Palestinian and Christian in a violent time

“What does it mean to be church amid these very harsh circumstances?” asks Bethlehem pastor Munther Isaac.

Interview by Elizabeth Palmer in the October 2024 issue
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Theologian and pastor Munther Isaac (courtesy photo)

Munther Isaac is a Palestinian theologian and pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Beit Sahour. He serves as academic dean of Bethlehem Bible College, where he directs the annual Christ at the Checkpoint conference. His forthcoming book, Christ Under the Rubble*, is based on an Advent sermon he delivered shortly after the current war in*

Gaza began.

Tell us about where you grew up and how you became a Lutheran pastor.

I grew up in Beit Sahour, a little town next to Bethlehem. I was born into an Orthodox family, but when I was a child, my siblings joined a conservative evangelical Presbyterian church and took me with them. I'm very grateful for that upbringing.

But my thinking evolved, so after I completed my PhD, my wife and I decided to look for a new church. We loved the richness of the Lutheran liturgy, and the Lutheran church in Palestine is very involved in the community: it has schools, an environmental center, and even a gender justice desk. In this political and social activism, I found a holistic understanding of the church's mission and practice.

It's not that I thought Luther's teachings were better than Calvin's. I was just so attracted to the witness of the Lutheran church in Palestine that I wanted to be part of it. When I joined, the church leaders asked if I would consider joining the ministry team. I began studying Lutheran teachings and practices, and two years later I was ordained.

What is Bethlehem Bible College's mission, and who does it serve?

It's a Palestinian interdenominational school that offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in biblical studies and public theology. We hold to traditional evangelical beliefs about the inspiration of scripture, the importance of personal encounter with Christ, and so on. But we're progressive on social justice issues. Unlike most evangelicals we don't embrace Christian Zionism, and we host an annual conference called Christ at the Checkpoint to show evangelicals its dangers.

Being progressive on certain issues within a traditional evangelical setting is typical of Global South evangelical movements. From my perspective, there's no tension between being in a mainline denomination that's outwardly focused in the community and holding traditional evangelical beliefs.

Just 2 percent of Palestinians in the West Bank are Christian. What are the challenges and opportunities of doing ministry in a place where you're such a small religious minority?

Yes, it’s less than 2 percent. But we don’t see ourselves as a minority the way many in the West view minorities. We’re not an ethnic minority. We’re Arabs, and you would not be able to tell who’s a Christian and who’s a Muslim by looking at us. Not from the dialect, not from the food, not from the traditions. We’re part of the Palestinian people, and we’ve been living together as Christians and Muslims for 1,400 years.

But there are challenges to doing ministry in Palestine. We may be the only context in the world in which the most important mission of the church is to save the Christian presence here. During the Ottoman period, many Palestinian Christians left—and when the British Mandate came, they were not able to return. When Israel was created, more became refugees. During the period from 1948 to 1967, there were such limited opportunities that more Palestinians emigrated. Because of the missionary schools established in the early 20th century, Christians were given the language skills needed to emigrate, and this has created a large Palestinian Christian community in the diaspora. Every Christian in Palestine now has friends or relatives outside.

Living under occupation is very hard because there are so many restrictions. Unemployment is high, and there’s almost always political tension and violence. The church tries to provide jobs, help people in need, and sustain families. Still, many Palestinians have such despair that they leave. This is the challenge we face.

Another challenge is the recent increase in religious fundamentalism: both political Islam and religious Zionism are on the rise. This leaves Palestinian Christians asking questions about where we fit in and what role we play. We’re also questioning our relationship with the Western church, which is heavily involved with the land in a one-sided way that gives support only to Israel. That troubles us.

In the midst of that, my challenge as a pastor and theologian is to make the Christian faith relevant and useful, to contextualize our message so it brings hope to our people rather than false optimism. What does it look like to be the church in this very difficult reality? What kind of work can we do on the ground to sustain people and to make the church truly a safe place?

When you first heard the news of the Hamas attacks on October 7 of last year, what emotions ran through you?

I can’t forget that day. It happened so quickly. I was leading the chapel service at the school in Beit Sahour, and my students were singing. My phone started buzzing in my pocket. Then a teacher handed me a phone with images on it.

Our first emotion was disbelief. We were shocked by the early images we saw of Hamas fighters deep within Israel: How did they get out of Gaza and into Israel? And like the rest of the world, we were horrified by the kidnapping of Israeli civilians. We were shocked that Hamas fighters were killing families in their homes and kidnapping children.

Then we heard about the missiles from Hamas close to Jerusalem, and we started hearing explosions. We decided to evacuate the school immediately. There were about 460 students who needed to get home safely to their parents. Some were panicking because we had to evacuate slowly, one classroom at a time.

When we got home, we began following the news. We were terrified by the thought of what Israel would do in retaliation. I remember thinking at the time that Israel’s response would be very strong. But the level of destruction in Gaza is something we’ve never witnessed or expected. The annihilation of Gaza’s infrastructure and the mass killing of people, especially children, continues to horrify us.

Since October 7, how has daily life changed for people in your community?

It’s hard to put into words the impact this war has on Bethlehem. These are some of the worst times I’ve experienced in my life. Many families are in dire need because of high unemployment. Most jobs depend on tourism, and that is now lost. We barely survived COVID, only for this to happen. A lot of the international support through human rights and development organizations has stopped coming because it now goes to Gaza. Many young families have left our community in order to survive.

Then there is the fear. Everyone is afraid that this could escalate to the West Bank. And with what’s happening now on the northern border, there’s even more fear.

Another issue is how much the blockades have tightened. Before the war, Israel had already closed many of the roads between Bethlehem and other Palestinian towns. Now, entry and exit to Bethlehem are limited to two roads. When they are closed, Bethlehem becomes another Gaza: completely isolated. Even when they’re open, we’re very concerned about traveling because of the settler violence. We try to avoid going between Palestinian cities at night, and some schools have moved to

online learning because the children can’t get to school safely.

There hasn’t been much attention on violence in the West Bank—the killing of young men in Jenin, Nablus, and Tulkarem—because it feels like nothing in comparison to the genocide in Gaza. But a record number of Palestinians have been killed by Israelis in the West Bank over the past two years. The numbers were very high even before October 7.

What are you hearing from Gaza these days? Do you have family there? Are there Lutherans or other Christians there who you’re in contact with?

There aren’t Lutherans in Gaza; the Christians there are Catholic or Orthodox. But all Palestinian Christians are family to one another, so we all know people in Gaza. I have a church member in Beit Sahour who lost a sister and a brother in the war. One was killed in a bombing, and the other got sick and died because there was no medicine. Another sister had to have hip surgery without anesthesia. Imagine the pain!

Christians in Gaza City made a collective decision to live in their churches instead of leaving. The Catholic church has a school campus, so about 500 people live there. The Orthodox church is smaller, and 200 people live there. In some ways, these people are privileged: they do not live in tents like so many others. At the same time, they’ve paid a heavy price for choosing to stay. When the Orthodox church was bombed, they had to bury 18 of their loved ones. Another was shot and killed in the street when she went home to get clothes. Two others were shot dead right in front of the Catholic church.

When I talk with my friends in Gaza, I have no idea how they are surviving. The stories they tell are horror stories. They are traumatizing. It really is hell on earth. I ask myself: What kind of strength do these people have, and where do they get it?

How are people from your West Bank communities involved in providing aid to Gaza?

The biggest challenge is getting the aid into Gaza. There isn’t enough food or water, and the prices are ridiculously high. So we have to be creative. Some people in Gaza still have cash. If we can get funds transferred to their bank accounts, they can give their cash to the people living in the churches, who can then try to go out and buy food.

The Catholic and Orthodox patriarchates in Jerusalem have also managed to channel funds to buy food and have it delivered to the churches in Gaza. The Lutherans in my congregations and the evangelicals at the Bible college are now giving money to the patriarchates to help them do that.

At such a desperate, heartbreaking time for your people, where do you find hope? How do you offer it to others?

I don't want to talk about hope right now. That may sound unchristian, but at this stage, we're just trying to survive and live day by day. The people of Gaza are finding strength in one another and in their faith in God. They know they can't rely on anything else.

I'm convinced that people undergoing harsh realities experience God in a more real way than we can imagine. We hear this from the people living in Gaza's churches, and we also see it in the Muslims who are pulled from under the rubble. They still say *we thank God* and *we rest our case before God*, even when they are going through near-death experiences and losing loved ones. The faith they exhibit in God is so strong. This kind of faith must be what sustains people in times of need. God must be present in the midst of these harsh circumstances. We pray for deliverance, but the Bible doesn't promise deliverance. It promises that God will be with us.

If a ceasefire can be reached, what do you think needs to happen next?

We've been calling for a ceasefire for almost a year, so we can't take that first step for granted. And it's hard to talk about day one after the war when we don't know what's going to be left to talk about. According to UN estimates, it will take 85 years to rebuild Gaza. Can anything good come out of this war? I wonder.

After all of this loss, all of this tragedy, I strongly believe that accountability must take place. We've got to hold those who committed war crimes accountable. Because if no one is held accountable, that means it can happen again. If international law isn't enforced, there can be no equality and justice.

We also can't talk about solutions without getting rid of the discrimination, the imbalance in power in which one group dominates the other. It was the case before the war and is even more so now. The reality we live in can be described as an apartheid reality. Many human rights groups and legal organizations—even some Jewish groups, like B'Tselem—call it apartheid. Israel's nation-state law says that

only Jews have the right to self-determination, and this principle extends in practice throughout the West Bank. That's the textbook definition of apartheid.

Right now my energy is focused on how we can end this apartheid using creative and nonviolent resistance. It may sound naive and out of touch to talk about nonviolence today as a Palestinian, given the intensity of violence we are subjected to. But I can't give up on my belief that the Jesus way is that of nonviolence.

What would you define as political progress for the Palestinians? Greater rights and improved living conditions in the West Bank and Gaza? A clear path toward a Palestinian state? Increased international support for a single, secular democracy in the region? Something else?

Well, Israel killed the two-state solution by building settlements deep in the land that Palestinians hoped would become the Palestinian state, the 1967 borders. The West Bank and East Jerusalem are now filled with Israeli land, so there's no way to make a Palestinian state there. This July, the Israeli Knesset voted against the establishment of any Palestinian state west of Jordan. So the two-state solution is dead.

But we Palestinians aren't going anywhere. That means there are two options. One is the continuation of the status quo: more oppression, more killing, more people living without autonomy. The second is a single state with equal rights for everyone.

Israel has to decide, because they hold the keys to the region. They are the ones who will have to decide when enough killing is enough. Sadly, the pro-peace voices in Israel seem to be getting weaker as the Israeli government shifts to the extreme right. There are still some very courageous Israeli Jewish voices, and we're grateful for them. But they're not enough to make a difference in the political discourse.

Most Israelis see their majority-Jewish state as existentially necessary for their security and self-determination as a people. Are they wrong to see it this way?

Many years ago, I visited the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem with an Israeli friend. I was shocked by what I saw, and as we walked through the museum, I kept asking myself, Where was the church? I was in my 20s at the time, and in my naivete I thought that the church could not have been OK with something like this! Later I studied the Holocaust and learned that the church was directly complicit in it.

So when someone asks me, “If there is a one-state solution, wouldn’t the Muslims kill all the Jews?” my reply is, Are you serious? Look at history. Who killed six million Jews? Was it Arab Muslims?

When people talk about the Middle East, they so often characterize Islam as a violent religion with a violent God. That is simply untrue: it’s based on prejudice against Arabs and against Muslims. I refuse to believe that Palestinians and Israelis can’t get along, or that Jews and Muslims can’t get along. History tells us this is not true.

And yet there are some groups that want to destroy Israel, like Hamas and Hezbollah.

I hope nobody thinks I am trying to defend these groups, because there is no justification for their violence. But the existence of these groups is clearly a response to reality. Hezbollah wouldn’t exist if there were no Israeli occupation south of Lebanon. And when journalists ask me how to get rid of Hamas, my answer is get rid of the occupation, and you’ll get rid of Hamas.

What kind of political leadership do you think Palestinian Christians are looking for in the West Bank?

We sometimes have conversations with the Palestinian leadership about what a secular state looks like, how it can respect all religions and how everyone can be equal under the law. This is not the kind of secularism where religion is out of the picture; it’s one in which we all respect each other and have equal rights.

Believe it or not, we don’t want any special status as Christians. We’re not looking for protection, not even from the West. The way for the Palestinian Christian community to rise from our ashes and flourish again is to ensure a future for *all* Palestinians. We want a state in which there are no second- or third-class citizens because all are equal under the law. That doesn’t exist now. But it’s not because we’re Christians; it’s because we’re Palestinians.

How do you understand the theological relationship between Christianity and Judaism?

Although there is a lot of diversity within the Jewish community, I think it’s important to look at the Jewish people as people of faith. We believe in the same God; there is

only one God in the Bible. But of course we have different understandings of this God. Christians view God as revealed in Jesus, and Jews don't.

So what if one of us is right and the other is wrong? That doesn't mean we have to act with prejudice and hatred toward the other. Antisemitism at its core is an ethical issue, so I could easily believe that access to the Abrahamic covenant is through Jesus without being antisemitic. What matters is what's in my heart, the love I have for my Jewish neighbor.

Some people have called you a supersessionist. Do you think that's a fair characterization?

Remember that supersessionism is a Western concept. It's based on a premise of supremacy—of one group being superior to another—to the extent that they cannot coexist. It's a Western idea, and yet somehow the discussion is now one in which we must all speak in a particular way or else we are supersessionists. I don't like this. Supersessionism is not really about how you interpret Romans and Galatians and Genesis; it's an attitude based on prejudice toward the other.

Are you saying that you're not a supersessionist?

No, what I'm saying is that I would like to challenge the whole premise of the question. To me, *replacement theology* and *supersessionism* are just empty terms. What I'm more concerned with is whether I am faithful as a Christian to the commandment to love my neighbor, regardless of how we understand Galatians 3:16 or 3:28 or what it means to be a son of Abraham.

I find it troubling when people try to impose one way or another on how we interpret the promises and prophecies in scripture. God is the ultimate judge, and our calling as Christians is to love our neighbors as ourselves.

So you're saying we should leave the question of salvation to God?

Yes. But more importantly, Christians should not need special categories in their theology to convince one another that they have to love the Jewish people. After the attack on the synagogue in Pittsburgh, many Christians said that antisemitism is wrong because Romans 11 says all Israel must be saved. This is a very troubling position! It suggests that the reason we must love the Jewish people is that God is still in covenant with them. But what if he isn't? Shouldn't we still love them?

Our insistence on asking about the special place of Jews within Christian theology is problematic in my opinion, and some of my Jewish friends agree with me on this. It's presumptuous for Christians to define the status of the Jews, as if we know what's best for them.

You've talked about Israel as a settler-colonialist state. Do you see Zionism generally—not just the ongoing Jewish settlement efforts within the Palestinian territories—as a settler-colonialist project?

Zionism is an ideology that created a homeland for the Jewish people on someone else's land, which meant the displacement of 800,000 Palestinians and the destruction of 500 to 1,000 villages. That's the definition of colonialism. A slogan associated with early Zionism was "a land without a people for a people without land." That completely erases the Palestinians as a people.

Palestinian-American historian Rashid Khalidi and Israeli historian Ilan Pappe have demonstrated clearly that the expulsion of Palestinians during the 1948 War was systematic and intentional. Zionism directly resulted in the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in 1948, the apartheid that currently exists in Palestine, and the genocide that's now happening in Gaza.

Many of the Jews who came to Israel before 1948 came as refugees: traumatized, stateless, and with nowhere else to go. Can a person be simultaneously a refugee and a colonist?

Zionism began before the Holocaust. The Jews were persecuted long before the Holocaust, and much of this was done by Christians. So Zionism was born out of real victimhood.

But the issue is that Jews didn't come to Palestine as refugees seeking to live in a peaceful relationship with the Palestinians; they came as invaders seeking to establish a Jewish state. Zionism, by definition, is not about seeking refuge in Palestine alongside Palestinian neighbors. It's about the establishment of a home for the Jewish people in Palestine.

The Palestinians have a history of welcoming refugees. When the Armenian community and the Syrian Christian community escaped from the Ottoman Empire, they lived with us. We welcomed them, and we gave them our homes. But with the Jews, it quickly became clear that they didn't come to seek refuge with us; they

came to establish a Jewish homeland. There is a big difference between the two.

As you said, Zionism emerged from centuries of persecution and pogroms across Europe, and Christians were often the perpetrators. How do you think this history of antisemitism shapes Christians' perspectives on Israel?

Antisemitism is real, and it has existed for a long time, especially in Western circles. Clearly it's a form of racism that doesn't look at the other person as equal. I would argue that the Western world didn't ever deal inwardly with that racism. What you did instead was export the problem to Palestine and blame us for it. The West tried to redeem itself at our expense, even to the extent of offering Palestinians as a sacrifice on the altar of repentance. Since you never had to pay for your sin of antisemitism, I don't think you ever internalized the process of repentance.

This war has confirmed for me that notions of supremacy and racism still exist in the West. It's evident in the way people justify the killing of Palestinians in Gaza, and it's evident in the rise of antisemitism in Europe and the United States, the attacks on synagogues, and the way some Chrisitan nationalists talk about Jews. The Western world, or at least much of it, hasn't dealt with the problem of racism and supremacy inwardly—with confession, with humility. The West hasn't paid for it. We Palestinians paid for it instead. And we're still paying for the redemption—for the guilt, if you will—of antisemitism in Europe.