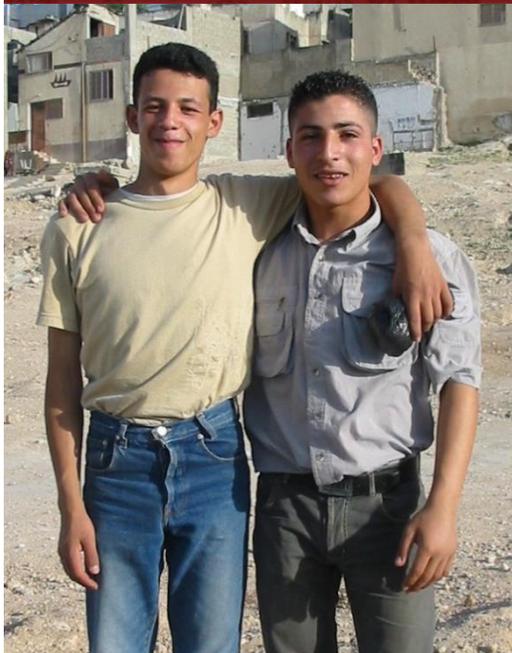




# Ahlan wa Sahlan!

Welcome! - Advent Stories for Children



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# Ahlan wa Sahlan: Welcome! Advent Stories for Children

Ahlan wa Sahlan, Welcome! *Christmas Through the Eyes of Children from Palestine and Israel* is a children's Advent curriculum designed to help children connect the Christmas stories in the Bible to real children who live in those places today. In this material you will visit Nazareth, Ein Karem, Bethlehem, and Beit Sahour and meet Nagham, John, Ronza, and Marianne-- four children who live in the cities where the Nativity story takes place. See how they find meaning in the stories from the Bible that happened in their hometowns!

Each lesson contains a letter from a child in that city as well as a craft and activity. Connect your children to Global Ministries' Middle East Initiative and help them understand how their faith is connected to real people and real places in the world today. The Bible stories are explained in their historical context and encourage children to consider what those stories mean for them.

This curriculum is designed with children in mind, but the facts and information included are for parents and teachers too. The modern Holy Land with its complexities comes to life as the children describe some of their fears and hopes along with the realities of separation walls, curfews, and isolation that they experience every day. Through personal and often painful stories, the message of the Advent and the promise of hope, peace, joy and love found in Jesus' birth is conveyed in new and meaningful ways. These children share their faith, traditions, fears and joy through the stories of Jesus that unite them with their Christian brothers and sisters around the globe.

Global Ministries would like to thank the Sabeel Ecumenical Center, the Church of Sweden, Danielle Cox and Norma Carmi for their assistance with this project.

*"I feel proud to be a girl from Nazareth, where the annunciation took place, where Jesus Christ spent his childhood...I feel I am a bridge, a link to share with you this lesson about Christ of Nazareth, my town and I feel very honored."* - Nagham Helou, 11

*"I know that my hometown is the birthplace of John the Baptist who baptized Jesus Christ."*  
-John Hanna, 7

*"The birth of Christ means new life, a life of security and joy for all, and we Christians have a role to tell the good news. We learn humility from the birth of Christ in a manger and to love all people. Even when there are difficulties in our own personal relations, love can bring us closer."*  
-Ronza Abu Sabbah, 9

*"We are the shepherds, and we have to repeat the story that Christ is born to save us all. It happened in our small village. What joy! The presence of the churches here reminds us of that great story and the angel telling the shepherds not to be afraid."* -Marianne Qumsieh, 9

## For More Information



For additional information about the work of the church in Israel and Palestine:  
[http://www.globalministries.org/israel\\_palestine](http://www.globalministries.org/israel_palestine)

For more information about the Global Ministries Middle East Initiative:  
<http://www.globalministries.org/meinitiative>

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# Share With Us

Please use this form to let us know when and where you used *Ahlan wa Sahlan: Welcome! Advent Stories for Children* so we can share your story with others and so that you can offer suggestions and comments about this Advent curriculum. Return the form to either the Cleveland, OH office or the Indianapolis, IN office (addresses are on preceding page).

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_

Role in Children's Advent study \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Church Name \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

(street)

(city)

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(zip)

My Overall Rating of the *Ahlan wa Sahlan: Welcome! Advent Stories for Children* Material is:

Excellent

Good

Fair

Poor

The best things about *Ahlan wa Sahlan: Welcome! Advent Stories for Children* are:

\_\_\_\_\_

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My suggestions for improving *Ahlan wa Sahlan: Welcome! Advent Stories for Children* are:

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# The Middle East Initiative

Pray.  
Learn.  
Engage.

## Nazareth: The Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38)

### Materials Needed

Map of Israel/Palestine (*See additional resources*), Globe, Bibles, Copies of Nagham's letter for each student (*optional*)

### Lesson

Today we are beginning a journey through the cities of the Bible. Did you know that many of those cities still exist today, and are home to children just like you? Today we will be traveling



to Nazareth. Has anyone heard of Nazareth before? (*Have students look for Nazareth on the map of Israel/Palestine. If you have a globe, encourage students to find your state or province and see where it is in relation to Israel/Palestine.*)

*Ask a volunteer to read Luke 1:26-38.*

Nazareth is not just where Jesus grew up, but the place where Mary was told that

God had a very important job for her! Mary's visit from the angel Gabriel is called "The Annunciation" by many Christians. Annunciation is a fancy word for special announcement. What special announcement did the angel Gabriel have for Mary? I wonder how Mary felt to hear the angel's message for her. When is a time in your life you have felt like that?



Nazareth is a very special place to all Christians. There are many places there that Christians consider holy because that's where we believe the stories in the Bible took place. There are many churches built on these holy sites. The most famous is the Church of the Annunciation with its lily shaped dome built over the ruins of the place where it is believed that the angel

appeared to Mary. Other important sites are Mary's well and the Synagogue of Nazareth where Jesus first revealed his message. I wonder if anyone here has been to a famous place like a monument or a museum. *(Mention local monuments, famous places, or museums the children might be familiar with)* Later in the lesson we will hear from our friend Nagham and how she feels like a bridge of sharing about Christ. In the same way, the special holy sites in Nazareth and our churches here are a bridge because they are all places where people can come to learn about Christianity.

Nazareth was built near three springs of water with a chain of mountains around the city. In Roman times, 2000 years ago, people who lived in Nazareth were workers and builders like Joseph the Carpenter, Jesus' father. I wonder if anyone here knows what it means to be a carpenter? *(If there is anyone in your congregation who is good at woodworking ask them if you can bring in a few small items they have made to help explain carpentry)*. I bet working as a carpenter would have been very hard work! In this time the people of Nazareth lived in a small group of natural caves, which they developed into houses for their families with areas to store food and keep their animals. Jesus may have lived in such a cave until he was thirty. I wonder, has anyone here ever been camping? What was that like? Do you think camping would have been similar to living in a cave? *(You can make connections between the two by commenting on things such as having no electricity, no running water, sleeping on the ground, etc.)*

Today, Nazareth is a city in the region of Galilee where Christians and Muslims live. There are 35,000 Christians and 45,000 Muslims in Nazareth. The Israelis have built another Nazareth-

Nazareth Illit, where a majority of Jews live. Nazareth means a bud of tree, a shoot/branch. This meaning is significant because all Christians, Muslims, and Jewish people are part of the same family tree, we are just different branches of that tree. We have a special opportunity to hear from one of our distant family members, Nagham. Nagham is an 11-year girl from Nazareth and she is a part of this special family tree. Let's hear about what it's like to live in Jesus' hometown.

*Pass out copies of Nagham's letter and ask for a volunteer to read (Or ask a youth helper to prepare to read Nagham's letter before the session)*

I wonder, what do you have in common with Nagham? *(Do you enjoy some of the same hobbies as her, are you the same age, etc.)* I wonder, How is your life is different from Nagham's? *(Is your school different, your family, etc.)*

It is an unforgettable experience to spend a day in Nazareth, to explore the holy sites. To walk the way Jesus walked, to feel the joy in the bazaars of this quiet city and to speak with the people, who are the descendants of the relatives of Jesus.



The angel Gabriel had a special message for Mary in Nazareth. How is God still speaking today in Nazareth? How is God still speaking today in our church? *(encourage children to reflect on Nagham's letter)*

## Closing Prayer

God, we are thankful for your message to Mary in the Nazareth of long ago. Our ears and hearts are open to hear your message of love and life today. We pray for our new friend Nagham, her family, and the town of Nazareth as they continue to live, work, and love there today. Amen.

**What does Nagham mean when she says the Church of the Annunciation has paintings and wall decorations from countries around the world picturing Mary as they imagine her?** The Church of the Annunciation is built over the site that was believed to be Mary's home, where the angel Gabriel appeared to her, and it has very special meaning to Christians around the world. Christian communities from many different countries have given mosaics and other artwork depicting Mary, often showing her holding Jesus or depicting the annunciation. Over 40 different countries are represented with mosaics and paintings displayed around the front courtyard and inside the upper church. Each mosaic reflects the culture, traditions, languages, and people of the country it represents. Visitors from all around the world enjoy exploring these mosaics, finding their country's Mary mosaic, and seeing how other people envision Mary and baby Jesus. If you are interested in seeing more beautiful mosaics of the Holy Land, this link has pictures of many of the mosaics at the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth:

<http://www.biblewalks.com/Sites/AnnunciationMosaics.html>



My name is Nagham Helou. I am 11 years old and I live in Nazareth with my father and mother and my brother Shadi who is 7. Mum teaches music at a school. My father teaches at a school for children with speech problems and dyslexia. My grandfather, my Mum's father, is Maroun Ashkar who has written 25 songs for Nazareth. (My name Nagham means tune and my mother's name Aihan means melodies.) My grandma is a wonderful person, human in all its meanings. My other grandma is an excellent cook, and she is the one who cooks daily for us.

I am in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade at St. Savior Greek Catholic school. My family is Maronite Catholic, and my school is coeducational (both boys and girls). There are 40 children in my class out of whom seven are Muslims. Our relations are very friendly, like brothers and sisters. We have a common link that is based on human bonds and not our religion or faith.

Religion at school is taught in a traditional way. Sometimes we watch videos about saints who did not know God and how they came to love God. We call our religion lesson, a meeting, an encounter. We speak of ways in which God helps us to know God better. We learn to give to others. It is not always easy for me to be good or to do good. I feel the message of the annunciation is for all. A woman gives life, and Mary was chosen by God to give life to Jesus, the savior. It is so important. She was good and was treated with honor.

I am the head of the student council in my class. School is sometimes nice and at other times not so nice. Exams are difficult. We have responsibilities, but we also have relaxed trips and camps. I feel proud to be a girl from Nazareth, where the annunciation took place, where Jesus Christ spent his childhood. Most of the people in Nazareth love Nazareth. Once there were many Christians in Nazareth. Now there are more Muslims. The role of the Christians is small but I am sure that it is important. People do not understand Islam properly. God is one, and we are all one people. I know that Jesus loves us all. It is as if the message of Christ has been planted here in a field that has been taken care of, watered, and bloomed all over, giving us another kind of spiritual food. Because of the Holy message coming out of Nazareth, Nazareth has become a sacred city. The Church of the Annunciation is a big church where every country that respects Mary, the mother of our Lord, has offered a painting or a wall decoration picturing Mary as they imagine her. Nazareth is special because every spot, every single dot of dust, reminds us that Jesus was there. It has a spiritual meaning for all.

My interests are poetry reading and writing as well as drawing. I love swimming and the computer. I would love for American and Canadian children to come and visit us in Nazareth and learn about our food, games, and plays. I would also like to come and see your country. We have different cultures and heritage. I feel I am a bridge, a link to share with you this lesson about Christ of Nazareth, my town and I feel very honored.

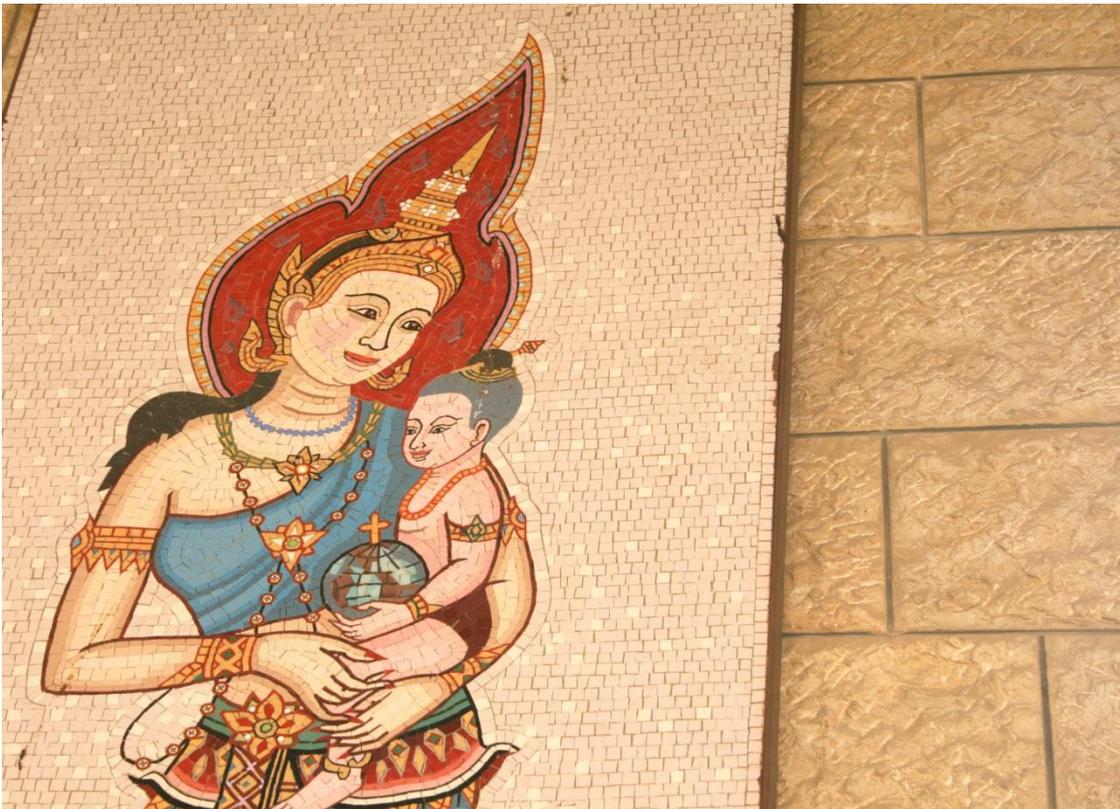
## Activity

### Mosaic Angel

**Items needed:** Angel template on cardstock *found on page 40* (pre-cut for younger children), hole punch, scissors, ribbon, glue or glue sticks, small foam shapes or tiles from craft store (small shapes cut out of construction paper may also be used)

**Goal of Activity:** To show children the mosaic style of artwork used in churches in the Holy Land, like the mosaics of Mary in the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth. Also can be used to show how individual, separate pieces can come together to make a beautiful work of art. Similarly we are each a small part of God's beautiful family.

**Method:** Show children how each small piece can be glued next to the other pieces to create a design on their angel template. For older children, have them begin by cutting out their angel template. For younger children, angels should be pre-cut. Punch a hole at the top of the angel so a ribbon can be tied through in order for the completed angel mosaic can be hung for decoration. Children may use their small shapes or tiles to create their angel.



## Activity

Simple words in Arabic

**Items needed:** Poster board, markers, sheet of Arabic phrases for children to take home

**Goal of activity:** To help the children speak simple Arabic words and greetings, just like their new Palestinian friends.

**Method:** Write the words and phrases on different posters. Children who can read will appreciate being able to see the words they are learning. Make copies of the words so that the children can take them home to practice. Practice saying them together and then allow children time to say them to each other. If children laugh or think it sounds funny, use the teaching moment to talk about the many languages in the world and how important languages are for understanding each other.

After the exercise, have the children share their feelings. How did the children feel saying words they didn't understand? Was it hard? Can they think of someone who might not be able to understand them?

Salaam al masih (sa-laam al ma-seeh)- Peace of Christ

Salaam (sa-laam) – Peace

Wi'am (we -am) – Harmony

Qalbi (kal-bee) – My heart

Abana (a-ba-na) – Our father

Marhaba (mar-ha-ba) – Hello

Allah maakum (a-la ma-koom) – God be with you

Shukran (shoo-kran) – Thank you

Eid Milad Majeed(a-eed mee-lad ma-jeed) - Merry Christmas!



# The Middle East Initiative

Pray.  
Learn.  
Engage.

## Ein Karem: The Visitation

(Luke 1:39-56)

### Materials Needed

Map of Israel/Palestine (*See additional resources*), Globe, Copies of John's letter for each student (*optional*)

### Lesson

I wonder, who remembers the city we visited yesterday? (*Give children an opportunity to find Nazareth on the map and share what they remember learning.*) Today we will be traveling to another special, holy town called Ein Karem. (*Point to Ein Karem and show in relation to Nazareth.*)



After the angel told Mary that she would be the mother of Jesus, Mary decided to go visit her cousin Elizabeth to share the exciting news of what God had done in her life. I wonder if any of you have ever had exciting news to share. (*Encourage students to share times in their lives when they had good news to share. I'm hopeful that they can connect ALL their good and exciting news to God.*) Mary also wanted to see Elizabeth because the angel had shared some exciting news with Mary about Elizabeth, too. Do you remember the angel telling Mary that Elizabeth was also expecting a baby?

*Ask a volunteer to read Luke 1:39-56.*



In the Bible, Ein Karem was the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah and the birthplace of their son John the Baptist. Zechariah was also visited by the angel Gabriel, just like Mary, who told him that even though he and his wife were old, they would have a baby (*Luke 1:5-25*). When Mary arrived at Elizabeth's house in Ein Karem, the baby that Elizabeth was carrying leapt in her womb. Have any of you ever felt a baby kick or move inside their mom? It's always exciting to feel that, but it was even more exciting for Elizabeth because she was filled with the Holy Spirit.

I wonder if any of you have ever been around a mom or dad as they prepare for their new baby. It is such an exciting time for the whole family! (*If a woman in the church is pregnant, perhaps use her and her family as an example*). Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months, and the two women spoke together of their joy in the children they were expecting. They both had been given wonderful news to share, and they were excited to share it.

Today, we are going to meet our new friend John, who lives in Ein Karem with his sister Elizabeth, and whose family is celebrating the new birth of his baby brother.

*Pass out copies of John's letter and ask for a volunteer to read (Or ask a youth helper to prepare to read John's letter before the session).*

I wonder, do any of you enjoy the same things that John does? John has a sister and a brother. I wonder, do any of you have siblings you enjoy playing with?

John's family is the only Christian family in his town, and sometimes that makes him feel lonely. I wonder, have you ever felt lonely because you were different? *Encourage children to share if they would like to.*

Ein Karem is a beautiful village located about 5 miles southwest of Jerusalem. Ein Karem, in Arabic, means "the spring of the vineyard," and Ein Karem is green and lush due to the water



found there. In the 1940s, there were about 2600 people living in the village of Ein Karem. One fourth of the families were Christian just like John's family. They grew grapes and oranges. In 1948 the people of Ein Karem were forced out of their village by the Israeli Army. They first went to Beit Jala near Bethlehem and then to Jordan. Those who live in Ein Karem today are mostly Israeli families. Many are artists and some work at the hospital built at the edge of the village.

The town contains two famous churches, one of which commemorates John the Baptist's birth and the other that celebrates Mary. The churches have the text of Zechariah's song in Luke, and Mary's song in Luke, respectively, both in many different languages around the church and courtyard.

**What does John mean when he says he is a refugee?** A refugee is someone who has been forced to leave their home and now lives someplace else, waiting to return home. People become refugees because of wars, because of hunger, or because of fear that they could be hurt. There are many Palestinians who are refugees who fled their homes in 1948 when the state of Israel was created there was a long war and people were afraid for their lives. Today many Palestinians are living in refugee camps or other villages, over 60 years later, waiting to go home. Their children were born away from home and now their grandchildren too. One-third of the families live in camps spread out in 59 different locations located in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Today there are over 4 million Palestinian refugees. The United Nations has said that these Palestinians have a right to return home in the UN Resolution 194, passed in 1948, but still today the problem is not solved.

## Closing Prayer

God, we are thankful for our friends old and new. We are thankful for friends who support us and celebrate with us like Mary and Elizabeth. We pray for our new friend John in Ein Karem and his family. We pray for the refugees in your Holy Land, that they might one day be able to return home. Amen.

My name is John Hanna and I am seven years old. My father is a film editor and my mother also goes to work.

We are the only Palestinian Christian family living in Ein Karem. We live close to the Latin Church. My grandfather came as a refugee from Ikrith, one of the Christian villages on the border of Lebanon whose inhabitants were evicted in 1948. They were largely Melkites. Today my family attends church in Jerusalem. My sister and I go to school in Jerusalem at the Frères College and my father drives us there every day.

I speak a little English. After school, I go into our garden and play with some of the Israeli children who live upstairs. I try to practice my English with them. Sometimes it is lonely to be the only Christian family. My father remembers feeling sad because he also belonged to the only Arab Christian family in the village.

Seven people live in my house. I have a new baby brother and I hope he will play football with me one day. In the meantime, I play with my sister Elizabeth and I also share a room with her. My grandparents also live at my house and that makes me very happy.

My mother is from Haifa. In the summer, our favorite thing to do is to go and visit family in the Galilee area, around Haifa and Jaffa and go to the sea. I love swimming in the sea.

I love drawing and I can show you my drawing of a boat in the sea. I have not made up my mind about what I want to be in the future. I do not know much about America but I would love to meet with other children from there. I know that my hometown is the birthplace of John the Baptist who baptized Jesus Christ.

## Activity

Make friendship bracelets

**Items needed:** Embroidery thread of various colors, beads, scissors, tape

**Goal of the activity:** To encourage children to think about the special friendships formed around the good news of God's great love such as Mary's friendship with Elizabeth, their friendship with each other, and their new connection with the children from Israel and Palestine.

**Method:** Children will make two friendship bracelets, one for themselves and one to give a friend. Encourage them to share what they have learned from their new friends in the Holy Land with the person who receives their friendship bracelet.

To prepare, pre-cut pieces of embroidery thread. Tie the three pieces of string together at one end. Children can tape the end of the string to a table while they braid or take turns holding the thread while a partner braids. If desired, they can add beads into their braid as they go. Children may braid their bracelets in any design they choose based on their ability, however the three strand braid has a special meaning as it reminds us of the special friendships we have when fellowshipping with other Christians around the world (one strand for themselves, one for their friend, and one for God's love which brings them together).



## Activity

Tá, tá tá iya

**Items needed:** A hat or a cloth.

**Goal of activity:** This game is a traditional Palestinian game, similar to “Duck, Duck, Goose,” played in a group of no less than 5 children or as large as possible. “tá, tá tá iya” means hat, hat haty and “sin, sin ya jaras” means ring, ring a bell.

**Method:** The children sit in a circle and one of them has a hat. He/she walks around the outside of the circle and sings, “tá, tá tá iya” and the children in the circle answer sin sin ya jaras. The child sings and walks a few times. Then he/she drops the hat behind someone’s back. The child who has the hat behind their back runs after the one who dropped the hat. If that child manages to run back and sit down in the empty space before he or she is caught, then the new player carries on doing the same thing, otherwise, the child who dropped the hat tries again.





# The Middle East Initiative

Pray.  
Learn.  
Engage.

## Bethlehem: The Birth of Jesus

(Luke 2:1-7)

### Materials Needed

Map of Israel/Palestine (*See additional resources*), Globe, Copies of Ronza's letter for each student (*optional*)

### Lesson

I wonder, who can help me remember what cities we have visited so far? (*Encourage students to recall the cities they learned about, what happened there, and who they met. They may use*



*the map of Israel/Palestine to identify the cities. We met Nagham in Nazareth, the city where the angel told Mary that she would be the mother of Jesus and where Jesus would grow up. We met John in Ein Karem, where Mary's cousin Elizabeth lived.)*

Today we are going to visit Bethlehem. Have any of you have heard of Bethlehem before. (*Listen to, respond to, and affirm their answers as many of the children will likely be familiar with*

*Bethlehem. Give them an opportunity to find Bethlehem on the map.)*

*Ask a volunteer to read Luke 2:1-7.*

During Jesus' time, Palestine was under the control of the Roman Empire. The Roman Emperor Augustus wanted to know exactly how many people lived in the land under his control. Today in the United States, we also have something similar called a census. Every ten

years a survey is sent to every household and your parents have to fill it out. Unfortunately for Mary and Joseph, they couldn't just fill out a form and mail it back to the government. They had to travel to Bethlehem, which is where Joseph's family was from, to register in person. Bethlehem was called the city of David, because that is also where King David from the Old Testament was from. In the Old Testament, Bethlehem was the scene of the book of Ruth and the tomb of Jacob's wife Rachel is also nearby.

When Mary and Joseph got to Bethlehem after their long journey from Nazareth (*Refer to the map to demonstrate the distance of about 80 miles*), it was time for the baby to be born. I wonder if anyone remembers where Jesus was born? *Listen to and affirm responses, likely about a barn or manger.* Yes, the Bible tells us that there was no room in the inn, so Mary had Jesus in a manger. A manger would be where the animals were kept, but not necessarily like the barn-like mangers that we decorate with at Christmas time today. The manger Jesus was born in was most likely in a cave.



Today in Bethlehem, the most important historic site in Bethlehem is Manger Square. The town is centered around Manger Square, where The Church of the Nativity draws the most attention. The Church is said to stand on the spot where Jesus was born in a manger. The original Church was built in the 4th century, but has undergone many transformations since. Jesus' birthplace was a cave, not a hay-lined, wood stable filled with cows. In this land of hills, inhabitants used grottos or

caves for living spaces, storage and pens. So, instead of a wooden structure, the stable in which Christ was born was indeed a cave.

Speaking of Bethlehem today, it's time for us to meet another friend from Palestine, Ronza. Ronza is nine years old, and loves living near the city where Jesus was born.

*Pass out copies of Ronza's letter and ask for a volunteer to read (Or ask a youth helper to prepare to read Ronza's letter before the session).*



Ronza enjoys being a part of the community of Bethlehem because it is the place of Jesus' birth, but also a place that feels like a living city today. I wonder, can you imagine going for pizza, or walking with your family in the same city where Jesus was born?

Ronza also remembers a time when she and her family could not go to Bethlehem because it was under curfew. I wonder, how would you feel if you were Ronza? How does Ronza think that the good news we have through Jesus calls us to respond? *Remind the children about what Ronza said, "We learn humility from the birth of Christ in a manger and to love all people even when they hurt us."* I wonder if anyone knows what humility, or being humble means? *Give them an opportunity to respond.* We believe that Jesus is God's son, whose gift of love would save the whole world. But despite how important Jesus and his life would be, he was born in a smelly manger as a tiny baby. Jesus' birth was a modest one, and he would continue to

live his life that way. Just like Ronza did, we can learn a lot from Jesus' example about how to live modestly and treat others with love and kindness, no matter how they treat us.

Today, the city of Bethlehem that Ronza loves so much is a Palestinian town with many little shops on very narrow, winding streets. Bethlehem is located 5 miles south of Jerusalem. Its inhabitants depend largely on pilgrims and tourists for their livelihood. Handicrafts, made from olive wood and mother-of-pearl, embroidered goods, and religious articles are made in the town. Bethlehem is also the trade center for surrounding farming villages and for the shepherds who inhabit the area.

The girls who attend the Good Shepherd's School in Bethlehem with Ronza are Christians and Muslims. In all there are about 100,000 residents of Bethlehem who are both Christian and Muslim. About one in three people are Christians. Bethlehem, like most of the Holy Land, has had many cultural influences on its history, and the remnants are found everywhere. The hilltop city is studded with Muslim minarets and Christian steeples and the view of Bethlehem is unforgettable, as is the city.

## Closing Prayer

God, we thank you for Jesus' humble birth in the manger, and that his birth and his life teach us to love and serve others. We pray for safety and peace for those living in the place of Jesus' birth, like our new friend Ronza and her family.

Amen.

**What does Ronza mean when she talks about The Church of Nativity?** The Church of Nativity is built above a cave, which is believed to be the manger where Jesus was born. The cave includes two small rooms: one with a star to mark the place of Jesus' birth, and one to mark the place of the manger and the resting place of the holy family. After the time of Jesus, the cave was covered with a shrine. The shrine was torn down by Queen Helena, who constructed the first Church of Nativity. She came to Palestine on pilgrimage in 325 AD, discovered the site and ordered a church to be built. The church was dedicated in May of 399. Later the church was destroyed in the Samaritan revolt against the Byzantine rule in 522, but was built again in 527. Because of the mosaic of the Magi dressed in Persian garb, the Nativity church was left alone, when the Persians rampaged through the land in 614 destroying churches. The Crusaders also renovated the church, adding artistic touches and used it as a coronation place in the year 1100.

Nowadays, the church is divided in three parts which are each cared for by three different Christian denominations: one section under the care of the Greek Orthodox, one section under the care of the Armenians and one section under the care of the Franciscans (Catholics). Christians from around the world come to pray at this church, especially at Christmas. The Muslim population in Bethlehem also honors Mary at the church of Nativity, because Jesus is considered a prophet in Islam.



My name is Ronza Abu Sabbah. I am 9 years old. I live in Beit Jala, a town near Bethlehem, and I have two brothers and two sisters. I go to the Good Shepherd's School and I am in the fourth grade. My mother, Hanan is a science teacher at the school, and my father is an architect. We are a Greek Orthodox family and we pray at St. Mary the Virgin Church.

My school is an all girls' school. There are 34 girls in my classroom and 17 of them are Muslim. We have a religion class on Mondays and Thursdays. The teacher has a book. She writes out things on the blackboard and we copy in our own notebooks. After three or four such lessons, we have a quiz or an exam. Yesterday's lesson was about the Resurrection.

I am happy to be in the land of Christ. I go to the Nativity Church on Christmas day. Bethlehem for me is a town we enjoy being part of. It is a place where I go with the family to eat pizza and walk in the streets. It is alive.

My friends are Hanan, Diana and Irene, who are Christian, but I also have two good Muslim friends, Dania and Arwa. My friends and I talk about school and our common hobbies. I usually play with my cousins. I watch cartoons on TV, read stories in English and in Arabic, and help my mother at home with the dishes and mopping the floor.

On Sundays, after church I go to Sunday school. We sing hymns and do drawings.

Sometimes when the army came, there was a curfew and we could not go out from our houses or even come to school. Time was wasted and now we have to make up for the lost classes. Miss Huwaida, our religion teacher, is wonderful. She teaches us hymns such as "Lord, I am a White Page" and "Do Not Leave Me Alone, Dear Lord." We collected money to help the ones who were affected by the curfew and those who could not find food to eat.

The birth of Christ means new life, a life of security and joy for all, and we Christians have a role to tell the good news. We learn humility from the birth of Christ in a manger and to love all people. Even when there are difficulties in our own personal relations, love can bring us closer.

I am pleased that I was chosen to represent Bethlehem in this interview. I would like to invite the children in America and Canada to come and visit the Holy Places, but now our life is not easy. People cannot travel and visit families in other towns because of the checkpoints. I would like us to be able to travel freely and feel secure.

## Activity

Decorate postcards, cards, and letters to be sent to the Good Shepherd's School in Bethlehem.

**Items needed:** Postcards, papers, envelopes, pens and perhaps crayons and paints. The postcards can have pictures from the children's hometowns or other landmarks from the United States. The children can also make their own postcards.

**Goal of activity:** To teach the children that Jesus' birth was a wonderful gift of love for all. Because God loved us, we are called to love others. One of the ways we can live out that love is through service to others. In this activity, we love and serve other children at the Good Shepherd's School (which is a school for girls) by connecting with children from abroad. Because of closures, the children in Palestinian towns find it hard to get in contact with friends and family and they seldom receive mail.

**Method:** The children can write postcards or letters to the school children and tell them about themselves, as the children in the book have been telling about themselves and their lives. What do the children in United States and Canada want the children of Palestine to know about them, and what is it like to be a child here?

Address the cards to: The Good Shepherd's School  
P.O.B. 64  
Bethlehem, via Israel



## Activity

Create a “Found Art” Nativity out of recyclable materials

**Items needed:** Literally anything could be used to make this fun and creative nativity. Toilet paper rolls, bottles, egg cartons, old magazines, scraps of cloth, cans, empty thread bobbins, empty cereal boxes, etc. Make sure all materials are clean. You may want to solicit donations of these reusable items from the congregation. You will also need glue, markers, tape, scissors.

**Goal of activity:** To inspire children to look at everyday objects in a new way and think outside of the traditional manger scene they are used to seeing at Christmas time. This will also promote being mindful of conservation of resources and care for creation.

**Method:** The children will choose material to create a small manger with the characters of today’s Bible story: Mary, Joseph, and Jesus (animals optional). Encourage creativity and uniqueness with the children, although you may want to provide an example of a “Found Art” nativity to get the creative juices flowing! This blog has some great ideas, including an egg carton nativity and a bottle nativity.

<http://lucykimlikes.blogspot.com/2013/12/nativity-crafts.html>





# The Middle East Initiative

Pray.  
Learn.  
Engage.

## Beit Sahour: The Visit of the Shepherds (Luke 2:8-20)

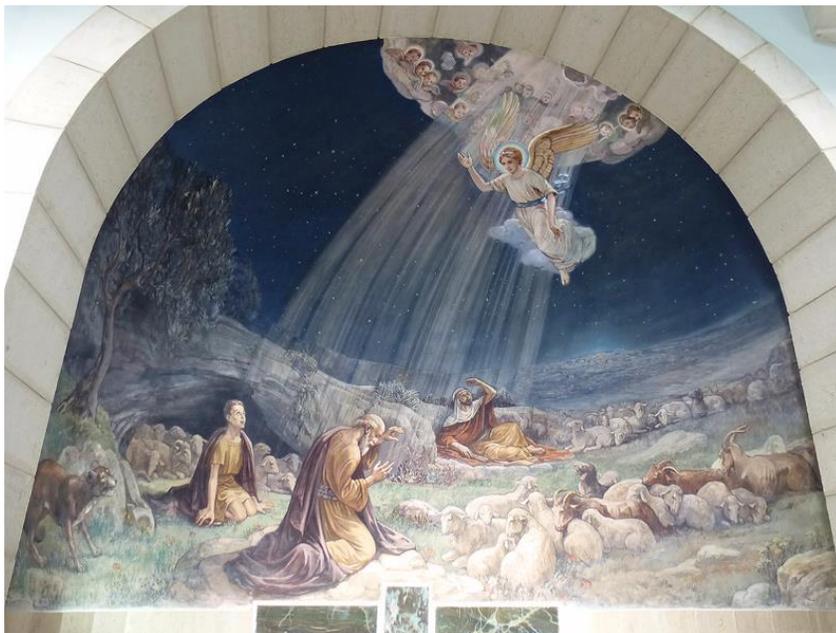
### Materials Needed

Map of Israel/Palestine (*See additional resources*), Globe, Copies of Marianne's letter for each student (*optional*)

### Lesson

I wonder, who can remember what city we learned about last time? What was so special about that city? *Encourage them to reflect on the new things they have learned about Bethlehem because of the previous lesson.*

Today's lesson picks up where yesterday's left off. At the same time Jesus was born, there were shepherds nearby, watching their flocks of sheep in a town that is known as Beit Sahour. The



origins of the name Beit Sahour (the house of vigilance) are from the words "beit" meaning place, and "sahour" meaning night watch, which reflected the importance of the area for shepherds. The land provided their flocks with good grazing during the daytime and safety in the numerous caves at night.

*Ask a volunteer to read Luke 2:8-20.*

The work of shepherds was very repetitive. That means it was the same, day in and day out. Their

job was to watch and protect the sheep from other animals and keep the flock together. I wonder, what was life like as a shepherd? *Allow time for response about what it would be like to be a shepherd.* But suddenly one night, something unexpected happened! When the angel appeared to the shepherds, the Bible says they were terrified. I wonder, would you have been scared if you were there with the shepherds?

When the shepherds heard the angel's message, they were told not to be afraid because the angel had good news of great joy for all people! I wonder, what does the "good news" mean and why is it so important? *Encourage the children to reflect what this good news means, particularly on Ronza's message from yesterday about God's love.* After the shepherds heard all of this, they headed from their fields of Beit Sahour to Bethlehem nearby. *Use the map to demonstrate the journey.* When they arrived in Bethlehem, they found exactly what the angel told them they would- Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus. Yesterday Ronza shared that she learns humility from Jesus' birth in the manger. Jesus' first visitors also remind us of Jesus' simple, humble beginnings. When Jesus grew up, he would continue to serve and minister to people like those shepherds.



Today, Beit Sahour is full of historical and biblical sites of significance that many people continue to visit. One of the most important sites is Shepherd's Field where the shepherds were working when they saw the star and the angel announcing Jesus' birth. There is a natural cave with an altar inside and this cave is believed to be where the shepherds lived. Every year on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, these fields are crowded

with thousands of pilgrims, singing Christmas carols to celebrate the joyous event. A pilgrim is someone who visits the places of special importance to their faith, like the field where the angel appeared to the shepherds to tell them about Jesus' birth. Visiting these holy sites makes them feel closer to God. Maybe someday you will take a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to see the places where Jesus and other people from the Bible lived and traveled.

Today we're going to meet another friend who lives in this special place, named Marianne.

*Pass out copies of Marianne's letter and ask for a volunteer to read (Or ask a youth helper to prepare to read Marianne's letter before the session).*

Marianne is very close with her family, and they have a tradition of saying the Lord's Prayer or singing a hymn each day. I wonder, what special traditions does your family have?

When the shepherds left Bethlehem, they returned to their home in Beit Sahour with great news to share of God's amazing love that had been shared with them. Marianne likes this story because she believes it is still meaningful to us even today. I wonder, what does the story of the shepherds mean to you?

*Encourage children to reflect on Marianne's thoughts about the shepherds in her letter along with what they learned from today's Bible story. How can we be like the shepherds? Here is a great place to connect how we share the good news of God's love along with how we can share with others what it is like to live in the Holy Land today. Their new friends have shared some of the hardships they endure that so many people in the United States and Canada are not aware of! How can they let others know about their new friends' struggles in a place where Christians around the world often look to for peace, hope, and love? These are all difficult concepts for children to discuss, but extremely important for them to understand.*

Marianne believes the shepherds teach us not to be afraid, even though sometimes it is hard not to be. I wonder if there has been a time that you have been afraid? How can you learn from the shepherds and from Marianne to be brave?



Today people in Beit Sahour work in tourism related professions such as making handcrafts. Also there are local small businesses such as textile factories, plastic factories, blacksmiths, and carpenters. In the past agriculture was the main source of income. The average Beit Sahour family has six members, although our friend Marianne's family has only four.



Beit Sahour is a Palestinian city adjoining Bethlehem to the east in the middle region of the country. It is southeast of Jerusalem about 15 miles. Beit Sahour is a town with a history of cooperation between Christians and Muslims. It is home to some 13,000 residents, about 65% Christian and 35% Muslim. Many of the new friends we have met

this week have talked about their Muslim friends, including Marianne. I wonder, do you have any neighbors or friends who are Muslim? *Encourage children to share their experiences with people who are from other religions, particularly those of the Muslim faith.* Muslims and Christians, as well as Jewish people believe in the same God, the God who appeared to a man named Abraham in the Old Testament. That is one reason why the Holy Land is a special place to people of those three faiths!

**What does Marianne mean when she says, “The restriction of movement is bad?”**

Walls are something that people build around their property to show what belongs to them and sometimes to keep other people out. Israel has decided to build a large wall between the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Israel. This wall makes it nearly impossible for Palestinians to come into Israel, even though many Palestinians work inside Israel and have relatives inside Israel. Israel decided to build the wall not on their own land, but inside the West Bank on Palestinian land, often putting the farms of Palestinians inside Israel but keeping the people out. Israel says that it will let the farmers come across to work their land but that is not working well because there are few entrances to the wall, open only for short periods and they are far away from the farms. In some places, the wall separates villages into two parts and then families are not able to visit each other anymore. Sometimes the wall separates a village from the town where the hospital is located. If Jesus was born in Bethlehem today, the shepherds would be unable to visit him because of the wall.

## Closing Prayer

God, we give thanks to you for the wonderful news of your great love for all people. We ask that we too might be like the shepherds, and share the good news. We pray for children like Marianne, who live in fear. Be with them so that they will not be afraid. We pray that walls of difference and fear come crumbling down, so that all of your people may live in peace and love with one another. Amen.



My name is Marianne Qumsieh. I am nine years old. I go to the Orthodox school in Beit Sahour where our family lives. I pass close to the Shepherds' Field every day. My father Issa (Arabic for Jesus) is a dental lab technician. My mother Reem (Arabic for gazelle) is a housewife and I have a younger brother who is six. We are a close family. We start the day by praying the Lord's Prayer or singing "Christ Is Risen." I go out in the morning to buy bread, sometimes before going to school.

There are 29 students in my class, both boys and girls, including two Catholics and four Muslims. My best friend is Suad who is a Muslim and my other friend Narmine moved to America, but we have kept in touch. She calls me, and we write to each other. We have Muslim neighbors, and I consider them as my brothers and sisters. I love my school, my teachers and Father Issa Muslih, our parish priest and religion teacher. He knows so much about liturgy and the saints, and he tells us the story of the shepherds in a way that makes it meaningful even today. We are the shepherds, and we have to repeat the story that Christ is born to save us all. It happened in our small village. What joy! The presence of the churches here reminds us of that great story and the angel telling the shepherds not to be afraid.

How can we not be afraid with all the Israeli tanks around us? We cannot move or travel. We have to stay at home. I like reading and playing games on the computer. I love roller-skating and jumping rope when I can go out to play. Because of the situation, many people are leaving our town and going abroad. My aunt who is Greek has left for Greece, and even my father sometimes thinks that he will leave, but I want to come back and stay in my country, even if I study abroad.

Even though I am nine years old, I have not seen the Church of the Resurrection (Holy Sepulchre) in Jerusalem. I have not gone to Jerusalem because we are not allowed to travel there. The restriction of movement is so bad. As for the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, we come often and we take part in festivities in the open air in the courtyard. Today, I am glad that I could come to see it again. As Palestinian children, we try our best to live normal lives. I go to Sunday school, summer camps and take part in some activities, but we do not have community centers or even a good library like in other countries. Because of the occupation, we are not like normal children nor can we live a normal childhood. Our country is beautiful, but the Israelis have occupied it, and they want to keep us uneducated, but we will keep learning and living. Come and visit us. See that we are a people too and it is because of our faith that we do not give up hope.

## Activity

Create scenes about the story of the shepherd.

**Items needed:** Paper, pens, crayons, paints and perhaps some cotton, pegs and other material that can make the drawings look more real/alive. Alternative: Use a small box such as a shoe box or box lid to allow the children to make a three dimensional “shadow box” of the shepherds in the field to help it feel more alive.

**Goal of activity:** To remind children of the connection between the shepherds of Jesus’ time and those who still live and work in the city today. To let the children themselves create/draw the scene of the shepherds at the field.

**Method:** The children can create scenes of how they imagine it looked like when the shepherds saw the star and heard the angel announce that Jesus was born. If they want they can paste cotton on the sheep and use pegs as staffs/rods, etc.

## Activity

Shepherd’s Relay Race

**Items needed:** Balloons (enough for each team to have several in case one breaks), Shepherds crooks (you can often find large plastic decorative candy canes around Christmas time that would work well).

**Goal of activity:** To show the children how shepherds carefully tend their flocks and how shepherds work together to keep the sheep safe. You can also connect the idea of teamwork and to how Christians around the world can work together to promote God’s vision of peace and love for all people.

**Method:** Divide children evenly into teams. Each team will receive a shepherd’s crook and a balloon. You may draw a face onto the balloon with a permanent marker to make it look more like a sheep. Using the hooked end of the shepherd’s crook, have each team guide their “sheep” to a designated point and back to the start to pass the “sheep” and “crook” onto the next team member. Children will quickly see that they must carefully and gently guide their “sheep” and that rushing or hitting the balloon hard with the crook will cause the balloon to fly away from them.

## Congregational Resources

Use this summary to promote the children's advent series in your church bulletin or newsletter!

During the season of Advent, our church's children will be participating in Christmas Through the Eyes of Children from Palestine and Israel, an Advent curriculum for children created by Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ as a part of the Global Ministries Middle East Initiative. Each week they will visit Nazareth, Ein Karem, Bethlehem, and Beit Sahour and meet Nagham, John, Ronza, and Marianne-- four children who live in the cities where the Nativity story takes place. Through personal and often painful stories, the message of the Advent and the promise of hope, peace, joy and love found in Jesus' birth is conveyed in new and meaningful ways. Your child won't want to miss this!

Use these quotes from the children's letters to promote each week's lesson!

Week 1: Nazareth

"I feel proud to be a girl from Nazareth, where the annunciation took place, where Jesus Christ spent his childhood...I feel I am a bridge, a link to share with you this lesson about Christ of Nazareth, my town and I feel very honored."- Nagham Helou, 11

Week 2: Ein Karem

"I know that my hometown is the birthplace of John the Baptist who baptized Jesus Christ." - John Hanna, 7

Week 3: Bethlehem

"The birth of Christ means new life, a life of security and joy for all, and we Christians have a role to tell the good news. We learn humility from the birth of Christ in a manger and to love all people. Even when there are difficulties in our own personal relations, love can bring us closer." -Ronza Abu Sabbah, 9

Week 4: Beit Sahour

"We are the shepherds, and we have to repeat the story that Christ is born to save us all. It happened in our small village. What joy! The presence of the churches here reminds us of that great story and the angel telling the shepherds not to be afraid." -Marianne Qumsieh, 9

## Sample Parent Letter

Here is a sample letter for the parents whose children will be participating in your Advent series. Because parts of the curriculum contains some sensitive material, we encourage you to keep the parents informed about what their children will be learning during Advent. This will also help to keep this conversation going at home throughout the week, during the Advent and Christmas season, and beyond. Feel free to modify it to fit the needs of your congregation.

Dear Parent,

Your child will be participating in *Christmas Through the Eyes of Children from Palestine and Israel*, an Advent curriculum for children created by Global Ministries. Each week they will be learning about a different city in Palestine and Israel, the part of the Nativity story that took place there, and what life is like there today in the words of Christian children who live there.

We believe this is an exciting and meaningful way for children to engage in the Nativity story and make connections to real people and places in the Holy Land today. The children from Nazareth, Ein Karem, Bethlehem, and Beit Sahour who share their stories may have many things in common with your child. However, some parts of their lives may be vastly different, so we encourage you to maintain an open conversation with your child about what they are learning. In addition to learning about the faith and experience of a child in each of these holy cities they will also learn some information about curfew and the separation wall, as this comes out in the stories of the children in Bethlehem and Beit Sahour who are living under occupation as they share about the reality of their lives.

This Advent series is part of the Global Ministries Middle East Initiative, which invites the whole church to focus on the Middle East for an 18-month period beginning July 2015. We pray that this program will help to foster a sense of wonder in your child as they explore the land of Jesus' birth and meet the people who live there today.

Peace,

(Insert Name Here and Church Here)

## Food Suggestions

Help your children experience the tastes and smells of the Holy Land with these snacks!

Here are some simple ideas for food to accompany each lesson. Most of these items can be purchased at your local supermarket and almost all of these are mentioned in the Bible.



Nazareth: Yogurt (plain or flavored) and Pita Bread



Ein Karem: Grapes and Oranges



Bethlehem: Hummus, Vegetables, and Crackers/Pita Bread



Beit Sahour: Dates and Dried Apricots

Here is a simple pita bread recipe, if you would prefer to bake your own. Freshly baked pita bread could also be used for communion!

**Pita Bread Recipe:**

1. 2 cups of flour
2. 1 teaspoon sugar
3. ½ teaspoon salt
4. 1 teaspoon yeast
5. warm water until it joins together

Combine the first 4 ingredients- mix them with enough water to add together, knead into a light dough, form into four to six balls and let them rest half an hour (until dough rises.) Roll the balls into thin circles. Bake in a hot oven until top is reddish.



## Global Ministries Partners

For those wishing to learn more about Palestine and Israel and Global Ministries' partners in the cities featured in this curriculum, we invite you to explore the links below.



Diyar Consortium is a Lutheran based, ecumenically- oriented organization in Bethlehem serving the whole Palestinian community with emphasis on children, youth, women and the elderly through unique programs that are contextual and holistic in nature.

<http://www.diyar.ps/>



جمعية الشبان المسيحية - القدس  
The East Jerusalem YMCA

The East Jerusalem YMCA operates a variety of programs related directly to the needs of Palestinian society in many Palestinian cities including Beit Sahour with special emphasis placed on holistic youth development.

<http://www.ej-ymca.org/>



The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) is part of the global Lutheran family. ELCJHL comprises six congregations in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Jordan. It has made education a high priority by serving more than 3000 pupils in its schools including the Good Shepherd's School in Bethlehem that Ronza attends.

<http://www.elcjh.org/>



Kairos Palestine is a Christian Palestinian movement, born out of the Kairos Document, which advocates for ending the Israeli occupation and achieving a just solution to the conflict. The Kairos document, "A Moment of Truth" is a Christian Palestinians' word to the world about what is happening in Palestine.

<http://www.kairospalestine.ps/>



Rawdat El Zuhur (Arabic for “Garden of Flowers”) is a primary school for Palestinian Christian and Muslim children in East Jerusalem. The school now serves 221 students, and employs 23 teachers and four workers. It mainly serves the lower- income community. You can sponsor a child at Rawdat El Zuhur through Global Ministries!

<http://www.rawdat.org/>

### **Articles and Books for Adult Advent-Study Leaders:**

*Bethlehem: Then and Now* by Rev. Dr. Mitri Rahab, Minister of Christmas Lutheran Church, Bethlehem and founder of Diyar is a partner of Global Ministries and spoke at the 2015 General Synod. This is an essay that he wrote about Bethlehem.

[http://www.bethlehemchristmaslutheran.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=74:bethlehem-then-and-now&catid=7:articles&Itemid=6](http://www.bethlehemchristmaslutheran.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=74:bethlehem-then-and-now&catid=7:articles&Itemid=6)

Explaining the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict to an 11-year old - This is an excellent essay by a Jewish guidance counselor: <http://www.squidalicious.com/2010/02/explaining-israeli-palestinian-conflict.html>

*Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak* by Deborah Ellis. This book (available on Amazon) covers 20 voices of Palestinian and Israeli children. It is developed for adults or young people who are in Middle School or older.

Videos (these are more political in nature but provide a context of current events for adult leaders):

Conflict in Israel and Palestine: Crash Course World History 223  
<https://youtu.be/1wo2TLMhiw>

Christians in Palestine—Yes, they exist <https://youtu.be/qqq5H-fdoo>

Where is Palestine? <https://youtu.be/y6f6G4ROKxU>

Hitting The Wall: Running in Palestine <https://youtu.be/WfbIwEhJGA8>

**Map of Israel-Palestine**

