

The pressures of the Israeli Occupation have made hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Christians emigrate. Those who were worshipping in their church this Christmas Eve had stayed, in part, because they want the oldest Christian community in the world to continue, because they want there to be Living Stones in the Holy Land, not just monuments and shrines for tourists.

Among the dozens of internationals present were those who had chosen to stay in the West Bank and Gaza even though their governments had told them to leave when the new Intifada had started. Still more had come into the city via complicated routes when Israeli soldiers told them Bethlehem was closed for the holiday.

Looking around at my teammates, I realized that we, too, were part of the faithful. We had come to church because we wanted to, not out of a sense of obligation. We had come to Bethlehem to join that long line of faithful and fallible witnesses who had come to meet Jesus when he shared our human condition.

Later in the service, we sang "O Little Town of Bethlehem," which I have always considered schmaltzy, but after the familiar first stanza, the second, alternative, stanza brought on fresh tears:

*"O little town of Bethlehem, the organs still do play  
Of Jesus in a manger and angels on the way;  
Our music and our singing is louder than a gun,  
And church bells in their ringing remind us we have won."*

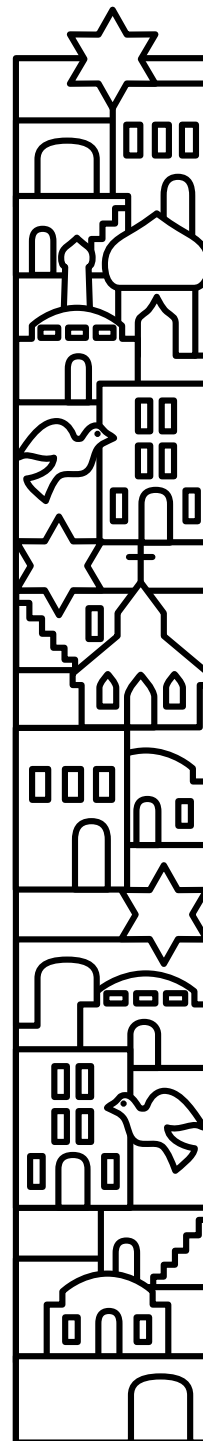
From that moment, the weight of the misery here lifted from my heart—or perhaps I should say that I found fresh confidence to face it and know that it would not have the last word.

This confidence lasted through the prayers, sermons and singing in different languages until the end of the service, when Palestinian children from the church began lighting the candles of the worshippers. As I saw their eyes shining from both the reflected light and their own awe and wonder, I thanked God once more for the reminder that the prayers and songs of the faithful are stronger than weapons, and that where Jesus is concerned, joy can happen in the most unexpected times and places.

### Hymn: "It came upon a midnight clear"

### Closing prayer

Lord, you have the power to redeem 2,000 years of wrong. Enfold the people of Bethlehem in your love and shine through us to give them light. Help us to be faithful. Come, Lord Jesus, once again to Bethlehem.



# Prayers for Bethlehem

*Mennonite Central Committee Palestine Office is asking people from around the world to send prayers for peace to Bethlehem this Advent season.*

For the fourth consecutive year, Christmas celebrations will take place in a climate of fear for all peoples in the Holy Land. This climate of fear results from the continuing violence—occupation, suicide bombings and military operations—which causes great suffering for the local population and greatly reduces any prospects for a just and peaceful solution of the conflict. The building of a fence or wall of separation is further deepening the climate of hatred.

Despite the harsh and difficult conditions, Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, is still first a city of peace. Sending a prayer by e-mail is an important way of communicating with the many people who long to hear a word of hope. It can also help overcome the despair that is felt by the local population, despair that is felt even more profoundly now than in previous years.

The people of Bethlehem appreciate the reception of wishes and prayers very much, both as a gesture of consolation and hope on the occasion of Christmas, and as a way to raise attention to the severe isolation and stagnation that have been imposed upon the Bethlehem community as a result of the closure and occupation. The wishes and prayers will be printed and handed out as personal messages, as educational materials at schools, and in the context of interfaith prayers.

Mennonite Central Committee is a partner organization of the Wi'am Center for Conflict Resolution. Wi'am and other Palestinian partners and international peace groups invite you to e-mail Christmas wishes and prayers for peace to Bethlehem.

**Send your prayers  
for Bethlehem via  
e-mail or fax by  
December 24.**



Text: Kathleen Kern, Christian Peacemaker Teams • Prayer request from the MCC Palestine office, November 29, 2003 • Peace Advocate Office, 330-683-6844, SusanML@MennoniteUSA.org • Design: Cynthia Friesen, PJSN volunteer • December 5, 2003

