

by Revs. Robert and Casey Baggott

Some thirty miles outside of Haifa, Israel, sits a very small Arab village named Ibillin. While it may be small in population, it is gigantic in spirit and courage. In fact, its spirit of strength and hope in the face of adversity has been a great influence in our lives and ministries. Let us tell you more about this village....

The village of Ibillin sits on rolling crags of rough and rocky land. Sitting on the village's steepest and highest hill is a school named Mar Elias (meaning Prophet Elijah.) The founder of the school, Father Elias Chacour, is an Arab-Christian who has been nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize. For decades he has worked in this village, slowly building this school and supporting its curriculum which is based, in every dimension, on the hope for peace. Every child who graduates from Mar Elias School must sign a pledge to work for peace in the world.

We have such respect for Father Chacour and his mission for peace, and have visited the school several times. Just this past month we once again had the privilege of visiting Father Chacour and the students of Mars Elias and hearing them speak of their commitment to peace. Their convictions and their dreams strengthened our own.

On our last visit to the school, we heard a story they told about another group which has chosen peace in troubled times. It seems that Rev. Faud Bahnam was an Arab Christian pastor in Beirut in 1983 when rumors of a coming siege circulated around Beirut. Members of his church began to buy all the canned food they could to survive the uncertain future of Lebanon. Eventually, the rumored siege became a reality and all roads leading in and out of Beirut were blocked. Fear gripped the population, and the members of Pastor Bahnam's church were gratified at their foresight in stockpiling food for the emergency.

Soon the church's council met to decide how to distribute the food they had purchased. Two proposals were made. The first proposal was to distribute food to the church members first, then to other Christians, and last, if any was left, to their Muslim and Jewish friends. The second proposal was to give food to all Christians regardless of whether or not they were church members, and then, if any were left over, to their Muslim and Jewish neighbors. There was much heated debate. But finally, an older, quiet, much respected elder of the church stood and said, "Brothers and sisters, I propose," she said, "that we do what Christ would do with our food. Let us first, feed our Muslim and Jewish neighbors, then feed the other Christians in our town. And then, if there is any left over. Lets us feed ourselves." The proposal passed unanimously.

This story is told and retold by the children at little Mars Elias School in Ibillin, Israel. It is told as a reminder that peace can come to any people, anywhere, when they are willing to think of others and offer their best in love.

We may not be able to directly effect the course of world peace – but then again, we can perhaps alter the course of arguments and disagreements in our own town, our own families, and our own lives. May each of do the hard work this tattered world needs to establish peace!