

**The Compass Rose Society, London**  
**Wednesday, September 30, 2009**

**The Rt. Rev'd Suheil S. Dawani**  
**Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem**

I want to offer my thanks to the membership of the Compass Rose Society and the Rev'd Kenneth Kearon for the generous invitation to be with you today. I appreciate your hospitality, your commitment to the ministry of the worldwide Anglican Communion and this opportunity to share with you my vision for the ministry of my diocese.

I bring you the greetings and prayers of 7,000 of your brothers and sisters in Christ from the Diocese of Jerusalem. As many of you are aware, we are a diocese which includes Anglicans in 27 parishes extending over five countries including Palestine, Jordan, Israel, Syria and Lebanon as well as Gaza and Jerusalem. We are a multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-lingual diocese living in a multi-faith and ecumenical world. This is challenging enough all by itself. We must also add the daily impact on our ministry of the social and political realities of life in the Land of the Holy One.

We confront many challenges as Christians and yet our ministry is exciting and full of promise. Our vision is a strengthened, vibrant, empowered and serving Christian Community. We see three dimensions of this ministry which focus on pastoral care of our people, improvement of our institutions of education and health care and finally, a ministry of building bridges between Christians, Muslims and Jews.

The Diocese of Jerusalem sponsors 37 institutions which include hospitals, clinics, kindergartens and schools, vocational training programs, and institutions for the deaf, the blind, the disabled and the elderly. Our institutions reflect our priorities of education and healthcare.

Through our schools, we teach Christian and Muslim children our shared values of mutual respect, and love of our neighbor. We stress the importance of good citizenship, human rights and peace education with our students. Most of our students are Muslim, reflecting the dominant religion of most of our diocese. Muslim families who enroll their children in our schools welcome our rigorous educational standards as well as our desire to emphasize moderation and tolerance in a part of the world where extremism is so prevalent. We take seriously this opportunity God has given us to educate the next generation of peace-makers.

Our schools include individual kindergarten programs and schools which cover pre-school through high school. Last June I was able to participate in the graduations of many of our schools where we graduated over 400 students. Our vocational schools train young men and women to be creative and contributing members of society with the skills needed to enter the work force and help build a healthy economy. Our rehabilitation centers provide education and training which give hope for many families for the future of their loved ones to live fulfilling lives.

We know that access to good education is an incentive to keeping young families in the Holy Land. We also know that families who are already struggling with unemployment need scholarship aid to attend one of our Christian schools. The need for scholarship help is very real.

In addition, we have discovered that upon graduation from high school and passing the University entrance exams, many students need assistance with university tuition to help them attend local institutions. Without such assistance, many students find themselves accepting scholarships to foreign colleges and universities where they settle in, find new opportunities and never return to their homes in the Holy Land. While this is testimony to the quality of the education our schools provide, students who leave to study overseas also represent a serious drain of talented and motivated people we can little afford.

We also continue to be deeply committed to improving the health of our people and our neighbors. With exceptionally dedicated doctors, nurses and other professionals we bring the healing touch of Christ to families who otherwise might not have any medical care at all. We build bridges with all of our neighbors in all the communities we serve by living out the Christian message of serving all people in need, regardless of religious affiliation or ability to pay. The witness of our Ahli-Arab Hospital in Gaza as well as St. Luke's Hospital and the Penman Clinic in the West Bank, are critical health care resources to under-served families where access to health care is restricted and adequate health insurance and specializations in certain fields is missing.

Through the ministry of these institutions, our parishioners, students, patients, and their families come to know Jesus Christ, the educator, the comforter, and the healer. The institutions constitute the interwoven fabric of a civil society's compassionate witness – the community's faith and trust embedded in our Christian servanthood.

We are a people who know what it is to live faithfully and with humility in a pluralistic society, facing many challenges, without losing our hold on the biblical faith “once delivered to the Saints.” In a region marked by division and conflict we work for peace and unity. We do so not for the sake of appearance but so that the image of the one God, the God of peace, may be revealed to the world.

Some people are surprised to learn that Palestinian Christians are the indigenous Christians of the Holy Land, mostly descended from the earliest Christian communities in the region. The Christian community has historically formed an integral part of Palestinian society participating in the political leadership of the region and the various public and private sectors of the economy.

There is a growing urgency to preserve a living indigenous Christian presence in the Land of the Holy One and the Middle

East. The Christian presence is threatened by those who are consumed by extremism. There is an increasing level of intolerance toward Christians in a number of towns and villages. While this is not widespread at the present time, we are very concerned about this development for our people. All the more reason to emphasize to you that the Christian community has a crucial role to play as a moderating element in the social and cultural fabric of the Middle East. The Diocese of Jerusalem stands with the indigenous Christian community in building bridges of dialogue, peace and understanding between East and West, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

In Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza, the long Arab-Israeli conflict continues to take a dramatic toll on Palestinians. Political turmoil and socio-economic pressures have led to an increasingly sharp decline of the indigenous Palestinian Christian population. By way of comparison, Palestinian Christians represented approximately 23% of the total (non-Jewish) population of pre-1948 Palestine. Now we make up less than 2% of the population and face possible extinction as a result of these sharply declining rates in the course of the next few decades, most notably in Jerusalem and the West Bank.

At the same time, recent research shows that Christians are interested in staying if they are able to enjoy an adequate standard of living, which is closely related to families being able to stay together and security for their jobs. According to this research, the large scale waves of emigration are the result of social and economic pressures, exacerbated by ongoing regional international conflicts which often create a climate of religious and cultural intolerance.

We know that providing good education and scholarship support are incentives to help support our people in their desire to remain in the land which is their home. We know that access to good health care is critical to the quality of life of our people. We also know that economic development and training for good jobs

are essential to improving the living conditions of all the people of the region. All of these elements are critical in providing hope for the future for Christians to remain in the land of their birth.

But there is more than education, health care and economic development involved in keeping a healthy Christian community alive in the Holy Land. There is also family. Our culture is oriented all around family relationships.

A report in June of this year from the Jerusalem Inter-Church Centre presents the situation clearly:

The Christian community struggles with the family reunification system and residency rights restrictions imposed by the Israeli Authorities. When one Jerusalemite cannot live together with his or her spouse who is a West Banker under one roof inside Jerusalem, the ultimate effect is that less and less couples decide to get married. Father Ibrahim Faltas, the Catholic Parish priest of Jerusalem, declared last week that the number of Catholic marriages this year is almost half of what they experienced during the previous years. New Jerusalem Christian families are more and more forced to leave their home city either to the neighboring West Bank or emigrate if they have the chance.

Family reunification among our people is essential if education, health care and economic development are to have any impact for the future. This situation is simply unacceptable. This crisis for our families not only creates enormous tension within many of our families but also feeds the frustrations of a population living under difficult circumstances. These are not seeds of peace, but seeds of discord. We look forward to a time when seeds of peace blossom and the weeds of discord are stamped out.

Our ministry in the Diocese of Jerusalem is full of challenges and yet we are a people of hope. We belong to a reborn community that welcomes the stranger and homeless; heals the sick; gives strength to the weak; upholds the oppressed; comforts the broken-

hearted and witnesses to the love of God in the example of Jesus Christ as a mediating influence of peace and reconciliation in a region torn by pain and strife.

The ministry of the Compass Rose Society is well known and appreciated throughout the Communion. I welcome the Society to renew a warm and reciprocal relationship with the Anglican witness of my Diocese in the Land of the Holy One.

I invite you, my brothers and sisters in Christ, to join us in partnership with your presence and your support.