

## David Ivaska's Report to First Presbyterian Church, Evanston and IFES in Palestine (CSPU) and IFES LINK

Christ at the Checkpoint USA Conference

October 15 – 18, 2018

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Jointly Sponsored by

Bethlehem Bible College (Palestine) and the United Methodist Church's Initiative for Middle East Peace

---

Nader Ghneim (IFES Palestine Staff) had invited Sally and I to visit him, his family and his work sometime in October this year. However, because of conflicting trips for Nader and his waiting word for those two trips, we concluded that October may not be possible. We look forward to another time that may work for us to visit.

In discussions with Nader and Jamil Chabouh (IFES MENA Regional Secretary) and with our IFES LINK supervisor (Tanya Van Horne) and with the Mission Director for our home church, First Presbyterian Church Evanston, Caryl Weinberg, we all decided that it would be best for me to attend the Christ at the Checkpoint USA Conference in Oklahoma City. This was the first time this conference was to be held in the USA.

### Highlights for Me

- 1) Meeting with Rev. Munther Isaac over an unhurried dinner and hearing him speak twice.
  - a) Munther directed this Christ at the Checkpoint Conference and others held in Bethlehem.
    - i) A very impressive list of speakers addressing 'Exploring Holy Land Realities and Our Response'. (see attached conference schedule)
  - b) He serves as Academic Dean of Bethlehem Bible College, the sponsor of this conference.
    - i) BBC was the primary host of this conference. Key members of BBC community presented, including, BBC President, Rev. Dr. Jack Sara, BBC Academic Dean, Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac, BBC Chair of Biblical Studies, Grace Zoughbi and former Director of BBC's Shepherd Society, Alex Awad.
    - ii) Throughout the conference, we heard video testimonies of BBC students and graduates.
  - c) Munther also serves as Pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, which is sister church of First Presbyterian Church, Evanston for 25 years. Over dinner, Munther shared...
    - i) The impressive work done by Rev. Mitri Raheb, former pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church, and particularly the tremendous impact he has had in establishing many ministries reaching out into the community, including primary and secondary schools, Dar al Kalima University of Arts and Culture and a parish nursing program serving elderly members of the community.
    - ii) His own gratitude for Mitri to select and appoint him to succeed him as Senior Pastor of the church. Mitri has been a good mentor.
    - iii) Munther was encouraged to hear of the long history of First Pres' long-standing sister church partnership. He looks forward to the partnership continuing and growing with the church.
    - iv) He shared some of his own vision for the church both short term and long term. His vision focuses on building up the local body of believers enabling them to not only stay in Palestine but to flourish as believers and be salt and light in their very difficult environment. He has a special concern for young families and has started a small group Bible study for 22 members that meet weekly.
    - v) Munther also shared some of their immediate concerns as a church. One concern is being able to hire two staff who can work with children and youth in such a way that they can also bring their friends to activities. The second concern is the difficulty young families and the elderly have in attending church since there is no parking and there are steep steps into the sanctuary. The church has a very unique

location right at the center of Bethlehem Square and has a beautiful sanctuary. The church is hoping to either build a parking lot and ramp on the property next to the church and/or to relocate further down the Main Street of Bethlehem so that they will be more accessible to young families. The third hope for the church is to build a Youth Center as an outreach as their ministry to young people expands.

vi). Munther would love to establish an ongoing schedule of exchanges between Christmas Lutheran Church and First Pres. This could include help with summer camps, pulpit exchanges, visiting over weekends whenever people come to Israel or Palestine. Too many times, tourists run in and out of Bethlehem rather than sitting with people over meals in their homes.

d) Another joy I had in meeting with Munther was to hear more about the IFES university student work in Palestine.

i) He serves as Chairman of the Board for the IFES movement in Palestine (CSPU). Whenever they have national events, he is often the major plenary speaker.

ii) Munther was a university classmate of Nader's at Beir Zeit University in Ramallah. Together now they lead the IFES student work in Palestine. He shared how as students they worked tirelessly to get the Dean's permission to host an outdoor event to celebrate Christmas and Jesus birth. In the end after several rejections, both the Hamas and Fatah student groups in the university went to the Dean with Nader and Munther and persuaded the Dean that he should allow this Christmas celebration. This event attracted many Christian and Muslim students and the Dean was surprised at their interest. At one of these events the IFES group showed the Jesus film for several nights and over 1,600 students came out. This Christmas event continues to this day.

iii) Sally and I look forward to our upcoming visit to Ramallah and Bethlehem to be with Nader and Munther.

e) Finally, we shared together the deep disappointment Munther, IFES MENA and First Pres experienced when InterVarsity USA reversed his invitation to be the Bible Expositor at this year's Urbana 18 Mission Conference speaking from the book of Revelation.

i) He was grateful to receive Pastor Ray's, Caryl's and Dave's letter sharing First Pres' decision to redirect scholarship meeting for Urbana to Palestinian students. This gift of \$5,000 means a lot to CSPU, Nader and Munther as we stand in solidarity with them.

ii) Because Palestinian already are so marginalized by the Western Church, not being able to be at Urbana was a great disappointment. First, for Munther to share his gift of Bible teaching with students about this book that was written with sustaining words for the suffering church. Secondly, for students in the West to hear the perseverance of Palestinian Christians in the midst of huge challenges in bring God's Good News to the suffering and oppressed.

iii) Munther graciously agree to review both the Arabic version of my *Be Not Afraid* and my *Heaven's Hymnbook, Sustaining Words for the Suffering Church*, as we consider using that on our upcoming visit to Palestine to be with university students.

2). Sitting under the teaching of Dr. Gary Burge who spoke three mornings on 'Biblical Foundations on Christ at the Checkpoint'. Gary and his family were members of First Pres Evanston when he was teaching at North Park University before he moved to Wheaton College and now Calvin Seminary.

a). His first exposition was on 'Jesus Inaugural Sermon in Luke 4'. This sermon launched Jesus' ministry and focused on the theme of God's Generosity and His love for the Outsider. God's agenda was not to prosper just one nation, but rather to prosper the poor, the oppressed, the prisoner, the blind, the lame and the needy. In this message Jesus highlights the ministry of both Elijah and Elisha when they went not to the nation of Israel but to Phoenicia and Syria with God's blessing.

b). His next two expositions focused on who were the 'Children of Abraham' and how do we understand race and land. He showed both from Old and New Testaments that God's focus was on grace not race, and faith not land. And God's intention all along was for Abraham to be a blessing to all nations.

c). Gary's teaching highlighted the importance of our handling rightly and responsibly the Word of God, especially as it relates to this very challenging conflict in the Middle East, Palestine and Israel. Over and over again, speakers addressed the huge challenge Christian Zionism is for the Christians in the Middle East.

3) Finally, I had the pleasure of sitting with Abound Elias Chacour as we waited at the airport together after the conference. He is author of '*Blood Brothers*' and has been nominated numerous times for the Nobel Peace Prize. He shared on the final evening his own journey of peacemaking in Palestine. Powerful!!

Attending this conference before Sally and I travel to Palestine was God's gift to us. I needed to learn what I did at this conference. And I trust I can be a good steward of what I learned.