



September 2026 Mission Support Memo

**As you read this story, what inspires you?
How are you accompanying refugees in your area?**

Nourishment for Arab Refugees

A story from our [Pacifica Synod](#)

Wandering around El Cajon, Calif., you will be amazed that the common language is not English or Spanish but Arabic. The city's immigrants and refugees are Muslim, Orthodox Catholic and even Lutheran. With such a rich cultural community, it seemed only natural to plant a new church to meet the need for Christian faith formation, so Bethlehem Arabic Lutheran Church was born this year.

El Cajon has a population of just over 100,000 and seemed a natural location to start an Arabic church, with over 30% refugees and immigrants, and numerous Arab families from Syria, Palestine, Iraq and various other Middle Eastern countries. Many residents come from a history of trauma, fleeing war and persecution, coming from refugee camps, seeking a new opportunity but often living below the poverty line. Bethlehem Arabic seeks to welcome and serve all Arabic-speaking people — regardless of nationality or denomination — with the love of Christ. That is where Bethlehem Arabic is vital: for offering support and encouragement while building resources and systems that strive for justice and belonging.

This church is happening through a deep trust in God. Its pastor, the Rev. Adham Alaraj, comes from Bethlehem — that's right, the Bethlehem where Christ was born. A Palestinian Christian who started attending prayer houses, he was nudged by leaders to attend Bethlehem Bible College and intern in Dubai, and eventually was drawn to the United States. While in Chicago, he connected with other Palestinian pastors, especially the Rev. Khadar El-Yateem, ELCA executive director for Service and Justice, who was eager to start and support a second Arabic-speaking Lutheran church. Pastor Adham seemed to have found his way to Chicago through the Spirit and was called to serve in this new ministry.



Bethlehem Arabic Lutheran Church's Facebook page describes it as "the first Arabic Lutheran Church in California [and only the second in the U.S.] ... a Christ-centered community rooted in the grace of God and called to serve Arabic-speaking people with love, dignity and hope ... as a place of worship."

Yet it is so much more. Through a partnership with St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, which houses it, and blessed to have Pastor Adham as its pastor too, Bethlehem Arabic is exploring how the

church building can become a place of new and creative gathering rather than a place of the past. Bethlehem Arabic's first service was in March, and 28 people came.

As Pastor Adham continued to be present in the neighborhood, he met folks. One day, a woman walking her dogs stopped and told him, "I have prayed that one day we will have an Arabic-speaking church." Now they do, and she has been a founder and a connector. So now the church not only hosts worship but nourishes the community with barbecues and Father's Day and Mother's Day events. It partners with local farms and even a Muslim-owned shop, and uses the church building to offer a place of belonging and hope. The members of Bethlehem Arabic Lutheran Church have found a safe and loving place where Christ is present in every encounter. Plus St. John's has seen new hope, from new faces coming through the doors to expanding its partners updating and using the building to the Pacifica Synod being present and offering support.



This ministry is deeply grateful that God has brought together Palestinians, Iraqis, Syrians, Jordanians, Lebanese plus many others, connecting various faiths and creating one community where everyone can find hope, belonging and the grace of Jesus Christ. The work is hard, it takes time, but as Pastor Adham has said, it demands a deep faith in God, a belief that there are no limits to God's blessings and knowing we are all part of the same kingdom of God.

ENGAGE WITH US

"The Joy of Generosity"

"The Joy of Generosity," a new, free resource from the ELCA Stewardship office, is made for any sized congregation. This four-week stewardship series is easy to implement and fully customizable, with scriptural and story helps, social media, and projection slides, and is accessible to any user. This resource is designed to be a complete annual response program. Community members will learn from God's word, be encouraged to think about their own giving as a joyful experience, celebrate their congregation and its ministry to the world, and be invited to increase their giving to the congregation by 1% of their household income. Much of the program is ready to use. Other parts of the program are customizable so you can share specific facts and stories about your congregation and its ministry.

Learn more at www.elca.org/how-we-serve/churches-and-church-leaders/stewardship.

GRATEFUL

We are grateful for the leaders, rostered and lay, that make September ministry thrive. From Rally Day to "God's work. Our hands." to starting up new youth and family ministry to Sunday school for all ages and Bible studies, plus adding extra energy to social and justice ministries, this work of our church happens because we are connected through Christ to be God's hands, feet and ears in the world. Thank you to all for your faith in being the church together.

In gratitude,

Nick Kiger, Interim Senior Director for Congregation and Synod Support

Karen Kretschmann, Coordinator for Storytelling Engagement