

# Letters from Overseas

## Susan Palmi Writes from the Middle East

January 2009

Post-Christmas thoughts from the ever-changing landscape of the Middle East:

Well, the Christmas solemnity of peacefulness and calm in the region of the Holy Land was shattered on Saturday, December 27, with the news that 200+ Palestinians have been killed by the Israeli attack on Gaza. Understandably, our work tasks have been curtailed somewhat and we have been “grounded.” We were at the Tulkarm Refugee Camp playing badminton with a group of women following our English conversation class with them when we were called by EAPPI staff to inform us of the situation, and told to go home and avoid any crowds we saw gathering.



Later that day, one of our local contacts, Abdulkarim Dalbah, called to say there would be a demonstration in Tulkarm that evening and asked us if we would like to participate. On consultation with EAPPI staff, it was decided that we all would be more comfortable staying home. The Tulkarm team has already experienced the Israeli army's response to a demonstration (in Jayyus) and were not anxious to experience it again. We were instructed to stay put on Sunday as well and not venture to Beit Iba Checkpoint and into Nablus for church. It is a very strange and helpless feeling not to be able to be out among Palestinians during this very stressful and sad time for them. We did visit a few shops on Sunday to tell shopkeepers how sorry we were for Palestinian losses in Gaza.

While the Israeli bombing of Gaza seems to have quickly replaced any lingering thoughts of Christmas, I would like to share some of the highlights with you. I arrived at the Ecumenical Accompaniment (EA) house in Bethelhem about 1:00 p.m. on December 24. At Gilo Checkpoint (CP 300), there was an additional army presence due to visiting dignitaries in Bethlehem for Christmas Eve services. However, the individual soldiers were in a light mood, even wishing visitors a Merry Christmas and assisting my EA friend, Benta (Sweden) and I in trying to find another poor lost EA, Carina (Sweden). We eventually found her standing on a street corner only two blocks from the house. “The lost had been found” and all was well.

Once past Gilo and the wall, I could focus on the reason we were there: to celebrate the birth of a baby so long ago.

The atmosphere was very festive and positive in Manger Square even though looked a bit like the circus was in town—tacky Christmas lights, with vendors selling balloons, cotton candy, falafel, and corn-on-the-cob. Quite a site! I wondered if I would feel any type of spiritual connection during the course of the evening given the atmosphere of the square.

At 5:00 p.m., we attended a service at the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church but unfortunately had to sit in an overflow area because the church was full. Nonetheless, we were treated by video to the Dar-al Kadima School Choir, the Bethlehem Star Choir, and ministers from the Christmas Church, the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, and Deutschsprachige Evangelische Gemeinde Erloserkirche. We sang carols and listened to messages in many languages. The sermon was in English; however, the Arabic voiceover drowned out the Rev. Mark Holman's delivery. I spoke to Mark after the service (having met him earlier in Jerusalem) and he jokingly said it was probably just as well. A clear benefit to being in the overflow area was that we were closest to the reception line with wine, canapés, and tea and coffee following the service.

We caught up with several of our EA colleagues for dinner at St. George's restaurant in Manger Square. We lingered over dinner until it was time for the marathon which was to be the Midnight Mass at The Church of the Nativity—in actual fact, the service was in the Church

of St. Catherine next door. We were security cleared at about 9:00 p.m. and then stood in a line-up until the church doors opened at 10:00 p.m. We moved into the church where all the seats (of which there were very few) were taken and we were ushered to a standing area. Remember we were still two hours before midnight at this point! There was a very friendly German family sitting next to where we were standing who offered to rotate sitting and standing with us. We gratefully accepted their offer. We had an excellent view of the front of the church and the aisle where all the priests and dignitaries processed in. I could have reached out and touched His Excellency, the President of Palestine, Mahmmoud Abbas, or His Beatitude Fuad Twal, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem.

I must say that singing *Adeste Fidelis* and *Silent Night* in whatever language you chose as the priests processed with the Holy Child to the Grotto of the Nativity was an emotional moment which connected me to my husband, family, choir, and church home at Glebe St. James in Ottawa, who, seven hours later, would be celebrating the same event in the same way. Voices really rang around the stone walls of the church. It was a wonderful moment and one which I will remember for a long time.

Thus, the marathon ended at 2:00 a.m. and we had a 40-minute walk back in the rain to the EA house in Bethlehem. Christmas morning, we all woke up late and shared a breakfast meal before leaving for our various destinations. I returned to Jerusalem only to find I was locked out of the St. Thomas Home where I was supposed to be staying on Christmas night. It was somewhat depressing to be walking aimlessly around Jerusalem on Christmas day for two hours in the pouring rain before the doors at St. Thomas opened. I must say I was delighted when the nuns told me that they would turn on the heat and hot water from 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. I think that they took pity on me!

Our Tulkarm team is all back in our placement and eager to pick up where we left off before our Israeli exposure week and the Christmas festivities, although that may be challenging because Muslims celebrate many holidays at this time of year. Yesterday, all schools and stores were closed for Hijra, first day of the Muslim New Year, and also to recognize the Palestinian fatalities in Gaza. Thursday is another holiday for Palestinians to mark the Western New Year. They close schools and shops for Christmas too. During these holidays, we can continue our checkpoint and agricultural gate duties, but visiting villages can be less effective.

I have scheduled a placement visit to Hebron on January 4, 2009, but it remains to be seen how the ever-changing landscape of will unfold this week and whether or not I will go. Here, in Tulkarm, we are about 150 kilometres north of the hostilities in Gaza. A good comfort zone. Hebron is much closer.

*Susan Palmaj works for The United Church of Canada as an Ecumenical Accompanier serving on the World Council of Churches/Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). The views contained herein are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of her employer (The United Church of Canada) or the WCC. If you would like to publish the information contained here or disseminate it further, please first contact the EAPPI Communications and Advocacy Officer (eappi-co@jrol.com) for permission.*

