

The Holy Land: Sight to the Blind (Luke 4:18-19)

Last week we heard about the work of the Al Ahli Hospital in Gaza and this week it is time to hear about the work of two schools, led by impressive women who are committed to providing a safe and supportive home and good education to some of the most neglected young people of the region. These are the children and young people who are orphaned because of the violence of the situation.

Al Shurooq



The Al Shurooq School for the blind and visually impaired was founded in 1981 by Helen Shehadeh and was based in Jerusalem. It began as a library for the blind teaching the children braille and giving them access to braille reading materials. However then, as now, it was not always easy for the children to get to the school as the Israeli authorities would not always issue the necessary permits. It was therefore very good when, in 2004, the school was able to purchase some land in Bethlehem in the Palestinian territories which meant that those who most needed the help of the School could reach it more easily. A purpose built school was erected on the site and

the school moved into it in 2009. Ruba Mukarke is now headteacher having previously spent time in the United States. She and her husband returned to Palestine in order to bring help to some of those who most need it in the area in which they grew up.

When Ruba took over the school it was in need of change and updating. Ruba and her team have worked with enormous courage and energy and have gathered help and sponsorship from all over the world in order to ensure that the children for whom the school has responsibility has the best and most up to date equipment possible. Their aim is to ensure that students become as confident and useful members of society as is possible in view of the extra challenges that they face.

Fifteen teachers run the school which caters for 33 children. There are also five students attending the university in Bethlehem who stay at the centre during term time. Twenty three children stay in the school and others come in each day from surrounding areas. Many of those who stay also go home by taxi on Friday evening. The aim of the school is to enable the pupils to become full and useful members of society and so it is important to keep up to date with equipment and advances in technology which allow those with visual impairment to care for themselves and to read and write.



About two years ago, on one of their visits out into the surrounding areas, the staff from the school visited the Aqbat refugee camp near Jericho and met Jaber. They were not equipped at that stage to cope with children with multiple impairments but such was his situation that they thought that they had to do something. Jaber is 10. He is deaf as well as blind and he has speech and cognitive delays. When the people from Al Shurooq first met him he was unable to communicate and was very frightened and isolated. His mother was ill and his

father unemployed. He now lives at the school and is able to find out more about his environment by touching and smelling things and people. He still doesn't communicate very well but is beginning to learn to sign and to play the Tabla (Oriental type of drums). He has new earphones and is independent in some life skills now. The changes are amazing considering the difficulties with which he arrived at Al Shurooq only comparatively recently - and his progress has enabled them to help other children with multiple difficulties too. Money collected through the Lent Call will help to ensure that Jaber continues to have a future and that other children with similar difficulties will too.

Educational play also helps all the children and especially those with multiple disabilities. The school has recently developed a play corner in one classroom which gives the children a wonderful opportunity to learn through play. There is a need for one in each of the other classes and our Lent Call gifts will help to provide multi-sensory experiences in other classrooms, helping many more children to thrive.

Jeel Al Amal



Jeel Al Amal has been in existence since 1972. It began in a house next to that of the founders, Alice and Basil Sahhar, that housed 10 boys. The numbers gradually increased and the school was accredited by the Palestinian, Israeli and Jordanian authorities. Eventually they were able to purchase a building on the eastern side of Bethany and it is now run by Najwa (Alice and Basil's daughter). The boys are from Bethsaida, Jerusalem, Ramallah, Bethlehem and all over the West Bank and are some of the most difficult cases in Palestine. Najwa tells us that no other organisation will take some of the boys who have behavioural difficulties. Some of them lived on the streets and some had been badly beaten by their family or others with whom they came

into contact. Others were starving, having not eaten properly for some time.

The current priority for the school is that they should be properly equipped to manage the boys who come into their care and present with the most difficulties. One of the best ways of helping with this will be being able to provide the right environment; giving them a homely atmosphere at the school's living accommodation in order to help the boys to feel safe and secure.

The accommodation provides a home for about 72 boys at the moment and tries really hard not to turn any away but to find suitable places for them elsewhere if necessary. The school attached to Jeel Al Amal is unique in the area in that it takes children from age 5 to 12 and is for both boys and girls up to Grade 6. Girls are housed in a separate house in Bethany. The running costs of the home are not funded by any governmental authority despite the school being widely accredited. The salary bill of \$20,000 per month for the 33 staff employed by the school and the home is a huge outlay for an organisation in Palestine. That is without the cost of food and medical bills. In some months Jeel Al Amal has been unable to pay the pharmacy bills and the electricity has nearly been cut off.

The school at Bethany is doing some really good work under very difficult circumstances. But, Najwa tells us, unemployment is very high on both sides of the wall built by the Israelis and this means that the people who might be willing to give to support the project have no money to share. That is where the Bishop's Lent Call and the other charities that support Jeel Al Amal are so important.

The Bishop of Southwark's

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