judges and meets regularly. The first court receives all cases such as cases of divorce, inheritance, custody, and domestic abuse, followed by the appeals court if necessary. These courts are standing testament to the ELCJHL's commitment to Gender Justice, both in the reformed Family Law and in the presence of female judges on the court.

This work is not easy; within a patriarchal culture with long traditions of gender inequality, making decisions in support of equity and gender justice is often an unpopular resolution to familial issues. However, these courts are making a positive impact on women in our courts, and we are leading by example as a church to our Christian and Palestinian community, in hopes that we have a future system that protects and advocates the rights of women regarding matters of family law.

In the past few years, we have undertaken significant reforms to improve both the capacity and scope of the court to ensure access to justice for all people under its jurisdiction.

2025-2026 in the ELCJHL Ecclesiastical Courts

The 2025 – 2026 bench for the courts is as follows:

Court of Appeals

Bishop Dr. Imad Haddad

Rev. Fursan Zu'mot

Judge Shadi Kasbari.

Judge Victor Al-Bandak.

Court of First Instance

Rev. Ashraf Tannous.

Rev. Dr. Munther Issac

Judge Scarlet Bishara.

Judge Yasmine Awad.

Both courts were able to continue hearing cases weekly regarding marriage certificates, marriage conflicts, annulment, divorce, child support, inheritance, and will registration this year.

This year, we held substantive training sessions for all current ecclesiastical court judges and pastors in the ELCJHL with the Palestinian Judicial Institute. This project, supported by the United Nations Development Program's Sawasya Programme Palestine, began last year with a needs assessment to determine how to design a training for ecclesiastical court judges. Currently, all judges in Palestine except those that serve on church courts receive training through the PJI. Our training partnership with them has been groundbreaking, and we are encouraging other churches to follow this example to improve access to justice for those we serve.

Trainings began in November and focused on human rights, the rights of women and children, rights for disabled people, and how to ensure our court rulings are following international civil rights standards. They also included guidelines and best practices on handling cases, writing case reports, the rights and jurisdiction of ecclesiastical courts, and how they connect with civil government courts. There were seven total days of training, culminating with each trainee receiving a certificate acknowledging their completion of the program. This partnership with the PJI has allowed us to ensure that all our judges are highly qualified, and the court itself is updated on the latest laws and procedures.

We are also working with Sawasya to bring Mizan, the national case archival management system, to the Lutheran Court. Currently, our archive is entirely physical, with no digital access or backup. It is essential that we are able to develop a digital archive. The Mizan archiving system is designed for all courts in Palestine, but ecclesiastical courts have historically been excluded from this. Utilizing this system will not only better integrate our court into the Palestinian legal establishment but will also improve access for our plaintiffs. For instance, someone with an active case would be able to open their records remotely from their personal computer and follow the process for their case. They would also have the ability to pay fees or submit follow-up documents online. This is particularly crucial in the Palestinian context, where we are facing significant barriers to movement.

This year we have continued our work with the Ma'kum (With You) organization to provide legal aid to those unable to pay for court fees or council. This ongoing project includes all six ecclesiastical courts in Palestine, and is incredibly important in helping Christians, especially those from vulnerable populations, access justice.

Last year, after ten years of implementing our reformed Family Law, we began undertaking a comprehensive review of the law. Over the last year, an expert consultant has worked with us to review the law and identify any gaps or loopholes and advise how the law can better protect vulnerable populations in our community. The consultant has prepared a draft of the new law, which is currently being reviewed by the necessary committees of the church. We hope the new law will be ready to be implemented in the coming months.

Finally, one of our biggest projects this year has been a review of our existing court facilities. Currently, the court is housed in a small building in Beit Jala that is also shared by the Diaconal Center. This is an issue as the nature of both organizations requires privacy and sensitivity surrounding those accessing services, which is not possible given the current set-up. We currently have no special room for child visitation or private waiting areas. We held a needs assessment this year to identify the specific needs of the court and chose a new potential space for the facilities. A mock-up design was created which would give the court a designated hearing space, waiting room, child visitation area, library, archive room, and more.

Challenges

The Ecclesiastical Court has faced many challenges this year due to the challenging political situation. The center of the Ecclesiastical Court is in Jerusalem. However, due to the inability of most congregants to access Jerusalem, we hold the court meetings in Beit Jala. Now, many people are having trouble accessing the Court in Beit Jala due to travel restrictions within the West Bank. The Court is meant to serve all Lutherans in Palestine, but it is particularly difficult for those from Ramallah to attend court now. This has been exacerbated by two regional wars during the reporting period.

As we mentioned above, the current court facilities pose significant challenges. We are currently exploring funding options to undergo the necessary restoration of the facilities.

Looking Forward

We continue to find joy and hope in the impact our court is having throughout Jordan and Palestine. Both the Palestinian Authority and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan have begun the process of reviewing their bylaws governing Ecclesiastical Courts because of the impact our Lutheran Court is having through our reform processes and partnerships. We continue to strive to be a leader in this area as a church.

Moving forward, we are considering how we can update the structure of the ecclesiastical court. We hope to make significant reforms to our policies, budget, bylaws, and develop a code of ethics specific to the court.

We are also engaging with many opportunities to network with government officials on how we can work together to improve legal access for Christians. Judge Scarlet Bishara is currently undertaking a research study related to the Palestinian Constitution to identify areas of neglect or

discrimination related to Christians in the hopes of improving the legal status and civil rights of the Christian minority in Palestine.



Ecclesiastical Court judges and ELCJHL pastors complete training with the Palestinian Judicial Institute, 2025.

The Environmental Ministry of the ELCJHL

Executive Director of the Environmental Education Center Mr. Simon Awad

Overview

The Environmental Education Center is one of the founding ministries of the ELCJHL, with 40 years of work to raise environmental awareness in Palestine. The EEC's mission is to build an environmentally educated and aware future generation in the occupied Palestinian Territory by providing environmental education, tools of empowerment, and opportunities for activism in our community. The EEC's strategy to achieve this goal is in the education of students, college-age youth, and women about topics including Palestinian identity, peace building and tolerance, climate change mitigation, biodiversity, waste management, water conservation, and public health.

The EEC is a unique ministry among churches, not just in Palestine, but globally. We participate in local, regional, and international advocacy that ties our calling as Christians to care for God's creation and to work for peace throughout the world with the struggle for environmental and climate justice.

In Palestine, the subject of environmental justice is inextricably linked the impact of the Israeli occupation. Land theft, ecological violence, restriction of movement, and cultural erasure are constant threats to our community. The EEC is one of the ways the ELCJHL equips the next generation with tools to preserve our environment and the indigenous practices our people have used to care for creation for thousands of years. As we witness the mass destruction of human life, animal life, agricultural lands, and traditional ecosystems during the last three years of genocide in Gaza, we feel this work is more critical than ever.

2025-2026 In the EEC

This year was a groundbreaking year for the Environmental Education Center. As we celebrate 40 years of the center, we engaged in significant work in the community and around the world.

Programming highlights from 2025-2026:

- Implemented solid waste management/recycling systems in six new schools
- Distributed 700 reusable lunch boxes and water bottles
- Hosted over 2000 visitors to the EEC from local schools, scout troops, international delegations, social clubs, and more
- Distributed 3000 native trees for planting by local farmers and landholders
- Co-hosted the 2025 Olive Harvest Festival
- Hosted two local conferences in Beit Sahour and Jericho focused on climate justice

Additionally, we worked very closely with 16 schools, including the four Lutheran schools, to increase environmental awareness and sustainability in and out of the classroom.

In these schools we don't only focus on students, we also work with teachers to train them how to teach their students about environmental topics, including providing new educational skills and materials. We work with teachers and administration to set up new facilities like solid waste management, recycling, and even compost. We taught students and teachers how to turn organic waste material into compost for their school gardens and nurseries, which provide vegetables and herbs for use in the schools.

For example, one school this year told us they had an entire room of electronic devices that they need to recycle, so we took students to the factory to show them how these devices can be reused and recycled. We have also helped recycle outdated paper archives and other materials from schools.

In each of these schools, we foster and support environmental clubs and leadership programs who have helped expand these initiatives throughout their schools and communities. These students have helped us show other students how to utilize solid waste management systems, how to care for nursery plants, and to monitor these projects to ensure their continuation.

These students have also taken initiative outside the classroom, going into their communities to make their homes, religious centers, recreational facilities, and more “greener.”

These efforts in communities and schools continue to build on themselves and grow into sustainable long-term projects. Earlier this year, we planted flowers and cleaned up trash throughout downtown Beit Sahour. People who saw us during that initiative requested that similar projects take place in their town. This also encouraged people to join themselves and participate in cleaning and beautifying their own cities and even prompted some people to organize their own cleanup projects.

Because of the ongoing economic and political crisis, we have been working with specialized trainers to teach women in the northern West Bank environment-based sustainability and survival skill like how to minimize water use, how to create food security around their homes, how to preserve fruits and vegetables, and more. These trainings help people develop home economies that can support their families in times of crisis. We focused these trainings in very vulnerable areas of the West Bank including Jenin, Tulkarem, Tubas, Nablus, and Ramallah.

In schools and local organizations, we present workshops about other timely topics, like the dangers and opportunities around AI, and how to reduce plastic and nylon in your daily life. We focused a lot on AI education this year as AI usage expands, and we want to communicate to people the negative impact AI use has on the environment and climate change. Through our advocacy, we have also focused on the impacts of ecocide on climate change. We want to communicate that advocacy for peace is deeply tied with climate justice; they are one in the same. The wars throughout our region are huge drivers of climate change.

Through our environmental leadership program we equipped more than 30 students with skills of public speaking and advocacy, and four of them toured abroad with us to advocate in different countries. These youth developed leadership and job skills that can help them find job opportunities here in Palestine. The church also benefits from increased confidence, expertise, and leadership skills in their youth. They have been well equipped with skills that benefit them, the church, and the message.

After the war on Iran began this spring, it was very hard for us to do activities at the center for students or even maintain regular contact with students. It was very hard for staff to reach the center and many schools and other visitors felt unsafe coming to the area of the EEC. We continued our tree distribution, although we faced a lot of issues due to landowners not being able to reach our gates with large vehicles.

After the ceasefire it became a lot easier for us to reach the schools and other places for outside programming. We also saw an increase in visitors to the center from local and international groups. However, we still have trouble implementing activities or hosting local visitors from outside the Bethlehem area due to the increase in checkpoints in the West Bank.

One strong success story this year came from our environmental leadership course, Empowering Future Scientists. One student who participated in the course, Michel, was very shy and rarely participated in school. After the course, he gained a lot of confidence to speak publicly and share his views and ideas in class. We are very proud of this program's impact on students and how popular it has been. Students in Palestine today are under a lot of pressure in school and at home because of the political situation. Extracurricular and leadership programs help them relax, improve their mental wellbeing, and help build skills for the future.

Challenges

May 2025 to May 2026 has been an exceptionally challenging period for our ministry. During this reporting period we have lived through two wars between Israel and Iran that significantly disrupted all life and work in the region, on top of the already difficult situation caused by the genocide in Gaza and rising violence in the West Bank.

The EEC's position at Talitha Kumi in Area C near the Tunnels checkpoint exacerbates these difficulties for the EEC. For large portions of this year, Israel closed all gates around Talitha Kumi and the EEC. Often our cars would be stuck on the compound for days, and we would have to get to and from work on foot.

Our coordinators for projects in the northern West Bank have also faced incredible difficulties this year. During this period, Israel expelled people from most of the refugee camps in Jenin and Tulkarem, where we conduct a lot of our work. The rapid expansion of illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank has also impacted our work, as it has made travel around the area more difficult and more dangerous.

Because most of our educators and visiting students lack permits to access Jerusalem, anyone coming from the northern West Bank, including Ramallah, must travel via Wadi an-Nar. This is becoming increasingly difficult, sometimes taking more than 8 hours to reach Ramallah for a 2-hour meeting.

We also have a challenge of maintaining funding. Today, most of our funds are very limited. Much of our funding is restricted to global mission and crisis funding response from partner churches who are having to reduce these funds due to internal financial difficulties or restructuring. We need to expand our funding options from just church to church relationships to relationships with government and NGO funding operations.

Witness in the Environmental Ministry

Witness is a huge part of our work at the EEC. Every day when we teach children, youth, and adults how they can engage with the native biodiversity in their homeland, we are witnessing both to God's creation and to how we can each participate in the essential work of environmental preservation and climate justice, regardless of the circumstances.

The EEC has recently taken this witness from local to regional and international. During this period the EEC conducted four advocacy trips focused on care for creation, climate, and economic justice in the United States, Sweden, Jordan, and Switzerland. Youth from our leadership program took part in these trips to advocate for these important issues around the world. Also during this reporting period, I was chosen as co-chair of ACT Alliance for Good Practice in Climate Justice. In October I was elected from 10,000 people to be the International Union for Conservation of Nature Council regional councilor from West Asia, which has also significantly broadened the reach and witness of the EEC.

Our two conferences in Jericho and Beit Sahour this year were also important continuations of our advocacy and witness in local society.

Looking Forward

Here in Palestine, when we look to the future we struggle to see a light at the end of the tunnel. With the never-ending wars and threats by the USA and Israel to others in the region combining with increasing land dispossession and settler violence in the West Bank, we continue to become more afraid. Our Christian community is shrinking every year because of these challenges. Every day we hear of someone from our network who has family leaving the country or is preparing to leave themselves.

Despite this, our witness and mission continues. Looking forward, our biggest goal is to reach more people through schools, scout programs, and our congregations. This year we began a project to form more intentional relationships and connections with our ELCJHL congregations

to help them strengthen their relationships with creation and create “greener” church facilities and practices.

We also want to expand our reach to other areas of society like sports clubs, youth groups, universities, women’s organizations, and other social groups. This helps strengthen the sustainability of our work. As more people get engaged with our work and mission for environmental preservation and climate justice, they start to incorporate new practices in their daily lives and spread our message to others in their lives. This helps grow local environmental clubs and other focused organizations, carrying our witness forward.



A Talitha Kumi student prepares to release a bird during the 26th Bi-Annual Bird Week Festivities.



The EEC participates in the Annual Olive Harvest Festival in Bethlehem.



EEC Director Simon Awad prepares to speak at the EEC's conference in Jericho, December 2025.



The EEC distributes reusable lunch boxes and water bottles to schools throughout the West Bank.

The Gender Justice Ministry of the ELCJHL

ELCJHL Director of Gender Justice Mrs. Ranan Issa

Overview

The ELCJHL is a pioneering religious organization dedicated to promoting gender justice and equality in the Middle East. With a focus on empowering women and men alike, the ELCJHL is working to reduce gender disparities and create a more inclusive society. Through its Gender Justice Ministry, the ELCJHL is tackling the root causes of discrimination against women in a patriarchal society, with a special emphasis on addressing legal loopholes that perpetuate gender inequalities. The church's commitment to gender equality is reflected in its bold move to reform its religious family law in 2015, making it more gender-equitable and in line with international human rights standards. In the same year the ELCJHL appointed the first female judge in Palestine and the Middle East to make our Ecclesiastical courts more accessible to women. In January 2023, the ELCJHL made history by ordaining its first female Lutheran pastor in Palestine, demonstrating again its commitment to promoting women's leadership and challenging harmful social norms that prevent women from reaching positions of power. Moreover, the ELCJHL places a special emphasis on the role of youth in driving progressive change and adopts their fresh perspectives. Through its efforts, the ELCJHL is working towards a future in which gender justice and equality are a reality for all.
Despite its modest size, the Gender Justice Ministry of the ELCJHL has significantly impacted both local communities and broader legal and religious frameworks.

2025-2026 in the Gender Justice Ministry

The reporting year began in May 2025 with the ordination of Rana Zeidan as the first deaconess in the ELCJHL. This opened a new path for women in diaconal and church ministry, and it reflects the church's ongoing support for women in leadership. We congratulate the church on this achievement.

Throughout the year, we worked with the Al Hakimat Council on advocacy material for stakeholders, civil society, community members, and decision-makers, shared at our annual conferences. This included a case study on the role of the ELCJHL and the Hakimat Council in advancing justice and equality, a study on the right to alimony in ecclesiastical and sharia courts, a policy mapping of sharia and ecclesiastical personal status laws in Palestine, and a study on the collapse of protection systems for women and girls in Gaza. We also produced a documentary, "Breaking the Stained Glass Ceiling: Women Leading Change in the ELCJHL."

We also cooperated with the judges of the Lutheran Ecclesiastical Court through meetings, trainings, and workshops to strengthen the court and improve access to its services. We do this work in partnership with the Lutheran courts, as part of ELCJHL's commitment to protect vulnerable populations. We are currently working with the court to reform the ELCJHL Personal

Status Law of 2015. In 2015, the ELCJHL was the first church to reform its family law to promote gender equality. After ten years of implementation, we are reviewing it again together with the judges who apply it, to close gaps and keep it aligned with gender justice principles. A legal consultant has prepared a first draft, and seven deliberation sessions with judges and pastors have so far reviewed it against international gender justice guidelines and the judges' experience in real cases. This keeps the church leading on gender justice and strengthens protection for the women and families who use its courts.

In June 2025, Judges Somoud Damiri and Scarlet Bishara represented the ELCJHL at the MENA Family Law workshop, co-organized by Diakonia, ACT Alliance, the Church of Sweden, and the Global Campaign for Equal Family Laws. The workshop brought together actors from across the region to look at discriminatory family status laws, share advocacy strategies, and develop national and regional reform plans. In the same month, we held a protection policy training for church and school managers and staff, covering safe environments, reporting procedures, and protection principles in the church context.

In July 2025, we worked closely with the Youth Ministry. We led a session on societal expectations and stereotypes during the "Youth Leading the Change" annual conference in Jericho, attended by 113 youth. We also organized an Old City tour for Jerusalemite youth in October 2025 to connect with their church and history. Through our volunteer program, which ran from July to December 2025, 25 youth took on active leadership roles in the church. The volunteers helped design our activities and took leadership roles during workshops and events, including our annual conference. Many became more active after the program ended, and some now work at the church. With our partner Faith to Action, we sponsored two youth at the "Faith Actors: Stewards of Change" interfaith convention in Nairobi, Kenya in September 2025 where they presented the work of the ELCJHL Gender Justice Ministry.

In August 2025, we held two activities for women. The first was a music-based psychosocial session with the Redeemer Lutheran Church women's committee, where more than 20 women found a safe space to relax and support each other despite the difficult conditions. The second was a workshop titled "Renewed Strength, Unbroken Hope: The Role of Women in the Church and Society." Bishop Azar spoke about the church's history in supporting gender justice, Judge Scarlet Bishara presented the church's achievements in this area, Rev. Sally Azar led a discussion on women in the Bible and in the church, and Dr. Renee Al-Ali gave a practical session on mental health and social support.

In September 2025, we held our sixth annual conference, "Gender Justice from a National and Religious Perspective: From Achievement to Aspiration." Speakers included Bishop Azar, Simon Ridley from the Sawasya programme at UNDP, Rev. Sally Azar, and Prof. Jamal Zeid Al-Kilani, Dean of the Faculty of Sharia at An-Najah National University. Minister of Women's Affairs Mona Al-Khalili could not attend because the border was closed but sent a message that

was read at the conference. The first session reviewed the work of the Gender Justice Ministry and the Al Hakimat Council over the past years, and the second looked at future opportunities in ecclesiastical justice, including the new partnership between the Lutheran Church and the Palestinian Judicial Institute (PJI). Our youth volunteers were a big part of making the day work. More than 90 people participated in the conference.

In October 2025, we held an awareness session for Breast Cancer Awareness Month, led by a nurse from Al-Muttala Hospital, on early detection, prevention, and treatment.

In November to early December 2025, the judges of the Lutheran ecclesiastical court took part in a series of trainings with PJI on civil and commercial procedure and case management. The work is supported by our partnership with the Palestinian Judicial Institute (PJI). The ELCJHL was the first church in Palestine to take part in PJI judicial training, and in each training round we consult the trainer judges on the Lutheran Family Law, so that our reformed law reflects established judicial practice and international standards.

In December 2025, we held our two annual Advent gatherings, one in Amman at the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church and one in Bethlehem for the five congregations in Palestine. We hold two gatherings each year because the Amman congregation cannot easily travel to Bethlehem. Both included prayer, music, and fellowship. The same month, we started a cooking course for women in Jerusalem together with the LWF Vocational Training Center in Beit Hanina. It is the latest in our skill development series, following courses in Ramallah and Amman, and the topic was chosen based on the needs of the Jerusalem congregation. The goal is to give women practical skills for income and independence in the current economic situation.

In January 2026, we led a needs assessment with the judges of the Lutheran Ecclesiastical Court. Based on it, we are working with the court and the church leadership to develop the court, including supporting its move to the third floor and moving it toward e-justice by integrating it into the Mizan archiving system, so that people can access their court cases online. This is part of the church's commitment to improving access to justice. More details are in the ecclesiastical court report.

In January 2026, we held a workshop in Bethlehem with local experts and institutions to discuss the draft of a new research paper developed by the Al Hakimat Council. The paper looks at how the war on Gaza has broken down legal and social protection systems, and what this means for women and girls, especially orphaned girls. It covers the sharp rise in orphaned and unaccompanied children, early marriage, the loss of identity documents, and the growing number of missing persons.

A second workshop followed in February 2026 at Al-Quds Open University in Ramallah, opened by the university president Dr. Ibrahim Al-Shaer, Bishop Dr. Imad Haddad, and Minister Mona Al-Khalili. Judges Scarlet Bishara and Somoud Damiri presented the draft. Also in February,

judges of the Lutheran ecclesiastical courts completed a two-day training on international human rights conventions, in cooperation with PJI and with Sawasya support. The first day covered women's rights, and the second covered children's rights and the best interests of the child. Certificates were given to the ecclesiastical Lutheran court judges.

In March 2026, women of the church led the annual prayer service celebrating women and mothers. We could not hold the usual joint gathering of women from the churches in Palestine because of the war, movement restrictions, and the security situation, so the women's committee is planning a church trip to Bethlehem instead. In Jordan, on March 22, we held a prayer service and celebration for Mother's Day and International Women's Day with the Good Shepherd women's committee, with women leading the readings, reflections, and hymns.

Currently, we are running a series of psychosocial support activities for women in different congregations, and a series of leadership trainings for women of the church in partnership with UN Women. The trainings cover building confidence and leadership skills, women's roles in church life, election procedures and the church constitution, and the roles of the parish leader and the parish council. The aim is to encourage women to take part and run in the upcoming church elections.

Challenges

- **Finances**. We faced financial problems due to delayed partner disbursement of grant funds and the church's lack of liquidity. Thus many vendors were not paid for several months which caused a lot of pressure and work load for the Gender Justice Ministry, as we had to stay in constant contact with funders, vendors, and accounting while still implementing new activities.
- **Unclear political situation**. Our activities always need to be flexible, with plans B and C ready. It is difficult to gather the women from the five congregations in Palestine, and even harder to meet with the congregation in Jordan. For example, we could not hold the annual joint women's gathering in March due to missile attacks and restrictions of movements. Our work is about building community between Lutheran women, but we cannot hold joint activities, so we do them separately to guarantee everyone's safety. This keeps people safe, but it limits our work. Also, sometimes many activities are canceled due to safety reasons thus all the work that went into planning the activity goes to waste.
- **Lack of staff in the ministry.** The ministry has no coordinator or assistant right now. The workload is too high for one person and is getting harder, including donor reporting, budgets, and coordination for several grants.
- **Volunteer program funding**. The youth volunteer program (July to December 2025) could not continue because no funding was available. It gave 25 youth leadership experience and job skills, and some now work at the church. Continuing it would have kept building the church’s next generation of leaders.

- **Family law reform**. The war and missile attacks repeatedly interrupted our deliberation sessions with the judges and pastors. The judges are volunteers with full-time jobs, so it is also hard to find dates that work for everyone.

Witness in the Gender Justice Ministry

Working with the youth: We believe that the youth are not only the future of the church, they are the present. Throughout our volunteer program, we have seen a clear difference between this year and last year in how active the youth are in the church. Volunteers helped design activities and led workshops and the program gave them tools to succeed in the real world.

Working with the Ecclesiastical Court and the family law: The Gender Justice Ministry was built on the foundation of working on the family law. After ten years, we are taking another step to improve it, now drafting the new law together with the judges and pastors. This is part of our witness of challenging the situation and continuing to improve it, and a witness to our Lutheran identity: being a voice for women in the Holy Land. We want our family law to reflect what we preach about gender equality. Having these policies on paper is a living, practical witness to our belief that men and women are equal in dignity and responsibilities, and we are sharing what we learn from our own experience with society.

Advocacy material: When we started developing our advocacy materials, no one was discussing the role of Christians in gender justice. Christians had been excluded from discussion and decision making, so there was no seat at the table in conversations about women's rights in Palestine. By going to government officials and decision makers offices, meeting with them, and inviting them to conferences, we made our own seat at the table. We developed over 10 research papers and 10 short documentaries in the last five years. These resources are part of our sustainability. They stay with us, and we use them to increase the reach of our witness regardless of the situation. They have also helped us find new partners and organizations to work with. We are now part of national teams and committees, the first time Christians have been at this table.

Looking Forward

We are working on expanding our partnership with the Sawasya program to build the capacity of the Ecclesiastical Court. This includes supporting the court's move to the third floor and moving it toward e-justice through the Mizan archiving system, so that people can access their cases online. We look forward to continuing and expanding our collaboration with the court to improve the status of women and other vulnerable populations in our church and society. We also look forward to finalizing the updated family law. We are still in the middle of this long process. After the August training round, we will continue the deliberations and start the consultation with the Church Council, and then distribute the final law through the church. We will continue the leadership trainings for women to prepare them for the upcoming church elections in December 2026, and we hope to restart the youth volunteer program if funding is

found. As always, in the coming year we will continue our work with women and youth and build our collaboration with local and international organizations.



Gender Justice Ministry Director Ranan Issa moderates a panel with Judge Somoud Dmiri and Judge Scarlet Bishara of Al Hakimat Council during the 6th Annual Conference on Gender Justice from a National and Religious Perspective in September 2025.



Youth from Jerusalem prepare to take a tour of the Old City during a joint program between the Gender Justice and

Youth Ministries, October 2025.



Women enjoy Christmas hymns during the Gender Justice Advent Gathering, December 2025.



Participants in a Gender Justice workshop in Beit Jala discuss a new research paper about the impacts of the genocide on women and children in Gaza, January 2026.

Youth in the ELCJHL

Rev. Rodny Said and Rev. Sally Azar

Overview of Ministry

The Youth Ministry in the ELCJHL has been considered an essential part of our mission for many years. The trips, workshops, leadership opportunities, and educational events offered by the Youth Ministry have helped hundreds of youth see themselves in the work of the church and find their place as adult leaders in our congregations today. When we invest in our youth by offering time for fellowship and space to explore their faith and ask questions, we are looking toward the future of the church and our community.

In a time when an overwhelming number of young Palestinians, especially Palestinian Christians, are leaving the country to seek opportunities abroad, we are striving to help our youth find a future here that allows them to stay on their land.

Youth in 2025-2026

In May of 2025, 20 youth leaders met for an overnight retreat in Jericho to begin planning the summer youth conferences and camps. This was part of our commitment this year to involve youth leaders in every part of our ministry, from planning to implementation. We were really impressed with the creativity, commitment, and incredible ideas the youth brought for our upcoming camps. All the camps during the summer were organized and led by youth leaders with help from the pastors.

Our first summer camp was for children ages 7-12, focused on the theme of "How to be a Disciple of Jesus." We held the camp in Jericho from June 30th to July 2nd, after the end of the 12-day war with Iran. This camp was immediately followed by a three-day Confirmation Camp centered around the Temptation of Christ. Youth visited the Mount of Temptation in Jericho as part of the camp.

We typically begin the summer with our Crossroads exchange program between youth from Jordan and Palestine, Sweden, and Mozambique. Because of the 12-day war, the meeting was moved to August and was held in Jordan. 16 youth from the ELCJHL joined five youth from Sweden and seven from Mozambique for a week of spiritual renewal and cultural exchange. This was the first time since the first ever Crossroads Retreat that the meeting was held in Jordan, which gave us the unique opportunity to share that piece of the ELCJHL's ministry with those who attended. The youth visited Amman, Wadi Rum, Petra, Jerash, and more.

Our July camp for teenaged youth was our largest camp ever, with more than 130 attendees. We spent three days reflecting and learning about the Sermon on the Mount. Our last camp was for university-aged youth and young adults, and was jointly organized and held with our Anglican partners from the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem. We had originally planned to hold the camp in Jordan, but significant issues at the border led to us pivoting to Jericho. The theme for this three-day conference was, “Our Hope in Jesus Christ.”

This year, our youth leaders have been meeting regularly to plan and organize activities. They have also increased their activity on social media, starting a Lutheran Youth Instagram page where they can share invitations for events, post updates from different congregations, and stay connected with each other better.

We have held several small events, mostly in Beit Jala, including movie nights, cookie baking, and Christmas tree decorating.

We held a special youth service and fellowship evening in partnership with the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem for Thanksgiving, which included games, trivia, music, and a barbecue dinner all led by the youth.

During the Christmas season, the youth ministry organized a concert and celebration in partnership with the ELCJHL Diaconal Ministry featuring music from Bass for Peace. This prayer and concert was also followed by a fun evening of dinner and activities.

In February, our ministry was once again disrupted by another war with Iran. However, we were able to safely hold a two-day youth leadership training course in collaboration with World Vision at the end of March.

In April, we held another planning meeting with our leadership team to begin preparing for this year’s summer camps. We are also beginning preparations for some upcoming youth exchanges including the annual Crossroads retreat in June which will be held in Sweden this year, and a planned trip for 13 ELCJHL youth from across congregations to visit Munich in August.

Throughout this year, several youth participated in a new volunteer program through the church. Youth got involved with several ministries of the church including the Gender Justice Ministry and Communication Desk and were able to develop greater ownership in the work of the church while gaining critical job skills and earning a small amount of money each month. We hope to continue this program in the future if funding is available.

Challenges

One of the biggest ongoing challenges for the youth ministry is restrictions on movement from Israel. New gates, closures, and checkpoints make it incredibly difficult for youth from different congregations to gather. Similarly, it has become impossible to obtain permits for youth from the West Bank to enter Jerusalem for school, work, or other activities, limiting not only our ministry but future opportunities for young people. Some of our youth are not able to attend their universities anymore because new gates and checkpoints bar their access.

This lack of opportunity is leading to many young people leaving the country or considering emigration. Most of our youth who have graduated from university are currently unemployed, especially those from the West Bank.

Since the pandemic, we have seen a significant impact on the mental health of many of our youth. COVID, followed by genocide in Gaza, a worsening of occupation in the West Bank, and two wars with Iran in less than a year are creating feelings of hopelessness for many. Some youth are even questioning their faith because of the level of suffering they are experiencing. They are having a hard time reconciling their faith with their reality. And through this, they are losing pieces of their identity. Many of them feel a strong connection to their identity as Palestinian Christians, but they don't know what it means to be a Palestinian Christian any more in the face of the trauma and hardship they are experiencing.

As pastors, we want to be there for them as they work though these questions and struggles, but we are also deeply impacted psychologically by our reality. This is something we are all working through together.

Witness in Youth Ministry

Despite all the difficulties of the situation, our youth decide to show up day after day. They come with open arms, ready to give back to their community. They are always more than happy to help with anything, more than ready to volunteer both inside the church and out in the community. Even with everything they deal with, they still have hope in the future. They have a great desire to rebuild this country in new and creative ways to create a thriving community. They refuse to be tools of the injustice they see around them. They instead devote their time to equipping themselves with knowledge. In this way, they are a living witness to both their Palestinian Christian identity and their resilience.

Youth from each congregation are different, but they all find unique ways to express their faith. Being a minority in society pushes them to show others what it means to be Christian and what it means to be Lutheran. Many of our youth are becoming increasingly active on social media, starting not only an Instagram account for the Youth Ministry as a whole but also running personal or congregational accounts, which opens new pathways for them to show others what their faith means to them. Our youth are always working to build bridges in their community and throughout the world.

Looking Forward

Though we are approaching the upcoming year of ministry in a time of great uncertainty, we hope to continue our mission to provide safe and open spaces where our youth can engage with their faith, ask questions, get to know each other better, and feel at home in their church and community. However, each year the situation deteriorates further.

This year, we hope to organize our youth leadership team so that it equally includes youth from all congregations. This is a challenge due to distance and movement restrictions, but we are working toward this goal. We also hope to establish a designated space for youth to gather. Currently there is no specific space for youth, so we have to borrow space from congregations. We also want to strengthen our local and international partnerships and open more doors for our youth to connect with others and grow their confidence, skills, and spiritual life.

Above all, we want to continue helping our youth have ways to stay in their homeland by fostering safe spaces for connection and growing opportunities for young people in our church.



Youth leaders meet in Jericho in May 2025 to plan the upcoming summer camps.



Lutheran and Anglican youth complete their hike at the Mount of Temptation during the joint retreat in Jericho, August 2025.



Youth lead games after the Thanksgiving youth worship in Beit Jala.



ELCJHL Youth lead prayer during the Advent Youth gathering in Beit Jala.

Communications in the ELCJHL 2025 - 2026

ELCJHL Communication Officer Mrs. Olivia Slagle

Communication Overview

Communication happens across many different platforms from the Communications Desk of the ELCJHL. Our social media accounts, primarily Facebook and Instagram, are the primary source of ELCJHL news, activities, and updates for our local congregations and our international audience. Our website is the landing page for those hoping to learn more about our history, the details of our congregations and ministries, and where we are headed. Our annual and bi-annual reports show the bigger picture and a longer arc of what the church's ministry has accomplished and is able to accomplish. Bishop Azar's presentations and statements communicate how Christ's call to us as Christians is a bedrock for the congregational, educational, environmental, gender justice, and diaconal ministry of the ELCJHL. The goal of the Communications Desk and the Communication Officer position is to share the story of this ministry and answer the question of: "Who are the Lutherans in the Holy Land?" This brings the ministry to life around the world, enriching our international relationships and connecting us to the larger Christian story.

2025-2026 Communications

2025/2026 was a big year for news in the ELCJHL. Many of our pastors transitioned to new congregations, and Rev. Dr. Imad Haddad was elected and installed as Bishop of the ELCJHL. Throughout the year, I continued regular communications updates via our major channels, including the website, social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram, primarily), and our monthly newsletters. Through these channels, we document the work and stories of our Bishop, congregations, ELCJHL schools, and ministries. In order to record and share these stories, I attend as many services and activities as possible during each month.

This reporting period began with several big milestones for the church that were shared with our local and global followers, including the ordination of Deacons Rana Zeidan and Bassem Thabet, and the installations of several of our pastors to new congregations within the ELCJHL. During May I also highlighted the graduations of each of our schools on social media.

During the summer we shared many updates from our Youth Ministry, including summer camps and youth exchanges abroad. At the end of the summer, I worked with many of our ministry directors to apply for grants to support their ministries in the coming years.

In the fall I had a very busy schedule keeping up with events and activities for the new school year, Thanksgiving and other church holidays, and many new programs through our ministries. In October, I partnered with the Gender Justice and Youth Ministries on their youth volunteer program. This program paired youth from the ELCJHL with church ministries to help grow the work of those ministries while developing professional and leadership skills for youth and giving them a sense of ownership and responsibility in the church. I began working with Nardine, a youth from the Bethlehem congregation, to translate all of the church's social media posts into

Arabic. This is a goal I had had for our social media for a while, and I was very glad to see it become a reality this year. It is essential that our communications serve the local ELCJHL community. Even after the Gender Justice Ministry's program ended in December, I continued working with Nardine through the Communication Desk. This has been a huge step for ELCJHL communications, and I hope to see it continue.

As always, Advent and Christmas were very busy times for church communications. I worked with Nardine and other youth around the church to get pictures and videos from congregations to share, and I attended as many services and school/ministry activities as possible. As Advent began, we also welcomed Pastor Christy Lohr Sapp and her family from the ELCA to co-pastor the English-speaking congregation of the Church of the Redeemer, and my husband and I were able to help them settle into Jerusalem.

I was intensely involved in the planning and coordination for the consecration service of Bishop Haddad and the retirement celebrations for Bishop Azar. I served as part of the consecration committee, and in my role as Communication Officer I was able to provide support by sending invitations, creating logistical planning sheets for guests, coordinating with international groups, creating written materials for the services and celebrations, providing photography support, and more. I was very grateful to be a witness and participant in this important milestone for the church.

In the spring I documented services in each congregation to welcome Bishop Haddad as bishop. These services were also important community events in each of the cities the ELCJHL serves and were attended by many local church and government leaders. I put special focus on making sure all events related to the consecration were well recorded and shared with our followers.

At the end of February another war with Iran broke out. Through discussions with Bishop Haddad and other ELCJHL staff, I made the decision to remain in the country. This allowed me to continue working with the church remotely from home or in the office, depending on restrictions and closures. During this time we published a pastoral letter from Bishop Haddad to our partners as well as an appeal for support. We also kept our partners around the world up to date with how ELCJHL ministries were adapting to new restrictions and safety concerns in the country.

During Lent and Holy Week, I attended as many services as possible to share with our followers what this season looks like for our congregations in the Holy Land. I also created a Lent series this year where each week we shared a reflection from an ELCJHL youth about what Lent means to them and in their faith. The videos were produced by the youth themselves and were in a variety of languages, with subtitles added by my communications volunteer. This was a very successful series, and I look forward to working more with our youth on how we can engage them in storytelling through the church.

I accompanied Bishop Imad to Amman for the Holy Week celebrations there, which happen a week after the celebrations in Jerusalem (following the Julian calendar).

Challenges

The biggest challenges this year have been due to the political situation as well as ongoing wars and conflicts in the area. This reporting period both began and ended with wars between Israel and Iran that significantly disrupted daily life and ELCJHL ministry operations. However, being able to work from home and staying in close contact with the Bishop and the Director of Operations was essential in communicating with ELCJHL audiences through statements and updates on activity cancelations and rescheduling.

Closures throughout the West Bank have made it more difficult to reach certain places within the ELCJHL's scope of work. Regular travel to Amman is a challenge, and even reaching Ramallah has become difficult at different points during the year.

Finally, the broad scope of work from the ELCJHL and the Communication Desk's limited capacity with only one staff member has sometimes made keeping up with communication needs a challenge. This year I was able to work with youth volunteers and elders from the various congregations to make sure each church and ministry is being highlighted through our communication channels.

Witness through Communications

The verse for our theme this year is Acts 1:8, *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* The ELCJHL has a very powerful witness both to the reality of life for Palestinian Christians living in the Holy Land and to the Christian faith here in the birthplace of Christianity. Much of the way this witness reaches to the "ends of the Earth," as Jesus says in Acts 1, is through the work of the Communications Desk. The essential work of the congregations, schools, and ministries of the ELCJHL to live out their witness to Christ's love in our world is shared with our local and international audiences through statements, stories, photo and video content, social media and web updates, newsletters, reports, appeals, and more.

Continuing to uplift the prophetic witness of the ELCJHL through this time of deep turmoil in Palestine, the region, and the world, is the role of the Communication Officer, and I am very honored to be part of this ministry.

Looking Forward

In this time of great uncertainty in the Holy Land, it is more important than ever for people around the world to hear the message and witness of the Christians here, including the ELCJHL. I look forward to continuing to work with this amazing team to tell the story of the ELCJHL and to improve our communications and increase their reach wherever we can.

We are in the middle of several important web updates including the Baptismal Site portion of our main site and the external website for Abraham's Herberger. Additionally, I hope to work with a professional translator throughout the next year to translate the entire ELCJHL website into Arabic so it can be more useful for the local Palestinian community.

Some of our work this year, especially around Bishop Imad's consecration, exposed some gaps in our communication methods. This year I want to compile a comprehensive contact list for all local and international partners of the ELCJHL that can be used for a variety of communication needs going forward.

I also have plans to partner with other ministries like the Gender Justice and Youth ministries to hold a workshop for church youth who are interested in helping with social media and communications for individual congregations, the Youth Ministry, and beyond. This would help our youth develop professional skills and be a benefit for the church.

Finally, I hope to produce a communication manual and style guide for the ELCJHL that can be utilized across all congregations, schools, and ministries to improve communications churchwide and continue to share essential information, stories, situational updates, prayers, and more with our audiences in Palestine and abroad.

I join the entire ELCJHL and many around the world in my prayers for a just peace in Palestine and beyond.



I join the Mother's Day event at the Church of the Reformation in Beit Jala.



I pose with the youth from Christmas Lutheran Church after Ash Wednesday service.



I join the joint Lutheran/Anglican Youth Retreat in Jericho.



I wait for the procession before Bishop Imad Haddad's installation service to begin with ELCJHL Gender Justice Ministry Director Ranan Issa and ELCA Sumud Program Director Maddi Froiland.

The ELCJHL Education Office 45th Report

"And You Will Be My Witnesses"
Our Witness in Times of Turmoil

Period reviewed:

January – October 2026

For the COCOP's meeting October 22nd, 2026

Mrs. Eva Azar

ELCJHL Director of Education

October 13th, 2026

1. Introduction — Our Witness in Times of Turmoil

In the midst of the continuing challenges facing the Holy Land, the educational ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) remains a living expression of Christian witness, hope, resilience, and steadfast service. Our Lutheran schools are more than institutions of academic learning: they are places where faith is translated into action, where children and young people are nurtured with dignity, and where the Christian values of love, justice, peace, and service are reflected in everyday life.

The theme “And You Will Be My Witnesses” speaks profoundly to our calling during these difficult times. In a context marked by political uncertainty, economic hardship, movement restrictions, and increasing pressures on Palestinian families, our witness is demonstrated through our determination to remain present, continue educating, and accompany our students with care and responsibility. Every classroom that remains open, every teacher who continues to serve, and every student who is given an opportunity to learn is part of this witness.

Rooted in the mission and philosophy of the ELCJHL, our schools seek to nurture the academic, spiritual, emotional, social, and creative development of every student. Through learning, dialogue, leadership, peace education, and pastoral care, we prepare young people not only for future professions but also for responsible and compassionate participation in their communities.

When uncertainty surrounds our students, our schools strive to offer stability. When division threatens communities, we promote dialogue, coexistence, and respect. When families face financial hardship, we work to keep education accessible. And when young people struggle to imagine their future, we remind them of their gifts, possibilities, and meaningful role in society.

This report covers January to October 2026 and brings together the educational programs, priorities, and challenges of our ministry. It also acknowledges the dedication of our staff and the solidarity of local and international partners who help sustain our mission. In the Holy Land, our witness is expressed not only through words but through presence, education, perseverance, service, and hope.

2. Educational Mission and Philosophy

The ELCJHL schools and educational programs serve Palestinian society across religious, economic, and social backgrounds. Grounded in the conviction that every person is created in the image of God, the educational ministry seeks to respect each student’s dignity, gifts, talents, and needs.

Our educational philosophy is holistic, inclusive, integrated, nontraditional, and coeducational. It brings together academic learning, spiritual formation, social responsibility, creativity, and opportunities for student participation. This philosophy informs both classroom teaching and the wider life of our schools.

3. Academic Excellence, Languages, and Student Pathways

Model United Nations Conferences

The Model United Nations (MUN) program is an important component of leadership development across the three ELCJHL schools. Weekly MUN lessons provide students with opportunities to strengthen public speaking, research, critical thinking, negotiation, diplomacy, and respectful debate. Students participate in national and international conferences every academic year, alongside the annual LuthMUN conference held each summer.



In January 2026, students participated in PalMUN under the theme “Documenting the Truth.” In August 2026, LuthMUN was held under the theme “Voices of Justice: Redefining Peace Amidst War.” The November 2026 Cyprus conference, “A World Divided: Power vs. Principles,” is also included in the annual program.



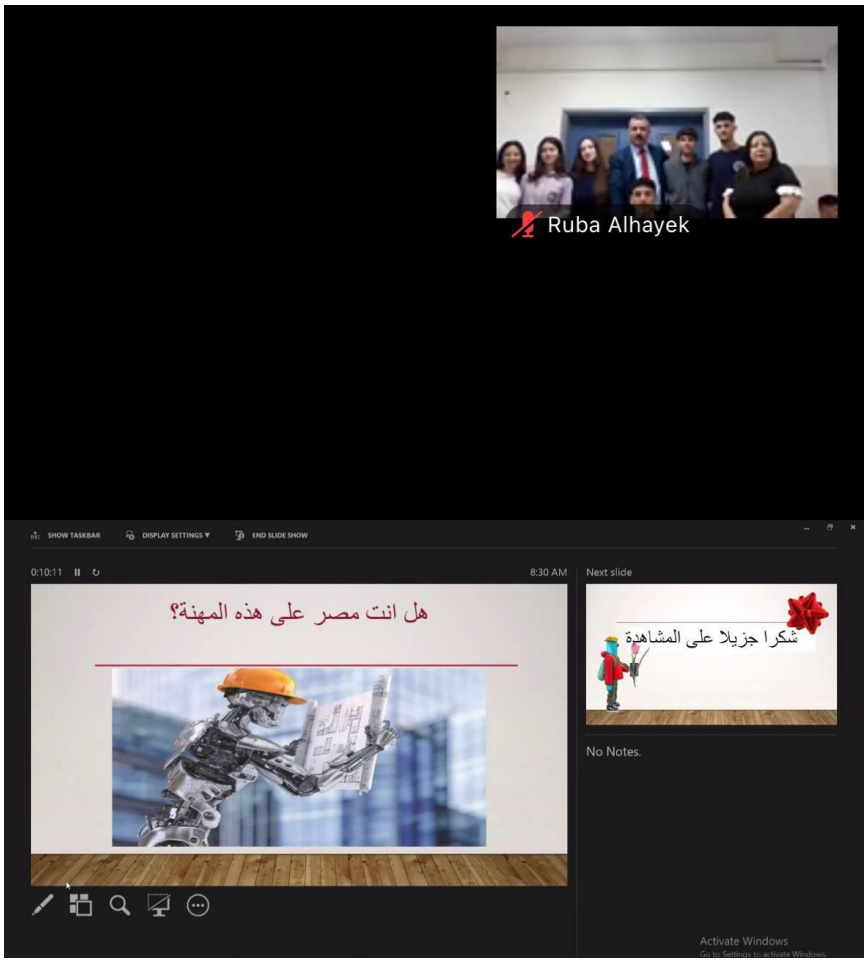
These activities encourage students to engage with global issues, consider different perspectives, and develop leadership skills grounded in dialogue, mutual respect, and peacebuilding.

German Language and Official Examinations

German-language education continues to be an important component of the academic program across ELCJHL schools. Students take official German-language examinations at the A1, A2, and DSD I levels, providing opportunities to assess and certify their developing language proficiency. The DSD II examination is also available as an optional pathway for students wishing to pursue a more advanced qualification. Together, these examinations support progressive language learning, encourage academic achievement, and broaden students' future educational opportunities.

Career Counseling Program

Throughout the scholastic year, 10th-grade students participate in the School-to-Career Program, which includes career guidance sessions with professionals, visits to universities and institutions, and the Holland Career Interest Test to help students identify their interests, ambitions, and future career aspirations. In April 2026, due to Ministry of Education restrictions on travel to Ramallah, students completed their final research, studies, and presentations at their respective schools rather than gathering at a central location. The program supports students in making informed educational and career choices based on their interests, abilities, and aspirations.



Vocational Program

Beit Sahour is renowned for its traditional handicrafts, particularly olive wood carving and souvenir production, which support local tourism and provide income for many families. Building on this cultural and economic heritage, ELS Beit Sahour offers a vocational training program for both female and male students, teaching practical skills in producing olive wood souvenirs and handmade candles. The program helps preserve traditional crafts, develop creativity and practical abilities, and encourage entrepreneurship and future income-generating opportunities.



Tawjihi Governmental Examinations



The 2026 Grade 12 Tawjihi governmental examination results reflect strong academic achievement across ELCJHL schools. Of the 44 students of the Science Stream, 43 passed (97.7%) and one student did not pass (2.3%). The student who did not pass is expected to retake the required subject soon. Among the 43 students who passed, 22 achieved averages of 90% or above (50% of the total cohort), 7 achieved 80–89% (16%), 8 achieved 70–79% (18%), and 6 achieved below 70% (14%). Percentages are rounded.

A total of 34 students from the three ELCJHL schools sat for the Tawjihi examinations in the Literary Stream. The results reflected strong academic achievement, with 29.4% of students scoring 90% or above, 47.1% achieving between 80% and 89%, 17.6% scoring between 70% and 79%, and 5.9% scoring below 70%. Overall, 76.5% of students achieved an average of 80% or higher, reflecting the schools' continued commitment to academic excellence and quality education.

English TOEFL

The English TOEFL examination for 4th, 6th, and 8th-grade students, scheduled for April 2026, could not take place due to movement restrictions between Palestinian governorates, which prevented examination staff from Jenin from reaching our schools. Additionally, limited participation from other schools prevented the specialized institution from purchasing the required examination materials from abroad. Despite these challenges, the ELCJHL schools remain committed to strengthening English-language education through regular English department meetings, focusing on improving teaching methods and students' language proficiency following curriculum changes introduced a few years ago.

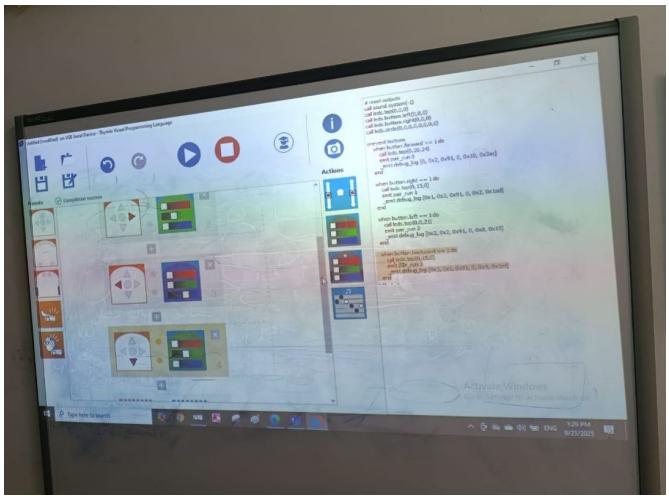
Math Olympiad

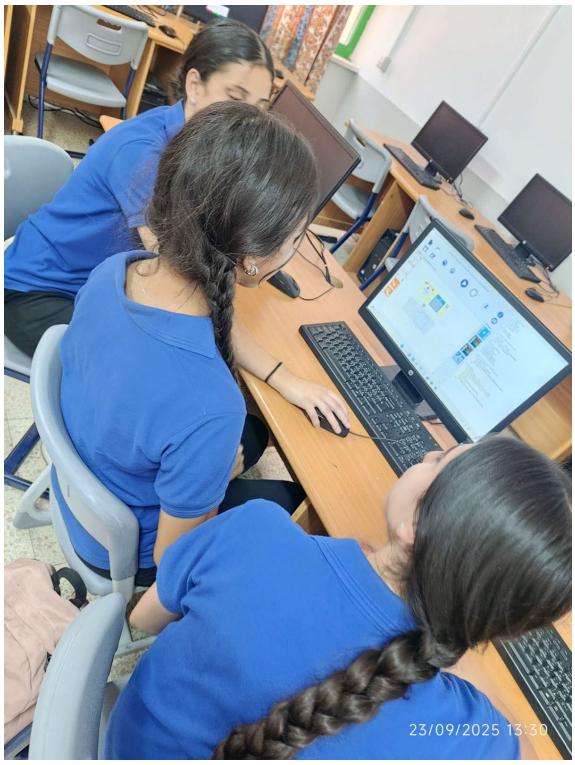
The Math Olympiad for 8th-grade students took place as scheduled across the ELCJHL schools. The results were analyzed to identify students' strengths and areas requiring improvement. Based on these findings, remedial plans were developed and will be implemented and monitored throughout the 2026–2027 scholastic year to strengthen students' mathematical skills and academic performance.

4. Curriculum, Innovation, and School Resources

Technology and Resources Update

The continuous development and upgrading of technological resources is an annual priority across the three ELCJHL schools. Each year, schools assess their technological needs to ensure an effective and modern learning environment.





During 2026, we were able to carry out essential updates according to each school's needs. These included LCD projectors, smart boards, internet networks, school–parent communication platforms, laptops, personal computers, and computer laboratory maintenance. These improvements support teaching and learning, strengthen communication, and enhance the overall educational environment.



Renewable Energy Curriculum

Renewable energy education is integrated into the science curriculum, enabling students to explore sustainable energy sources, environmental responsibility, and the importance of conserving natural resources as part of their regular science learning.





Environmental Club

During the 2025–2026 scholastic year, the Environmental Club at ELS Beit Sahour organized environmental awareness campaigns through morning broadcasts for all students and classroom activities, particularly for Grades 1–4. The activities focused on keeping the school, its surroundings, and the church area clean. Students practiced waste sorting, including paper recycling, and reused collected paper for art projects. They also transformed decorated plastic bottles into planters and used bottle caps to create photo frames and placemats.



In cooperation with Beit Sahour Municipality, students planted trees and flowers in school corridors, playground wall planters, and city streets. They painted tree trunks to help protect them from insects and contributed to painting pedestrian crossings and sidewalks in front of the school.



The club also participated in the Spring Educational Contests and the Olive Festival. Eight students actively took part in eight Environmental Leaders training sessions, strengthening their environmental awareness and leadership skills.



Additional Environmental Club initiatives during the 2025–2026 scholastic year included Grade 10 students' participation in olive harvesting and Environmental Club members planting crops in the school greenhouse. Five club members from Grades 9 and 10 participated in a 30-hour Environmental Leaders course during the mid-year break. The Environmental Education Center funded soil, agricultural supplies, and flowers worth NIS 2,200 to green the school and expand its planted areas. Students also participated in the "Watan Al-Alwan" (Homeland of Colors) competition. Environmental workshops were held for students throughout the academic year, including a dedicated workshop on environmental concepts and practical activities for Environmental Club members.

School Premises Renovations

Maintenance and renovation needs varied across the three ELCJHL schools. Work included repairs and improvements to solar panel systems, electrical capacity, water piping, and other

essential facilities. Additional projects, including school pergolas, have been identified for implementation in the near future, according to each school's needs.

5. Student Well-Being, Protection, and Inclusion

Child Safeguarding Policy

During 2026, a new official Child Safeguarding Policy was developed and formally adopted across the three ELCJHL schools. The policy establishes clear standards and procedures to ensure a safe, respectful, and protective learning environment for all students. It applies to all school staff, as well as external individuals and organizations conducting workshops, activities, or any other programs involving students on school premises. The policy reinforces the schools' commitment to child protection, student well-being, and safeguarding children's rights.

Psycho-Emotional Ventilation Workshops and Support

Recognizing the importance of psycho-emotional well-being, various workshops for staff and students were facilitated by supportive local organizations, focusing on emotional expression, stress management, and resilience. The staff retreat planned for summer 2026 was postponed due to travel restrictions at the Jordanian border crossing, including limited pre-booked seats and permit requirements. We hope to hold the retreat in summer 2027.






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Special Education Facilities and Support

Special education departments are well established across the three ELCJHL schools, with each school equipped with a dedicated resource room to support students with additional learning needs. Specialized educators provide individual or small-group interventions based on individualized educational plans developed according to students' needs and recommendations from teachers and psycho-educational specialists. These interventions aim to strengthen academic progress, personal development, and inclusive education.

Medical Awareness Campaigns

The ELCJHL schools organized medical and health awareness activities to promote students' well-being and healthy lifestyles. These included vision and hearing screenings, cancer awareness, healthy dietary habits, puberty and adolescent development, and diabetes awareness. The activities strengthened students' understanding of prevention, early detection, and healthy living.



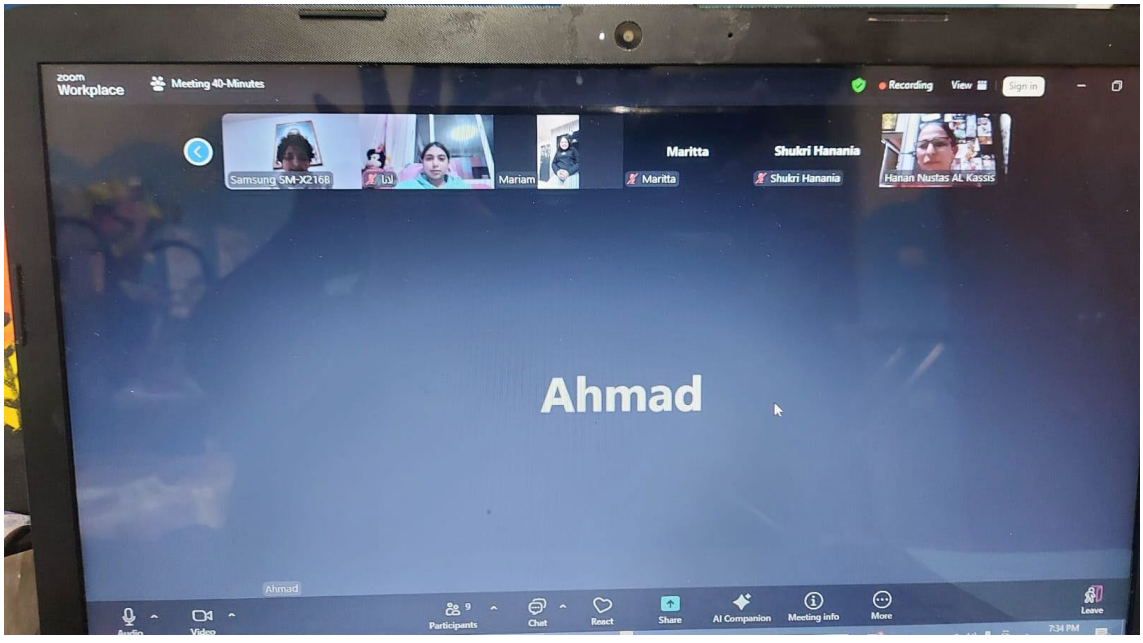
Music Therapy

Weekly music therapy sessions are provided across the three ELCJHL schools for students with psycho-emotional needs. These sessions support emotional expression, stress relief, and students' overall well-being. Since the beginning of the war in October 2023, the need for such support has continued to increase each year, highlighting the growing importance of music therapy within the schools' psychosocial support programs.



Online Teaching During Closures

During the few periods of school closures in 2026, the three ELCJHL schools shifted to online teaching to ensure educational continuity. Teachers provided virtual lessons, assignments, and learning materials while maintaining communication with students and parents. These arrangements helped minimize learning loss and maintain students' engagement despite disruptions to in-person education.



6. Leadership, Peacebuilding, and Christian Witness

Leadership Program

Across the three ELCJHL schools, selected elementary students participate in a year-long leadership and peer mediation training program. At the beginning of the following scholastic year, students graduate from the program and assume their roles as peer mediators during recess, helping classmates resolve conflicts peacefully. The program promotes leadership, responsibility, communication, teamwork, and a culture of peace within the school community.



Regular leadership classes are provided to students in Grades 9 and 10, complemented by ongoing activities within the schools and local communities. Grade 11 students also participate in these activities and are additionally required to design, plan, budget, and implement a graduation project with clearly defined objectives. The program develops leadership skills, responsibility, teamwork, initiative, and community engagement.

Peer Mediation

The Student Mediation Program continues to be implemented across the three ELCJHL schools. In each school, selected elementary students participate in a year-long training program designed to equip them with communication, active listening, conflict-resolution, problem-solving, and peer mediation skills.

At the beginning of each scholastic year, the trained students graduate from the program and assume their roles as peer mediators during recess, helping their classmates resolve disagreements peacefully and constructively.

The program promotes student leadership, responsibility, empathy, mutual respect, and a culture of peaceful conflict resolution within the school community.



Brass for Peace

The Brass for Peace Program provides weekly individual and group music lessons led by German volunteers. Classes are offered at different proficiency levels, allowing students to develop their musical skills progressively while promoting teamwork, creativity, discipline, and cultural exchange through music.



Ambassadors Program

The Ambassadors Program provides students with opportunities to represent their schools during visits by partners, guests, and delegations. Student ambassadors welcome visitors, introduce their schools, and share information about school activities and achievements. The

program strengthens students' communication, leadership, confidence, and sense of responsibility while encouraging active participation in school life.

Monthly Joint Christian–Islamic Lessons

As part of a specially designed ELCJHL curriculum, monthly joint Christian–Islamic religious education sessions are conducted across the three Lutheran schools. During these encounters, Christian and Muslim students come together to explore and discuss a different theme or concept each month. The program promotes mutual understanding, respect, dialogue, and appreciation of shared human values, while encouraging students to recognize and respect their religious differences. These sessions strengthen interfaith relationships and foster a culture of peaceful coexistence within the school community.

League of Christian Schools

During the reporting period, two meetings were held with the League of Christian Schools to discuss common challenges facing Christian schools in Jerusalem and the West Bank, as well as shared concerns and future plans. These meetings strengthened cooperation and collective planning among Christian educational institutions.

7. Creativity, Culture, and Community Life

Children's Dreams Exhibitions

Children's exhibitions create space for imagination, expression, and hope. Add the themes, participating schools, artwork, and community response.



Kindergarten and High School Graduations

Kindergarten and high school graduation ceremonies were held as usual across the ELCJHL schools. However, in accordance with Ministry of Education directives, and in consideration of families' financial hardships and prevailing mourning traditions, celebrations were kept modest, with limited festivities.



Theatre and Drama Program

Weekly drama lessons are led by Mr. Paul from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Through theatre and creative expression, students develop confidence, communication skills, teamwork, and empathy.



125th Anniversary of ELS Beit Sahour

In 2026, Evangelical Lutheran School Beit Sahour celebrates 125 years of educational mission and service. This milestone honors generations of students, educators, and families, and reflects the school's enduring commitment to quality education, community engagement, and Christian witness in the Holy Land.



Scientific, Religious, Cultural, and Sports Events

Fairs, celebrations, competitions, and sporting activities contribute to holistic education and a vibrant school community.







Alumni Social Media Pages

During 2026, alumni social media pages were established to strengthen connections between graduates and their schools. Weekly posts highlight alumni achievements, professional journeys, and success stories, celebrating their accomplishments, inspiring current students, and maintaining a strong sense of belonging to the ELCJHL school community.
https://www.facebook.com/share/1BeJKRvmVg/

https://www.facebook.com/share/19ZzmocUPH/





8. Partnerships, Workshops, and Special Programs

Staff Capacity Building and Professional Development Workshops

During 2026, the ELCJHL Education Office organized a series of professional development workshops across the Lutheran schools, focusing on trauma awareness and resilience, artificial intelligence in education, classroom management, curriculum development, innovative teaching methods, and open educational resources.

Additional training addressed early childhood education, digital learning platforms, German language instruction, personal development, and first aid.

These initiatives aimed to strengthen teachers' professional skills, enhance educational quality, and promote the well-being of staff and students.







MNAP

Mahaba Nursery and Preschool (MNAP), located on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, welcomed a new principal at the beginning of the 2026–2027 scholastic year, following three years without a new appointment. Enrollment increased compared with the previous two years, in a context where foreign nationals had faced restrictions on work visas. MNAP was recently recognized by the Red Cross as a nursery and preschool option for its staff, ahead of anticipated employee arrivals in October and November 2026. The British Embassy in Jerusalem had similarly recognized MNAP as a childcare option for its employees shortly before October 7, 2023, although subsequent circumstances prevented those plans from progressing. MNAP has also begun the Ministry of Education licensing process. Staff started the required professional courses in October 2026, with sessions scheduled on weekends, after working hours, or online. Several indoor and outdoor renovations were completed during summer 2026 to ensure a safe, welcoming, and educational environment for young children.





Complementary Program (CP) – Dar Al-Kalima School (DAK)

In line with the ELCJHL's commitment to holistic education, Dar Al-Kalima School offers a Complementary Program (CP) providing students with free extracurricular activities. The program nurtures creativity, talents, physical well-being, and social skills beyond the classroom. Activities include chess, mini-volleyball, girls' football, boys' football for two age groups, art club, gymnastics, table tennis, flute, choir, badminton, basketball, and creative writing. The program encourages teamwork, self-confidence, and inclusive participation, offering students opportunities to develop their interests regardless of financial circumstances.


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Volunteers Program — YAGAM and BMW

Due to ongoing travel and access restrictions, volunteers from both YAGAM and BMW have been unable to return to the ELCJHL schools. Since their departure in October 2023, no international volunteers have been present in any of the schools, resulting in the continued suspension of both volunteer programs.

Free Extracurricular Clubs Across the Three Schools

The three ELCJHL schools offer a variety of free extracurricular activities, including Model United Nations (MUN), traditional Palestinian Dabkeh dance, leadership, peer mediation, choir, drama, and environmental clubs. These activities strengthen students' talents, cultural identity, communication skills, environmental awareness, teamwork, and personal development, reflecting the schools' commitment to holistic education.



9. School Fees and Financial Hardships

The economic situation in Palestine continues to place severe pressure on families and communities. Tourism remains largely at a standstill, while restrictions on employment in Israeli territories have deprived many households of income. Frequent and unpredictable closures of roads and access points between villages and cities further disrupt daily life and economic activity.

The financial crisis affecting the Palestinian public sector has added to these hardships, as government employees continue to face partial salary payments. The closure or reduction of operations of UN agencies and other nongovernmental organizations has also affected employment opportunities. Families of ELCJHL students who depended on such work have experienced job losses or uncertainty, directly affecting their ability to meet school expenses.

These circumstances have had a growing impact on the collection of registration and tuition fees across ELCJHL schools. Following the Ministry of Education's decision and in light of the difficult political and economic situation, the League of Christian Schools adopted a decision not to increase tuition or registration fees for the 2026–2027 scholastic year. The ELCJHL Church Synod endorsed this decision to ease the financial burden on families.

Nevertheless, the gap between operating expenses and fee collections remains a serious challenge to the sustainability of our educational ministry. The continued commitment of local and international partners is vital to keeping our schools open, supporting our staff, and ensuring that financial hardship does not become a barrier to learning.

10. Organizational and Statistical Data

Insert verified January–October 2026 data for each school: enrollment by school and grade, teaching and nonteaching staff, graduation figures, program participation, financial indicators, and other agreed performance measures. Comparative figures should clearly identify the reference year.

Religious Composition of Students – 2026

The religious composition of students across the three ELCJHL schools is presented below as percentages only.

School	Christian students	Muslim students
ELS	64%	36%
DAK	10%	90%
SOH	17%	83%

The ELCJHL schools continue to serve both Christian and Muslim students, reflecting the Church's commitment to inclusive education, interfaith understanding, and peaceful coexistence. The proportion of Christian students ranges from 10% to 64% across the three schools, while Muslim students account for 36% to 90% of enrollment. These figures reflect the important role of Lutheran education in fostering mutual respect, dialogue, and cooperation among students from different religious backgrounds.

2026 data pending confirmation from the Education Office and school administrations.

School Leadership, Coordination, and Educational Planning

Regular quarterly meetings, preparatory meetings at the beginning of the scholastic year, and end-of-year evaluation meetings bring together the leadership of the four Lutheran schools and the ELCJHL Educational Director. These meetings provide opportunities for joint planning, reviewing educational progress, addressing shared challenges, and discussing mutual visions and priorities. They strengthen coordination and collaboration across the schools.

In addition, several meetings are held annually with the local Palestinian Educational Director to discuss educational challenges, administrative concerns, and decisions affecting the schools. These meetings support coordination with local educational authorities and provide opportunities to address emerging issues and consider appropriate responses.

Strengthening School Leadership and Academic Support

At the beginning of the 2026–2027 scholastic year, three deputy principals were appointed across the ELCJHL schools. All three hold master's degrees in education and have served as teachers in their respective schools for many years. Their academic qualifications, extensive classroom experience, and deep understanding of their school communities are expected to provide valuable academic and pedagogical support, strengthen instructional leadership, and enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

In addition, a new principal was appointed at MNAP at the beginning of the scholastic year, further strengthening educational leadership and school administration.

11. Current Challenges and Priorities

There is a great need for psychosocial and emotional support for both staff and students. Psycho-educational plans and targeted interventions are necessary to assist students facing academic and emotional difficulties.

Registration and tuition fee payments remain a major challenge, as many parents are unable to pay due to unemployment and the serious increase in poverty rates in Palestine. Significant emigration among Palestinian families, particularly within Christian communities, also threatens the stability of school communities.

Strengthening German-language teaching and improving student performance in DSD I examinations remain priorities, alongside encouraging students to pursue the optional DSD II examination. Additional attention is needed for inclusive education, educational continuity during closures, and sustainable funding for school operations and facilities.

12. Conclusion

In a period marked by uncertainty and hardship, the ELCJHL educational ministry continues to bear witness through steadfast presence, compassionate service, and commitment to quality education. Our schools remain places where children can learn, grow, find belonging, and imagine a future rooted in dignity and peace.

We are deeply grateful to our principals, teachers, counselors, administrative teams, families, and partners for their perseverance and solidarity. Their dedication allows our mission to continue despite difficult circumstances.

“And You Will Be My Witnesses” is more than a theme for this reporting period. It is a calling lived daily through the work of our schools. With faith and hope, we remain committed to empowering a generation equipped with knowledge, compassion, and the courage to build a more just and peaceful future.